



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Dying to tell a story: the role of Citizen Journalists in Myanmar

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Introduction



Screengrab of Khing Hnin Wai, PE teacher and dancer, who filmed her exercise routine on a main road leading to Myanmar's parliament complex on 2 February 2021. Credit: Khing Hnin Wai/YouTube

Physical Education teacher Khing Hnin Wai made international news headlines on 2 February 2021, when her livestreamed exercise class unwittingly captured a coup unfolding in the street behind her.

As Wai pumped her arms and legs to upbeat music, military vehicles and personnel were moving towards the parliament building in Naypyidaw, the capital city – en route to seize power from the civilian government, detain political leaders, and declare a state of emergency.

It was, perhaps, the first inadvertent act of citizen journalism to be performed over the past three disastrous years under the junta's control, and it was by no means the last.

Over 200 journalists have been detained since the coup. Some have been tortured and gang raped. Seven have been killed. Hundreds have fled to the Thai-Myanmar border,

for fear of being arrested on criminal charges, the highest of which carries 15 years in prison. These journalists are effectively stateless.

The Myanmar media landscape has had to adapt significantly to continue reporting. As journalists have minimal access on the ground, they have come to rely on “citizen journalists” (CJs). These are generally non-professional actors who can provide information from within their community to international and local media journalists operating from abroad or border regions.

It is not known how many CJs have been arrested and killed, as they are not included in the statistics.

Given the situation, CJs now have a key role to play in accurate reporting what’s happening in Myanmar media landscape. This project aims to examine the evolving role of CJs and the ethical considerations of working with them, including safety, remuneration, and information integrity.

Myanmar presents a worst-case scenario, but it is not alone in its circumstances – there are important lessons to be gained for journalists around the world. Press freedom is on a downward trend globally. Over the past five years, 85% of the world’s population has witnessed a [decrease](#) in press freedom in their country. ¹

Moreover, half of the world's democracies are in a state of decline amid decreasing civil liberties and rule of law as governments become [increasingly authoritarian](#).² In 2022, [363 journalists were imprisoned](#) – the highest figure recorded since the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) started compiling data in 1992.³ Journalists' safety is of increasing global concern, and Myanmar serves as an acute example of this trend.

¹ UNESCO 2021-2022, Press freedom in times of crisis and transformation
<https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en/global-trends>

² Reuters 2022, Half of world's democracies in decline, intergovernmental watchdog says.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/half-worlds-democracies-decline-intergovernmental-watchdog-2022-11-30/>

³ CPJ 2022, journalist imprisonments reach 30-year high: <https://cpj.org/reports/2022/12/number-of-jailed-journalists-spikes-to-new-global-record/>

The Myanmar context

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a country in Southeast Asia bordering Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. It gained independence from British rule in 1948.

In 1962, it suffered a military coup under [General Ne Win](#).⁴ Subsequently, Myanmar went from being one of the richest countries in Asia to one of the poorest and has suffered from decades of ethnic armed conflict.

A decade of liberalisation (2010 - 2020)

In 2010, military dictator Than Shwe decided to initiate a series of partial democratic reforms. This started with [a series of elections](#) in 2010, followed by the freeing of former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi from decades of house arrest.⁵

Many other political prisoners were also released and some exiled journalists returned. In 2012 press [censorship](#) that had been in place for almost half a century was abolished, and journalists no longer needed to [submit their articles for government approval before publication](#).^{6, 7}

Over a dozen veteran Myanmar journalists interviewed for this project refer to this period as “a golden era” for Myanmar journalism – a time when journalists savoured a sense of press freedom, and media developments included the opening of the [first private journalism school](#) in 2014.⁸

Veteran Burmese journalist Tin Htar Swe stated that this period helped Myanmar journalism to “prosper and flourish” even though there were some restrictions and limitations in which a number of [journalists were arrested](#) under various charges.⁹

⁴ NYT 1962, *Junta of 17 governing Burma*, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/03/03/archives/junta-of-17-is-governing-burma-gen-ne-win-defends-army-coup-junta.html>

⁵ <https://myanmarelectionwatch.org/en/history-of-elections-in-myanmar>

⁶ <https://pen.org/an-era-of-censorship-comes-to-a-close-in-myanmar/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-censorship-idUSBRE87J06N20120820>

⁸ <https://www.mediasupport.org/first-journalism-school-opens-in-myanmar/>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-military-journalists-idUSKBN1AD1EB>

“In this era, we had a chance somehow to exercise ourselves as the fourth pillar of society and played our role as a watchdog. There were rights to question, report, and record,” said Myint Kyaw, former secretary of the Myanmar Press Council. “If we compare this period with the past before 1962, or the current one, it was the most open period,” he added.

The long-forgotten [private press sector](#) rekindled during this period, serving as a platform for journalists to hone their skills.¹⁰

Swedish journalist Bertil Linter, a Myanmar media specialist, believes the main mistake the military made when they staged the 2020 coup was an underestimation of the changes that had taken place in the preceding decade. “There are many experienced journalists who became professionals [...] during those 10 years of openness,” he said.

The Rohingya Crisis and a tainted reputation

Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's international reputation was undermined after the 2017 Rohingya crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya had to flee their homes due to a military campaign that the U.S. government formally determined to be a genocide.

