

# Facebook and genocide: On the importance of new evidence for Meta’s contributions to violence against Rohingya in Myanmar

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Matt Schissler

Visiting Fellow, Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University &  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan

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## Abstract

For the broad public increasingly critical of technology companies, the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar has come to illustrate the evils of Facebook and its parent company, Meta. At the same time, the Myanmar case has become an influential template for understanding the dangers of social media, past, present, and future, as well as developing solutions. Yet this template is strikingly narrow: it has been limited to content that negatively characterizes the victim group, such as through hate speech and misinformation. As a result, most extant analysis has excluded other processes that scholarship on genocide has also shown to be significant: practices aimed at constructing not the victims of genocide but those who are supposed to support it. This paper therefore analyzes some of these practices as they involved Facebook in Myanmar, offering new interpretations of publicly available evidence and drawing on observations from work in Myanmar during 2012-15. It then concludes by discussing the relevance of these initial findings for ongoing efforts to pursue restitution and accountability and proposes concrete questions that could be taken up in these efforts as well as by scholars and practitioners.

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## I. Introduction

“Facebook... [is] tearing apart our democracy, putting our children in danger and sowing ethnic violence around the world,” Francis Haugen, a prominent Facebook whistleblower, said in the opening statement of her testimony before the US Congress. “What we saw in Myanmar and are now seeing in Ethiopia are only the opening chapters of a story so terrifying, no one wants to read the end of it” (Haugen 2021). Haugen spoke in a hearing mostly focused on the consequences of social media for children. Her reference to Myanmar was the hearing’s first. She made the reference as if it would be understood without further elaboration. When Myanmar was next mentioned, some twenty minutes later as the chairman concluded his remarks, he too treated it as a commonsense example already known to all. “Whether it’s teens bullied into suicidal thoughts or the genocide of ethnic minorities in Myanmar, or fanning the flames of division within our own country or in Europe, [Facebook is] ultimately responsible,” he said (Blumenthal 2021).

For the broad public increasingly critical of technology companies, genocide in Myanmar illustrates the evils of Facebook and its parent company, Meta.<sup>1</sup> This common sense is not unfounded. Facebook operated with a de facto monopoly during the period immediately before 2017, the year of a military campaign against Rohingya Muslims that a UN Fact-Finding Mission later concluded warranted prosecution for genocide (IIFMM 2018, 178, 241-2, 358-364). Changes in Myanmar’s telecommunications infrastructure only five years earlier brought many people online for the first time, the vast majority of whom used Facebook—and not any other platform. “For many in Myanmar, Facebook is Google, LinkedIn, Tinder, Tumblr, and Reddit, all in one,” wrote one important analysis (Thant Sin Oo 2019, 5).<sup>2</sup> With this monopoly as a background, dozens of articles raising concerns about “hate speech” and other forms of content about the Rohingya on Facebook have been published by scholars<sup>3</sup>, advocates<sup>4</sup>, and major media outlets.<sup>5</sup> The single most influential claim for links between such content and violence, meanwhile, came from a UN Fact-Finding Mission following the 2017 attacks, which concluded that Facebook played a “significant” (IIFMM 2018, 14), even “determining” (Miles 2018), role in the genocide. A report that Meta commissioned to assess its impacts on human rights in Myanmar, meanwhile, concluded that

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<sup>1</sup> In an article penned in 2019, for example, Prasse-Freeman made this same point, citing examples from leading journalists to comedians such as Jon Oliver. “The narrative is convenient,” he wrote, “because it dovetails with identical descriptions of events across the globe—particularly vis-à-vis Russia’s alleged use of social media to undermine the USA’s 2016 elections—and nests within hoary dystopian interpretations of rapid digital advances” (2021, 146-149). In the years since, as the Congressional testimony demonstrates, the assumption that the causal relationship between Facebook and the Rohingya genocide is an established fact has only continued to circulate. “I, working for Facebook, had been a party to genocide,” said a second whistleblower who came forward a few weeks after Haugen (Timberg 2021).

<sup>2</sup> As part of a broad set of legal changes in Myanmar during its abortive decade of democracy during the 2010s, the cost of a mobile phone SIM card reduced from nearly USD 1,000 to just over USD 1 dollar in early 2014, in large part due to the arrival of international telecommunications companies. Within less than a year, nearly 60% of the population owned a mobile phone, rising to more than 80% in 2016 (Zainudeen et al 2017). Figures vary, but sources indicate that between 35% and 85% of these people actively used Facebook (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019; Zainudeen et al 2017). While direct messaging applications such as Viber and WhatsApp were also popular, platforms such as Twitter or Instagram were rarely used; only in 2018-19 did another platform, TikTok, start to become prominent (Thant Sin Oo 2019, 11).