Suu Kyi's seeming alignment with the military tarnished her image, especially when she defended the country at the International Criminal Court against charges of genocide and crimes against humanity committed by the military, over which she had no governmental or constitutional control.

During Suu Kyi's civilian NLD government's rule, several cases were brought against journalists under criminal law, as well as defamation and telecommunications laws, particularly for reporting on the Rohingya genocide and the war in Kachin in the north. Some journalists were jailed.

These cases tested the level of press freedom in the country, showing Myanmar had not been granted full press freedom. One infamous case under Aung San Suu Kyi's government included the imprisonment of two Reuters journalists, for covering [the expulsion of the Rohingya in Rakhine](#) and crimes against humanity committed by the military.^{11, 12} The cases also highlighted the partiality of the democratic transition

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/01/burmese-private-newspapers>

¹¹ Reuters 2018, Special Report: How Myanmar punished two reporters for uncovering an atrocity

¹² Reuters 2018, Myanmar Burning: Inside the expulsion of the Rohingya

during this period, as the charges were brought by the police, who were under military command, while the civilian government had no governmental or constitutional authority over the military.

The Military Coup of 01 February 2021

In November 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won [another landslide victory](#) against the military-backed USDP.¹³ The military claimed [voter fraud](#), while [international election observers](#) found the election to be free and fair.¹⁴

On 1 February 2021, the same day that the new parliament was due to open, the military staged a coup.¹⁵ I was in Yangon (the commercial capital) as a correspondent for Reuters. I first became aware of the coup upon waking at 6:00 in the morning. A Reuters team had been tracking developments through the night, and were the first to break the story with the confirmation of an NLD official. At 3:30 Myanmar time, the military had begun by arresting Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as some government ministers and MPs at their homes in the political capital of Naypyidaw. It was not clear how many had been arrested and if it was just limited to newly elected MPs.

To try and get a better understanding of the situation, and how many had been arrested, I started to call sources. But I was also aware that the military might wish to detain journalists. And I already had a court case being brought against me by the military for reporting on the Rohingya.

I got my emergency grab bag, packed a few additional items and was out of my home within an hour.

I have never been back.

By that time, the internet and phones had been cut in Yangon. The streets were eerily quiet, but I found a taxi to go to one of the major international hotels. On the way, we

¹³ Reuters 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling party claims resounding election win in Myanmar | Reuters

¹⁴ Reuters 2021, Events in Myanmar since calls by military of election fraud | Reuters

¹⁵ Reuters, 2021 Myanmar military seizes power, detains elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi | Reuters

passed Aung San Suu Kyi's Yangon residence, and there were just a few police officers outside – nothing out of the ordinary.

At the international hotel we were able to get a connection. And we got to work reporting and trying to build our understanding of the situation.

Before the internet was cut, some videos had already been shared live on social media showing the coup happening in real time. These included Wai's fitness video and, in another, a husband captured his newly elected MP wife [being taken by armed soldiers](#) in the early hours of the morning.¹⁶

After a day, the internet came back, but was intermittent. Protests mounted in the coming weeks. These were met by a brutal crackdown by security forces in which journalists covering events were directly targeted by police and soldiers.

During the coup and its aftermath, video footage taken by citizens began to contribute in a powerful way to journalists' ability to understand and report on what was happening on the ground throughout the country. The role of CJs in shedding light on Myanmar's coup around the country had begun to emerge.

That necessary role has only continued to grow as Myanmar descends further into a fractured conflict between the junta and the armed resistance, which now consists of dozens of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), and hundreds of people's defence forces (PDFs) around the country.

Myanmar now ranks [173rd out of 180 countries](#) in RSF's World Press Freedom Index.¹⁷ Since the coup, over 200 journalists have been detained. Some have been tortured and gang raped. Seven have been killed. This makes Myanmar the [third-worst jailer](#) of journalists in the world, after China and Iran.¹⁸

Independent media in Myanmar is now effectively illegal, as the country approaches its fourth year with an exiled media landscape in which independent media outlets and journalists are no longer safe to operate within its borders.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-55884482>

¹⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/country/myanmar>

¹⁸ <https://cpj.org/2022/12/myanmars-jailing-of-journalists-enters-harsh-new-phase/>

In the wider post-coup context, [Myanmar's economy has collapsed](#), and the country continues to fragment into a deeper state of civil war, with the military fighting on multiple fronts against dozens of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and hundreds of newly formed People's Defence Forces (PDFs), each with their own relationship to the shadow National Unity Government (NUG).¹⁹

In response, the military has [doubled down and committed to a scorched-earth policy](#), destroying entire communities, committing [mass executions](#), and targeting schools and hospitals in aerial [bombings](#).^{20, 21, 22}

¹⁹ Bloomberg 2021, Myanmar Crisis Looms With Fitch Warning Economy Will Shrink Up to 20%

²⁰ UN 2023, War crimes by Myanmar military are more frequent and brazen – IIMM Annual Report

²¹ Reuters 2022, Myanmar army engaged in torture, mass killings, war crimes - U.N. | Reuters

²² NYT 2023, The Country That Bombs Its Own People - The New York Times

The evolving role of CJs post-coup

In the weeks preceding 2 February 2021, there had been some indication of an impending coup. Some journalists and editors with exile experience from previous decades had already relocated to border territories or neighbouring countries.