<sup>3</sup> Bachtold 2023; Morada 2023; Aiden Moe 2021; Buzi 2021; Davis 2021; Diamond & McLean 2021; Wai Moe 2021; Prasse-Freeman 2021; Passeri 2020; Whitten-Woodring et al 2020; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019; Radue 2019; Fink 2018; McElhone 2017; Diamond 2015; Schissler 2016a, 2016b, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty 2022; Global Witness 2022, 2021; BHRN 2021; Rio 2020; Graphika 2020; Progressive Voice et al 2020; Phandeevar 2020; Davis 2017; C4ADS 2016; PEN Myanmar 2015; Dolan & Grey 2014; Internews 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Frenkel & Kang 2020, Ch9; Levy 2020, Ch17; McLaughlin 2018; McKirdy 2018; Mozur 2018; Rajagopalan et al 2018; Reed 2018; Safi & Hogan 2018; Stecklow 2018; Rajagopalan 2017; Frenkel 2016.

“Facebook has become a means for those seeking to spread hate and cause harm, and posts have been linked to offline violence” (BSR 2018, 24).

Yet research on Facebook and Myanmar has also often included caveats and qualifications, even if these do not make it into the broader public common sense. Most often this takes the form of gesturing towards a generalized lack of knowledge or affirming the difficulty of connecting content online to action offline, speech to violence. “Whether the hate campaigns against Muslims and Rohingya have led or contributed to actual outbreaks of violence is difficult to establish,” the UN Mission wrote, for example, adding a few pages later, “The extent to which the spread of messages and rumours on Facebook has increased discrimination and violence in Myanmar must be independently and thoroughly researched” (IIFMM 2018, 331, 343; see also e.g., Rio 2020, 11; C4ADS 2016, 11). The sentence from the evaluation commissioned by Meta, quoted above, contains a second clause with an even stronger hedge. Facebook has become a means for those seeking to spread hate, it acknowledges, “though the actual relationship between content posted on Facebook and offline harm is not fully understood.” (BSR 2018, 24). Even technology journalism meant to respond critically to this Meta-commissioned research concluded by repeating the same caveats (Newton 2018; see also Mozur, quoted in Prasse-Freeman 2021, 158).

Moving beyond these hedges and qualifications has significant stakes. Advocates working on behalf of Rohingya in the US, UK, and Ireland have filed three cases against Meta seeking more than \$150 billion as remedy for its contributions to genocide (Milmo 2021), echoing efforts to secure reparations for Holocaust victims from private corporations such as railways (Federman 2021). In these adversarial settings, claims about the difficulty of establishing causal relationships may be taken up in Meta’s defense, as its legal team in the US has already signaled (Gibson, Dunn, & Crutcher LLP 2022, 1-2). How the relationship between Facebook and genocide is understood also has clear, though less direct, potential consequences for other attempts to pursue accountability. Meta’s servers hold content that could be valuable evidence as Myanmar faces charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice and by prosecutors at the International Criminal Court and elsewhere (Kewlani 2022). What investigators seek to acquire and analyze from these servers will be shaped by their assumptions about how action on Facebook could be linked to violence. The corollary to this is that these assumptions will also shape what they ignore. The consequence is that significant evidence may be missed or lost forever as Meta decides what to store and what to permanently destroy (Mooney et al 2021).

Better understanding the relationship between Facebook and the Rohingya genocide is also important because, as Haugen’s testimony illustrates, the Myanmar case has become a template used to explain others, past, present, and future, as well as advocate for solutions (e.g., Crystal 2023, Easterday et al 2022). It has also become a template used to help predict the consequences of other technologies, such as AI (e.g., Latonero & Agarwal 2021). The template provided by the Myanmar case, in other words, is increasingly influential—and also strikingly narrow. With rare exception, analyses have been limited to content on Facebook that negatively characterizes the victim group, whether through hate speech, misinformation, or other efforts to construct the Rohingya as foreign, dangerous, and conspiring to conquer Myanmar.<sup>6</sup> Such speech should be cause for concern. It is

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<sup>6</sup> The problem has most commonly been named in terms of “hate speech” and “misinformation,” but scholars have also questioned these categories of analysis or used alternatives, such as Benesch’s “dangerous speech” framework (e.g., Diamond & McLean 2021; Fink 2018). Prasse-Freeman, meanwhile, identified another genre of speech, “hate bait,” which he demonstrated could effectively associate the Rohingya with hatred and danger, such as through posting that, while not “hate speech,” repeatedly emphasized news about Islamic “terrorist” activity elsewhere in the world (Prasse-Freeman 2021; also Schissler 2016b). Even as they depart from the “hate speech” category, however, these analyses all share a family resemblance in that the content they focus on shares the same object of reference: an out-group different from that of the speaker.

important, however, to be clear on the reasons for this concern. “Hate speech,” as well as other categories such as “misinformation,” are moral categories, based on commitments to normative values such as dignity, justice, or truth.<sup>7</sup> Such speech should be cause for concern independent of any conclusions regarding causal effects.<sup>8</sup> How speech on Facebook might contribute to causing violence, on the other hand, is a question of function. Many forms of speech can serve this function and they are not limited to speech that is about the victims.

In focusing on speech that characterized the Rohingya, extant attempts to understand the relationship between content on Facebook and the Rohingya genocide have ignored other forms of speech that did not reference the victims, but still contributed to causing them harm. In order to identify some of the forms that such speech can take, Section II highlights a process that studies of genocide have shown to be significant: “in-group policing,” which the scholars Brubaker and Laitin define as “the formal or informal administration of sanctions... within a group so as to enforce a certain line of action vis-à-vis outsiders” (1998, 433). Sections III and IV then analyze in-group policing in Myanmar and on Facebook, by offering new interpretations of publicly available evidence and drawing on observations from work in Myanmar during 2012-15. A conclusion discusses the relevance of these initial findings for ongoing efforts to pursue restitution and accountability and proposes concrete questions that could be taken up in these efforts as well as by scholars and practitioners.

## **II. Genocide and in-group policing**

Research linking Facebook to the Rohingya genocide has primarily focused on a narrow range of evidence, limited in scope to content that negatively characterized the Rohingya. Take the analysis of the most influential source, the UN Fact Finding Mission, for example. The Mission identified five background factors that were necessary for the genocide: (1) years of “concerted hate campaigns” against the Rohingya, (2) decades of gradual marginalization, (3) the denial of legal identity, (4) instigation of conflict between Rohingya and other local residents of the same region, and (5) failure to attribute responsibility to perpetrators (2018, 177). Within this analysis, Facebook’s role was to “enable and spread” hate speech and misinformation about the Rohingya (2018, 338-343), dehumanizing and portraying them, and other Muslims, as a threat to Myanmar as a Buddhist nation (2018, 166-170). In other words: when the Mission analyzed content on Facebook it was primarily content that was about the Rohingya. Important exceptions prove this rule: in a few places, the Mission does point to content that referenced other groups, such as “the international community” or human rights defenders. But it does so to highlight negative impacts on legal rights such as freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.<sup>9</sup> This section will demonstrate that such examples should also be analyzed for their role in mobilizing a genocide.

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<sup>7</sup> It is standard for discussions of “hate speech” to note that there is no single agreed-upon definition of the term. Most definitions do share a distinctive feature, however, in that they only include speech that references an out-group distinct from the speaker and their in-group. The range of speech that falls within any particular definition can thus vary depending on factors such as what speech constitutes “assaultive language” (Matsuda et al 2018 [1993]; Waldron 2012). But this variation is all within a range that is limited to the kinds of out-groups that are to be protected from such assaults. One approach to broadening hate speech protections has thus been to advocate for expanded understandings of protected groups (e.g., Ghanea 2013). This has not typically included members of the dominant in-group, though sometimes concern is raised for attacks on people who warrant protection such as “human rights defenders.”

<sup>8</sup> Indeed “hate speech,” along with incitement to genocide, is sometimes said to be an inchoate crime: it can be found to violate international law even absent any demonstrable effects (Gordon 2017; Wilson 2017).