Reporters who remained and operated openly on the ground were arrested, making the environment for journalists almost impossible. Words such as 'junta' and 'coup' were officially banned.

Since March 2021, the junta has taken measures to block several local media platforms, and declared multiple major news outlets illegal organisations. Satellite dishes were [made illegal](#), making it impossible for people to listen to or watch independent news.²³ The penalty for using a satellite dish is a year in prison or a fine of K500,000 (US\$320). Internet and phone lines continue to be cut at will.

As the crackdown increased, many journalists (including myself) decided to leave the country, or flee to liberated areas where we would not be arrested easily.

Given that professional journalists are now practically unable to report on the ground or access areas of conflict, CJs have emerged to provide first-hand information. "They are indispensable at such a time when it is difficult to get information," said Ye Ni, the Editor In Chief of the Irrawaddy Burmese. "Every media house has to use them."

Defining Citizen Journalists in the Myanmar context

Media expert Bertil Lintner explained: "Citizen journalism means that first, by nature, they have to be anonymous. And none of them have any training, they have no background as journalists. You will not generally know who they are, what sources they have, unless you know their personal records."²⁴

This is the classical definition of a CJ, but it does not totally align with the way the term is currently used in Myanmar. Instead, the term CJ currently acts as an umbrella term for a

²³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/06/myanmar-junta-bans-satellite-television>

²⁴ Bertil Lintner, Interviewed on June 18, 2023

spectrum of roles in Myanmar. These roles can be roughly broken down into three categories: Classical CJs, Occasional CJs, and Semi-professional CJs.

- **Classic CJs** have minimal connection with news outlets. They have little working knowledge of the media ecosystem. When they encounter a newsworthy incident, they post about it on social media, or send it to news outlets via Facebook, Telegram, or other methods. Most of them won't reveal who they are.
- **Occasional CJs** are trained by senior journalists or experienced journalism trainers. They are selected by the newsroom's management team with recommendations from trusted networks. They have no commitments to news organisations, however, and they have other jobs.
When something happens in their respective areas, they will help to connect sources with journalists, or they will go to the respective sources and interview them, before forwarding the answers back to journalists as needed. They can be paid by the article or get some support for petrol or phone bills.
- **Semi-professional CJs** (close to intern journalists) have some training from senior journalists and have been linked with newsrooms via trusted recommendations. They are prepared and committed, however, to serve as proactive contributors, regularly contributing stories. Payment of semi-professionals vary, ranging from fixed salaries to article-based payments, depending on the newsroom they work with. They may get online coaching from journalists, and editors while working on a story together. Also, for safety, there can be arrangements for emergency situations such as safe houses and salary to family members as compensation if arrested.

To capture the evolving phenomenon of CJs in the Myanmar media context, I interviewed 35 CJs, journalists, editors, media experts and newsroom leaders.

According to those interviews, some newsrooms began training CJs in late 2021. Senior journalists or journalism trainers equipped volunteers with training in the basics of mobile journalism, including: what is newsworthy, how to take videos or pictures for news purposes, sending footage via safe channels, and finding or interviewing sources.

Sometimes, the training included digital security and discussion about ethics over published articles.

Four themes emerged from my interviews, which are illustrated by six key profiles:

- Theme 1: The exodus of professional journalists, including a profile of Khit Thit founder Tharlon Zaung Htet
- Theme 2: Recruiting and training CJs, including a profile of 19-year-old "GT" (pseudonym), a semi-professional CJ based in Sagaing.

- Theme 3: Challenges in funding, rights and support for CJs, including a profile of Annt Hmue Mahr, an ex-CJ Photojournalist, and Pu Noi Tsawms, a semi-professional former CJ who is currently unemployed.
- Theme 4: Post-coup newsroom norms, including a profile of Khit Ni (pseudonym), a semi-professional CJ operating in Yangon.

Theme 1: Exodus and adaptation

It is not currently possible to operate openly as a journalist in Myanmar. It is not even safe to read a non-junta news outlet in public: you will be arrested. A 22-year-old Yangoner summed up the state of press freedom in one sentence: "We are in a country where we cannot read or listen to news while commuting on the road in buses or cars."

According to free speech organisation Athan Myanmar, more than 200 journalists have been imprisoned since the coup. Of that number, it is currently estimated that over 50 remain in prison.

Reports include at least [one documented case](#) of a male journalist who was gang raped and tortured in detention.²⁵ Additionally, seven journalists have been [killed](#) since 2021.²⁶

In this environment, "many senior journalists quit their profession, as the profession has become life-threatening," said Ye Ni, the editor-in-chief of the *Irrawaddy Burmese*.

My interviewees estimate that over 50% of experienced professional journalists have quit the profession since the coup. Some people put the figure of those no longer practising as high as 90%, with the remaining journalists having fled to exile in neighbouring countries like Thailand.