<sup>9</sup> The Mission report primarily discusses content on Facebook in two sections of the report. The first, in an analysis of the Rohingya genocide, is titled “Spreading Hate.” The section is divided into two: one sub-section documents the “Inciting of anti-Rohingya sentiment” (IIFMM 2018, 166-170) while the other documents the “Inciting of negative sentiments against the international community” (170-172). Content analyzed in the first sub-section is limited to

A broad base of scholarship on other cases of genocide and mass violence confirms the importance of the factors identified by the UN Mission, including the narratives about the Rohingya that were promoted through content on Facebook.<sup>10</sup> But limiting the scope of analysis to the way Facebook can be used to construct the victim group can also implicitly assume that there is a group ready to act based upon content they encounter on the platform. Yet while perpetrators may claim to act in the name of a pre-existing ethnic, racial, religious, or other group, such groups are not ready-made antagonists, like billiard balls waiting to collide when effectively incited (Brubaker 2004). Instead, violence on the scale of genocide requires the creation of coalitions that can work towards this end (Leader Maynard 2021, 70-75; Anderson 2017, 99-101; Straus 2015, Ch2; Gerlach 2010, Ch2; Fujii 2009, 18; Mann 2005, 8-9). Such coalitions often include people affiliated with multiple identity categories; they always require bringing together people with a variety of orientations towards violence, willing executioners but also the indifferent and ambivalent, conflicted and reluctant (Williams 2020; Anderson 2017; Browning 1992; Arendt 1963).

The sociologist Brubaker has been one of the most influential among many who have argued against the assumption that ethnic or other groups can be protagonists in conflict or viable units of social analysis (2004). “*Inter-ethnic violence is conditioned and fostered by intra-group processes*,” he wrote in an article with the political scientist Laitin (1998, 433, emphasis original). Brubaker and Laitin identified a set of “intra-group processes” that foster violence, one of which they termed “in-group policing:” “the formal or informal administration of sanctions... within a group so as to enforce a certain line of action vis-à-vis outsiders” (1998, 433; also Mann 2005, 20-21; Semelin 2007, 30-44). Writing in the late 1990s, they illustrated “in-group policing” by pointing to the murder of rivals, dissidents, or suspected traitors among the ranks of insurgent organizations in South Africa, Ireland, Palestine, and Sri Lanka. The anthropologist Thiranagama, meanwhile, provided a brilliant ethnography of the last case as well as a broader argument for the significance of such phenomenon (2011). “[T]he identification and prosecution of treason are constant, essential, and ‘normal’ parts of... reproduc[ing] social and political order,” she wrote in a collaboration with another anthropologist, Kelly. “Placing treason at the heart of our attempts to understand the ways in which political regimes are made and unmade... raise[s] important questions about categories of belonging, about their moral, political, and economic foundations, and about the often contradictory choices faced by modern political subjects” (2010, 2).

Research on the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda has provided particularly robust evidence for the significance of processes like in-group policing. Scholars studying Hutu perpetrators have consistently found that their involvement was explained less by beliefs about Tutsis than by local

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examples that characterize the Rohingya, with the exception of one paragraph about nationalist organizations calling on people to cut off social relations with Rohingya (166-170). The second sub-section, meanwhile, focuses on attacks on international organizations. It includes one paragraph describing the way “national staff” of such organizations were attacked as traitors—but this only serves to illustrate attacks on the organizations. The Report’s second discussion of Facebook is located in a section on “Democratic Space and Fundamental Freedoms.” A sub-section titled “the issue of Hate Speech” details a variety of slurs, tropes, and common narratives about the Rohingya (320-344). This part of the report includes a general reference to “moderate commentators, human rights defenders and ordinary people who have views that differ from the official line” (339). But this is not lent further analysis or, to the extent that it is, this is to identify negative effects on legal rights such as freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly (315-320, 344-345). Their contribution to causing violence is not analyzed.

<sup>10</sup> Ample scholarship links dehumanization and violence (Livingston Smith 2021, 2020, 2011), for example, while an even stronger consensus underlines the central importance of narratives that construct victims like the Rohingya as foreign, dangerous, and an imminent security threat (e.g., Leader Maynard 2022; Moses 2021; Straus 2015; Weitz 2003). The Mission also noted the gendering of anti-Rohingya narratives, including about Muslim men as sexually rapacious and conspiring to convert Buddhist women, which also aligns with scholarship on the centrality of gender, and claims about and over women in particular, to the mobilization of mass violence (Das 2006; Taylor 1999).

relationships, particularly to individuals and institutions that mobilized for the genocide, and group dynamics that shaped recruitment into killing groups (Fujii 2009, 2021; Straus 2006). McDoom, meanwhile, argued that, of all the baseline conditions and contingent circumstances necessary for the genocide, ultimately the decisive factor was the superior material and coercive capabilities of a faction of Hutu “hardliners” that sought genocide. The tipping point, he concluded, came when these forces began in-group policing, through attacks on other more moderate Hutus in the country’s capital, after which similar in-group policing among Hutus in successive regions drove anti-Tutsi violence across the country (2020, 34, 371, Ch5 passim). Benesch’s influential model of “dangerous speech,” meanwhile, was recently updated to reflect evidence from Rwanda. Among the five “hallmarks” of dangerous speech, it now includes four forms of speech that characterize the out-group victims and a fifth that involves characterizing members of the in-group, such as by calling them traitors or otherwise questioning their loyalty (Benesch et al 2018, 17-18; see contra Benesch 2014, 8-9).