Reasons for leaving may vary, but include a desire to prioritise the safety of family and avoiding being killed or arrested, or to adapt to survival in new places. Sein Win, managing editor of Mizzima, told me: "There were 3,000 journalists before the coup, now Myanmar media has about 300 journalists in exile, with some undercover journalists in the country."²⁷

"It is a big loss for the industry," said media expert Myint Kyaw.²⁸

Despite the junta's [efforts](#) to suppress press freedom and instil fear and insecurity among journalists, my interviewees strongly agreed that the Myanmar media has

²⁵ Frontier Myanmar 2022, I reported on the military's abuses, and then I became a victim

²⁶ VOA 2021, 'He Was Only Taking Photos,' Says Friend of Myanmar Journalist Who Died in Military Custody

²⁷ Sein Win, Managing Editor of Mizzima Media, interviewed on February 10, 2023

²⁸ Myint Kyaw, former secretary of Myanmar Press Council, interviewed on January 30, and July 27, 2023

survived without missing a day of newsroom operation.²⁹ "I am amazed and encouraged by seeing how good they are," Myanmar media expert, Bertil Lintner said.

Profile 1: Tharlon Zaung Htet, Founder of Khit Thit online news outlet

Area: Withheld



"We are reporting and telling people the story of our country. I believe that journalism should not be constrained by the situation," Tharlon Zaung Htet, founder of [Khit Thit online media](#) told me.³⁰

Khit Thit is one of five media organisations that faced the first bans imposed by the junta in early March, 2021. Before the coup, Khit Thit had 300,000 followers, but this has since surged dramatically to 6.1 million followers, making it one of the most popular Myanmar news outlets.

The newsroom currently operates with a mixture of permanent staff, under-cover journalists, and CJs. Tharlon said that there are over 30 CJs nationwide regularly contributing to coverage, in addition to 25 permanent journalists.

Some critics say their reportage is too close to tabloid journalism – language choices verging on activism, lack of robust verification processes, and payment of sources – but it is highly popular with the public and ranks at the top on the junta's most-wanted list.

Tharlon acknowledged that they have had to learn from painful mistakes.

For example, they published a story from a Facebook page posing as a rebel defence force who claimed to have won a battle against the junta. The public began donating funds to the group before it was revealed to be a scam. The team now pays closer attention to verification.

²⁹ Reporters Without Border (RSF) 2023, report on anti-journalist terror

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/khitthitnews>

More devastating was the arrest of one of their CJs. The individual, a construction worker, had contacted the newsroom via Messenger, asking if he could do anything to assist their coverage. "I couldn't join in the armed revolution as I had older parents to take care of," he wrote.

Although his submissions were not published, the worker began sending frequent messages to the newsroom. Khit Thit decided to use his footage for the first time when he sent [pictures](#) of airborne soldiers practising nearby his construction site. After that, his messenger was not responsive anymore. When they checked with different sources, Khit Thit found out that the soldiers came and checked their construction site after news was published. The worker was arrested, as they found pictures on his mobile device.

In terms of digital security, he said, the Khit Thit's team reminded the people who are in contact with them to delete the pictures and texts, or if possible, to set auto delete on communications and pictures.

In response to criticisms of bias, Tharlon said their editorial policy prioritises justice over impartiality. "I have dreamed before to be the fourth pillar. But now our aim is to fight the junta, [and] their leader Min Aung Hlaing. This is to achieve press freedom again."

He dreams of reporting on a future country trial for all the war crimes the military has committed, dating back to 1962, including the case of his grandfather who was killed without charges by the military.

The advantage of being a small newsroom is being portable and mobile, he said. He claimed no one from his team had been arrested to date. Most staff are still operating inside the country, except the founder and a few senior managers. Their policy is to prioritise safety over news, as the profession has become increasingly dangerous. But the first and most important rule is that Khit Thit's journalists must not expose the organisation.

The most pressing struggle for Khit Thit is long-term sustainable revenue for its operation. The newsroom is 100% dependent on donors. "It is like we are walking in space, in the cold darkness, moving from one extreme to the another," he said.

Khit Thit publishes details of graphic violence in their news reports. However, Tharlon said they receive more traumatic content than they share. "I am not even covering as much as 10% of the atrocities that are happening in the country."

As mentioned above, during internet shutdowns, Tharlon handed over Khit Thit's operational duties to a trusted friend.

Nyan Lin Htet, founder and editor-in-chief of Mekong News described his routine of traveling 11 miles from his jungle safehouse to a tea shop, just to access the internet.

[Nathan Maung](#), co-founder of Kamayut Media, reflected on the regime's attempts to crush the press: "The Junta has tried every possible way to destroy the media industry. But they didn't succeed; the news industry's resilience stands strong."³¹

The outlet had to cease online publication after Maung was arrested along with his colleague, [Hanthar Nyein](#).³²

³¹ Nathan Maung, Founder of Kamayut Media, Interviewed on January 17, 2023

³² DVB 2022, Hanthar Nyein sentenced to an additional five years in prison

Theme 2: Recruiting and training CJs

As Myanmar journalists adapted to the extreme dangers now inherent in the media landscape, some re-implemented an old strategy to pass their expertise on to the younger generation. More than a dozen people I spoke to were involved in training CJs.

Aung Kyaw, a journalist for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) who was once a CJ himself under Than Shwe's regime, was [imprisoned for 8 months](#) after his arrest in March 2021.^{33, 34} After his release, he fled the country and soon led the operations of the now-banned DVB from exile, training a new generation of CJs within the country.

CJ trainers operate from different places inside the country, as well as in exile in border territory or outside the country. Their aim is to overcome the limitations preventing them from reporting on the ground and to ensure coverage continues.

"We have to continue our job: reporting on crimes against humanity and human rights violations in our country," said Aung Kyaw, who reports having trained over a hundred CJs nationwide through his online CJ training program. According to him, about a quarter of these trained CJs have become regular contributors to exiled media outlets. "There is no way that we can go back into the country soon, so a new generation will be needed."

Hla Hla Win, another CJ platform founder, echoed Aung Kyaw's sentiments, noting that a third to a quarter of those trained have stayed in occasional or regular reporting roles as CJs for various media outlets.³⁵

Those who have participated in CJ training are mostly young people aged 17 to 30, including Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) students, government staff, and activists, collaborating with other organisations, according to CJ trainers interviewed.

³³ Aung Kyaw, leading a CJ training program of Democratic Voice of Burma, Interviewed on May 17, 2023

³⁴ The New York Times 2021, 'I Didn't Look Like a Human': Journalist Tells of Myanmar Torture

³⁵ Hla Hla Win, senior Journalist and CJ trainer, Interviewed on April 3, 2023

Profile 2: GT, semi-professional CJ

Area: Sagaing, Central Myanmar



GT, a 19-year-old civil engineering student, saw his world turn upside down when the coup unfolded. He initially participated in peaceful protests and later became a communications officer for the People's Defense Forces (PDF).

To use his time efficiently, he signed up for online CJ training, arranged by local media houses, The 74 media and [Than Lwin Khet](#).³⁶

There were 10 trainees in GT's group and they are still active in the revolution. The training included finding news angles, interviewing and filing stories, as well as news photography.

GT has a keen and enthusiastic character. After completing a digital journalism course from Reuters, which I shared with him, he quickly posted about it on social media.

"I am not new to journalism," he stated, having attended a journalism short course in high school. But he was surprised when editors decided his first stories, which covered combat casualties and internally displaced persons due to a military incursion, were good enough to publish. He recalled, "It was remarkable. I wrote three stories that day."

Initially, he received no payment but later negotiated a fee and earned 200,000 kyats (approximately \$70 USD) per month, agreeing to do long-form stories in addition to breaking news in his region.

GT is based in Sagaing, where internet access is scarce. He has found that the connection works better between midnight and early morning hours. "To connect via VPN took a lifetime," said GT, "Anytime a call comes in, the process of connecting to the VPN is destroyed."

He has covered stories related to Sagaing region for several local media outlets, and he has now become more selective on news outlets he works with, based on the experiences he gained within his first months dealing with editors.

³⁶ <https://thanlwin.khet.net/>

Before he sent articles for Myanmar Now, and several other local media houses. He doesn't work for Myanmar Now anymore, as he said they ask too many follow-up questions. Other media houses have editorial rules and policies which are tiring, he said. The "tiring rules" include sticking to formal writing styles, wordings to avoid, and when editors ask too many follow-up questions to verify. "I have other tasks as an officer in the PDF."

GT admitted he sometimes used his own feelings and experiences of an event, but presented them as a quote from a villager, witness, information officer, or a soldier on the ground. When asked if that was in line with his CJ training, he asserted, "I am in the middle of a war zone; I am witnessing it. I just write what I want to say sometimes."

GT doesn't see journalism in his long-term future. "I'm doing it for the people and also for the country. If the country [becomes] politically stable, the news might not be as exciting as what we have right now," he said.

Theme 3: Challenges in funding, rights, and support for CJs

Case Study: Annt Hmue Mahr, ex-CJ Photojournalist

Place: Southern Myanmar



Annt Hmue Mahr is from Yay, which is small town in Southern Myanmar dotted with beaches and small islands.³⁷ He is 21 years old. At the time of the coup, he was a first year Archaeology student at university. That same year, his grandmother gave him a camera for his 18th birthday.

When the coup triggered demonstrations in his hometown, he decided to document them. As the situation deteriorated, the only local journalist in the town was put under surveillance and made to sign an agreement with the local authorities that he would cease reporting what was happening.

The journalist asked Annt Hmue to take responsibility for reporting what was happening and connected him with the major local media houses. Annt Hmue effectively became an underground CJ, though he received no income.

Over the next month or so, Annt Hmue went out with his camera and a makeshift bullet-proof vest stuffed with books to document what was happening. Eventually the authorities put him on the 505a list making him a criminal.

So he fled to the jungles bordering Thailand in territory under Karen Ethnic Armed Organisations, who are supporting the democracy movement. He continued reporting from the jungle, interviewing victims of war crimes.

³⁷ Eh Mhuu Mhar, ex CJ Interviewed on March 10, and June 17, 2023

More recently, Annt Hmue's health deteriorated after contracting severe dysentery. With no significant medical infrastructure in the area, it took him a month to proceed through the jungle to the Thai border. That is where he is now, having successfully received treatment, although he is still physically weak.

He is now in a place that's relatively safer than before, yet he remains effectively stateless. His mind is elsewhere, thinking of friends who died in the jungle. While he is still alive, he wants to contribute to the revolution however he can. He currently works to help fund the revolution.

Just as many journalists have had to flee the country, many CJs have a limited timeframe in which they can operate safely too. Many I interviewed reported a toll on their physical and mental health. There are two main causes: the direct threat to their security, and the safety of family and friends; and having to constantly review material which is graphic and disturbing. Effects on mental health include depression, nightmares, survivor's guilt, and chronic stress.

"In terms of security, there is no longer a situation where people will knock on the door and take them away [as many are now in exile]. But in terms of mental state, we still have a lot of problems to deal with. The following waves will be tougher," said Ye Ni of *Irrawaddy Burmese*.

Despite the high turnover, it is possible for news reporting to continue because of a steady supply of new and eager CJs. Funding is becoming an increasingly acute issue though, especially with a collapse in advertising revenue for media houses.

International funding from NGOs and private donors reduced sharply following the prioritisation of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, my interviewees said. And any remaining funding, which might be available for journalists, is not on offer for CJs.

Much of the CJ training stopped in December 2022, as a result of the budget constraints, Hla Hla Win said. As for the DVB training program, Aung Kyaw said it is uncertain how long the training budget would last.

Case study: Pu Noi Tsawms, semi-professional former CJ (now unemployed)

Area: Tanai, Kachin State, Northern Myanmar



Pu Noi Tsawms is in her early 20s. Before the coup, she was preparing to take part in a beauty contest, and dreamt of representing Myanmar at an international pageant. After the coup, her father was arrested for having served as an election campaigner for Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party. Her family fled town for safety.

After a number of months, Tsawms returned to her hometown (Danai, Kachin State) with her dreams on hold. While running a second-hand clothing stall in a small local market, she received CJ training from a local news outlet that covers Northern Myanmar, [The 74 Media](https://www.the74media.com/).³⁸

After the training, she agreed to work as a "CJ/caller", a post that pays 100,000 kyats (approximately US\$30) per month. The 74 Media (74) newsroom reporter or editor would give her questions, and contacts to call. She would then contact sources, ask questions, and send the answers back to the newsroom. The people that she contacted were varied: internally displaced people, people from revolutionary forces, and activists.

The role was created because the newsroom had already had five journalists arrested and needed extra capacity.

Tsawms said, "Sometimes, I don't exactly know who I am calling. They give me a name, number and a set of questions." She recounted a sense of insecurity about what she was doing: "I was worried that neighbours might hear me interviewing people, as my home has walls made of bamboo."

For safety, 74 would provide CJs with a day of digital security training, such as how to communicate using secure channels.

When asked why she took such a risky job, Tsawms said: "I am alone, and jobless, not much choice in my life."

³⁸ <https://www.the74media.com/>

After a month working as a CJ/caller, 74 invited Tsawms to attend a three-month internship in Laiza, an ethnic-liberated area of Kachin. If she performed well, Tsawms said the news outlet told her she could be promoted to a junior journalist. Transportation costs would not be fully provided, but Tsawms was willing to use her own money, and excited to travel to Kachin's revolutionary town, Laiza.

During the internship training, she shared a room in the office with four other female CJs from different parts of the region. The training was fun, she said. But Tsawms also reported witnessing some bullying in the workplace. Trainees who made typos or vocabulary errors were made to do squats as a punishment. She said it happened around 10 times within a three-month period. Male trainees were also on the receiving end of vulgar language by editors, she added.

After training, the girls were promoted to junior reporters, earning 200,000 kyats (\$70) per month, and told to prepare for relocation to Thailand. When they arrived in Thailand in mid-2022, the newsroom gave them an additional food allowance of \$55 per month, and provided accommodation.

The accommodation provided was a house that doubled as their newsroom, and certain rules were enforced by management. For example, all the journalists had a curfew. After staying out late three times, Tsawms was told not to leave the housing compound grounds for a month as punishment. She said she was put under the watch of a female editor who shared the house with them, and could only leave to visit nearby markets when accompanied by a senior staff member.

Tsawms said they hadn't been given much time to consider the offer of employment: she said the contracts were provided in English and they were given a couple of hours to decide if they were willing to sign and move to Thailand or abandon the employment opportunity.

One of the terms of the contract is a non-compete clause, whereby employees may not work for another news organisation for two years after resignation. "I was told that if I don't comply, they will sue me," Tsawms said. "I was scared to death." Her boyfriend, a human rights activist, explained that, due to the legality surrounding newsroom operation in Myanmar and Thailand, the contract was not enforceable.

"They themselves become little dictators in their small world while fighting against a dictator," Tsawms concluded. "It is unacceptable."

When we asked The 74 Media to comment on Tsawm's allegations, they invited us to tour their office and interview staff to confirm that she was one of only three employees with such grievances. They said the idea for squats had been introduced by the interns themselves, and house rules were arrived at by consensus, as a way to protect journalists in a foreign land under trying circumstances.

They further commented: "Our organisation is managed by rules, policies and procedures that are in accordance with international human rights and labour practices, and we have never heard remarks like these from former and current employees except from the three who failed to adhere to our organisational procedures, rules, and policies during their employment. [...] Despite everything we have done for them, they were the most unappreciated [sic] and entitled individuals we had ever seen in our existence as a news agency. [...] Our team is appalled by the length they would go to spread mis and dis-information about the organisation that they had worked for. We were also wondering why they did not bring the grievances they thought they

had to media organisations such as IMJA or IPCM. We could then solve the issues quickly and our reputation would not be tainted as much."

It is worth noting that many CJs, especially those from rural areas, may be unaware of their basic rights or how to assert themselves. This is compounded by the desperation created by the circumstances in Myanmar. Over a dozen CJs from various media organisations that spoke to me for this project reported labour rights violations and exploitation were occurring regularly.

Donors to independent outlets should evaluate employee contracts and HR practices as part of their auditing process. They should also have clear whistle-blowing mechanisms in place.

Lack of funding for CJs also means they do not have other forms of support while they are operating. For example, another organisation, the Assistance Association for Myanmar-based Independent Journalists (AAMIJ), based inside the country, has been set up by a group of experienced journalists.

Within a year, they have trained over 30 young people, and run a page covering flash mobs, providing pictures and information to media outlets. However, their operation was put on hold and the page went unpublished for months due to the arrest of three CJs while covering protests. They have struggled to get legal aid and support for those arrested CJs, the group said. "If something happened to CJs, we have got little support, even legal aid as they are not listed as journalists, and connected to media houses," an organiser for AAMIJ told me. The organiser said the group has already moved six times within two years. Every time they had to move to avoid detection, it was difficult to find the money for the additional expenses.

Further diminishing financial support, some international media organisations have stopped paying for user-generated content (UGC). The move was made with a view to promoting safety, on the logic that remunerating local actors could incentivise them to take unwarranted risks to obtain content, and could therefore constitute exploitation by international organisations.

There is a risk, however, that in applying this policy, international organisations end up achieving the outcome they seek to avoid: exploitation in the form of not remunerating people for their work; and undermining safety by denying people the means to support themselves. The policy may also deny people the dignity of deciding for themselves whether a risk is worth taking for work (especially frustrating in the instance that they will take the risk anyway).

A global policy around non-usage of UGC, which might make sense in other safer contexts, may mean CJs in the Myanmar situation go unpaid. Myanmar media expert and ex-head of BBC World Service Burmese, Tin Htar Swe said, "It is about time that we move on and explore how best to help these people rather than sticking to the rules." She suggested that if it were not possible to pay a fee, they could at least receive encouragement through recognition. She also suggested that CJs might receive safety and HEAT training, on the basis that this did not constitute a fee.

Theme 4: Post-coup newsroom norms

Case study: Khit Ni, CJ (Semi-professional)

Area: Yangon (Commercial Capital)



Khit Ni, a pseudonym, was a 20-year-old second-year archaeology student before the coup. He is now reporting six days a week from his small flat in Yangon, posing as an unemployed youth.

When the coup happened, he became a volunteer fact checker to counter misinformation on social media platforms, and a [keyboard warrior](#) to draw global attention to what was happening in Myanmar.³⁹ In mid-2022, he participated in various training programs including transitional justice, federalism and citizen journalism, and became a contributor to a Facebook news page called the CJ Platform.

He reports on various sectors, from [humanitarian crises](#) in conflict areas, and [labour rights](#), to the [illegal wildlife trade](#). He broke the news on [sexual harassment of arrested young Rohingya girls in a youth rehab camp](#).

When asked to name a journalistic ethic, he answered "impartiality", and added, "I'm standing on the side of Justice. I am sure that we didn't choose *Ahdhamma*."⁴⁰

Like many working journalists, Khit is expecting arrest at some point. He has thought of a way to reduce the level of punishment by the junta for being a journalist. "I have a narrative to use in an emergency situation if I am arrested," he said.

His biggest fear is that the junta's retribution will not stop at him, but also come to his family, including his mother and father. However, he has persuaded himself to continue doing what he is

³⁹ <https://restofworld.org/2021/k-pop-vs-the-coup/>

⁴⁰ Ahdhamma means "injustice" in Pali, the Buddhist holy language.

doing: "I do think it is worth it to take risks in such a situation. There are people who do more than us. [...] History will judge us."

When asked about his expectations for the future, he replied, "My primary plan is to go back to university when the revolution is over. In the beginning, I was expecting that the revolution would be finished within a year or two. [...] Now going back to school is an impossible dream.'

The post-coup newsroom structure of Myanmar media outlets has seen a shift, with a special focus on security. Many interviewees related how editors, journalists and CJs now interact with each other daily without ever revealing their real identities, opting instead for pseudonyms.

The recruitment process for appointing new reporters or CJs relies heavily on recommendations from trusted sources. This approach aims to ensure the safety of all individuals operating in the news space.

Tin, a CJ trainer, told me the main reason for secrecy was to avoid exposure in the event of an arrest.⁴¹ "It is questionable how much they can protect the information if they were arrested, as the interrogation process is brutal as hell," she said. "With the coding system, not many people can be [compromised] even if one is arrested."

According to a former editor at Myanmar Now, this increasing emphasis on security has come at a cost to news quality overall, with a heightened potential for fabrication of sources and news. There is also a potential for a lack of accountability and transparency in how news is collected.

Another issue is the degree to which CJs are also be activists or members of newly formed People's Defence Forces (PDFs). This is made more difficult to track in an environment of increased anonymity. It is therefore harder to evaluate the bias and interests of anonymous CJs. "Journalism's power builds on trust. Not only from those who support us, but also from non-supporters. Without the respect and trust, journalism will not be powerful," said a Myanmar Now editor.⁴² "If we cannot build trust, there is no way of surviving long-term."

⁴¹ Tin, Media Trainer, Interviewed on January 28, 2023

⁴² A Myanmar Now editor, Interviewed on May 21, 2023

Profile 2: Mauk Kham Wah, ex-CJ and Photographer

Area: Loikaw, Kayah State, Eastern Myanmar



Mauk Kham Wah is a 28-year-old from the Karenni hill region of eastern Myanmar, bordering Thailand.⁴³ Ten years ago, as a teenager with dreams of becoming an author, Wah moved to Yangon from Loikaw.

In Yangon, he ended up establishing himself as a filmmaker and spent some of his time writing Burmese traditional folktale poems, called Thangyat, and participating in student activism.

When the coup happened, Wah actively participated in peaceful protests and started taking portrait photographs of protestors. He said he wanted to contribute positively in some way during this time.

When the armed crackdown on protestors happened he had to flee to a rebel area. His first relocation to an ethnic area was the Karen National Union (KNU). This did not last, as they would not allow him to take photos due to security concerns.

He then relocated to his homeland, Loikaw in Kayah State, where he started his war photographer's life, while participating as a communications officer of the Loikaw PDF. His story illustrates the sometimes-blurred lines between CJs and resistance groups.

Wah first contributed as a citizen journalist by posting pictures of air strikes on social media platforms, and giving updates on the situation in the area. With the help of Wah, I covered the junta's attacks in Kayah which forced thousands of villagers to flee. He was quick to assist in finding sources on the ground, connecting me with the people who recorded the junta's movements and helicopters.

Within a year living in a conflict area, he had contributed to international media outlets including NHK World, France 24, and many local media outlets including Myanmar Now and also human rights organisations such as Fortify Rights.

⁴³ Mauk Kham Wah, ex CJ and Photographer, Interviewed on April 9, 2023

Some of his contributions to local media outlets were not paid. He said he saw this as a citizen's duty in a time of crisis and revolution in the country.

He also gained some insights into the challenges of Myanmar's news industry – particularly in terms of financial constraints and capacity building. He stated that most CJs, like him, have other jobs, but he believed in a need to provide more capacity building to CJs in order to upgrade their capabilities as journalists.

Wah's efforts have received international recognition. His photo 'Retrieving the Dead', was taken in Moebye, Karenni region (Kayah state) in February 2022, when he suffered the loss of 17 of his comrades from the Loikaw PDF.



The image won multiple awards, including the World Press Photo 2023 regional award. "I'm happy every time my photography gets recognised, and shares a serious message about Burma, about my lost comrades," he said.

He is now effectively stateless on the Thai side of the Thai-Myanmar border, still serving as a secretary and fundraiser for the Loikaw PDF after spending over a year in the jungle. For the future, he is dreaming of building a country where a new generation won't need to fight or suffer for revolution. As a stateless person, he couldn't travel to access the prizes that he won.

The mental toll on documenting the events in conflict areas has been huge, he said. When he hears about big battles in his home area, he experiences severe depression. "I want to go to the battle to take pictures, to record it," he said. "Look out for me in the future," he added, vowing to return to the film industry.

Conclusion

The themes and profiles above show how much danger and personal sacrifice CJs have to undertake, and also how unstable and sometimes blurred the identity of a CJ is.

It is important to acknowledge that numerous CJs have lost their lives or ended up in jail for their work. One example is [Khant Thiha \(aka\) Spider](#), an 18-year-old student, originally from Yangon.⁴⁴ He had started the coup by covering protests in Yangon, but then had to move when his identity was revealed. He was fatally shot in a battle in Sagaing region, Central Myanmar.

During an interview with [Myanmar Now](#), his girlfriend recalled his dream of one day setting up a gallery to exhibit his post-revolution photographs, and to use the proceeds to assist displaced people.⁴⁵ There are thousands of young people whose memories and aspirations will now fade away – so many lives, opportunities and potential lost under the coup.

While the challenges facing the media in Myanmar are extreme, the junta's relentless attempts to dismantle press freedom have failed.

A new generation of people committed to ensuring reporting of information has emerged under the exiled media landscape in Myanmar. These new CJs have emerged in the country to take on a wide array of roles, including on-the-ground semi-professional reporters for exiled media houses.

As such, CJs have a key role to play in ensuring people's right to access information. This is a constituency characterised by bravery and duty, and which urgently needs increased support in terms of capacity building and sustainable remuneration.

People interviewed for this project were unanimous in their view that CJs will not be disappearing from the Myanmar media landscape any time soon. The situation will only

⁴⁴The Irrawaddy 2023, Burmese Spiderman Killed in Sagaing

⁴⁵ Myanmar Now 2023, As Myanmar's revolution beckons, a new breed of activist photographers heeds the call

change if the country can restore rule of law and press freedom. Media houses, and CJ trainers are, however, uncertain about funding due to donor fatigue, loss of revenue and a policy by some international media organisations of not paying for content.

CJs are in need of urgent support, ranging from emergency budgets for safehouses and relocation, to legal and mental health support.

Employment protections and rights should be hard-coded into organisational HR policies and documentation. For example, CJs and journalists should be aware of their basic rights, and should receive fair treatment. International donors should conduct due diligence to ensure employment contracts and HR practices are fair. There should be a clear whistle-blowing mechanism to donors.

Resources are also required for continued journalist training. This includes teaching journalism principles, ethics, best practices for reporting, physical, mental, and digital safety, how to cover human rights violations and war. This is important for maintaining news quality and long-term sustainability.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to all Myanmar journalists, including Citizen Journalists CJs, who continue to contribute to a free press and people's right to access information, while operating under extreme conditions.

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