Research from Rwanda illustrates the significance of in-group policing in the formation of groups necessary for carrying out genocide. But in-group policing is important beyond mobilizing direct participation in killing. The Holocaust in Germany provides two examples. Firstly, the eventual physical murder of German Jews required isolating them from the rest of German society, transforming diverse forms of social life into “social death” (Kaplan 1998, 5; also Wildt 2014; Dean 2004, Ch3)—their exclusion from what Fein called “the universe of obligation of the dominant group” (1979, 9). Even as antisemitism was widespread in Germany, encouraging non-Jewish Germans to cut off social relations with Jews still required systematic pressure campaigns. Anti-Jewish boycotts implemented soon after the Nazis came to power, for example, were not immediately successful. Instead, they relied upon a variety of strategies for shaming violators. Sentries were posted outside Jewish businesses to harass patrons, for example, and names were read aloud at public meetings and rallies, posted to billboards, and published in newspaper articles, sometimes accompanied by photographs, and often shown in display cases built for this purpose (Beck 2022, 157-157, 223, 231-235; Kühne 2020, 38-40; Wildt 2012, Ch4-5). Secondly, while there is clear scholarly consensus that Nazism developed into a popular movement uniting a broad, diverse, and willing coalition in Germany, it also required early aggressive action to eliminate opposition. Even after Hitler’s appointment as chancellor in 1933, leftist and liberal political parties, which had collectively won more votes in recent elections, represented real alternative bases of power. Members were imprisoned by the thousands as well as subjected to brutal attacks and public humiliation (Fritzsche 2020, Ch3-4; also Evans 2005, 2007). The Nazis had to construct new visions of what it meant to be a member of the dominant group, in other words, even as they worked to exclude Jews from its universe of obligation.

This section began by noting the narrow scope adopted by most analyses of Facebook and genocide: they have focused primarily on content about the out-group, the Rohingya, to the exclusion of processes involving speech that may not reference the out-group at all, such as in-group policing. One final way to illustrate the problem of this approach is with models that have been developed to identify places at risk of genocide. An early example is Stanton’s “8 Stages” model of the processes leading to genocide (Table 1) (1998).

Table 1. Stanton’s “8 Stages of genocide”

1. Classification	4. Organization	6. Preparation
2. Symbolization	5. Polarization	7. Extermination
3. Dehumanization		8. Denial

Most analyses of Facebook and genocide in Myanmar fit within just the first three stages of Stanton’s model, because these are the stages that deal with speech that is about the victims—classifying, symbolizing, and dehumanizing them.<sup>11</sup> But Stanton’s model highlights the importance of other intermediary steps before the final stages of “extermination”. His fifth stage, “polarization,” might as well have been called in-group policing: he described it as the “intimidating and silencing... [of those] from the perpetrators’ own group... most able to stop genocide” (Stanton 2013, 2). Yet the stages that Stanton describe also often occur simultaneously rather than in sequence. More significantly, sometimes these processes can occur, yet genocide fails to be the result. Over the last two decades, therefore, scholars have increasingly sought to develop models that can account for such “failed” cases. A factor that these studies consistently identify is the relative success of processes here termed “in-group policing” (e.g., Mayersen 2015). Straus, for example, synthesized such research into a diagnostic tool designed to assist policymakers and others working in situations of potential genocide (2015, Appendix). Among broad risk factors, his tool includes the strength of actors that could serve as sources of restraint (3b, 4ei). Among short-term dynamics of escalation, meanwhile, it includes steps to marginalize or intimidate potential opponents and cut off inter-group relations (2ai, 2ii, 3a, 3b). The following section will analyze these dynamics as they unfolded in Myanmar during the years immediately before the 2016-17 military operations.

### III. In-group policing in Myanmar

Some of the best scholarship on the Rohingya genocide has pointed to a tripartite relation involving Bamar Buddhists, from central Myanmar, and Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists, both living in the same region of western Myanmar, near the Bangladesh border (Holt 2019, 14). These relations have never been static (Prasse-Freeman & Mausert 2020; ICG 2020; McKay 2019) and, in violence against the Rohingya, Rakhine and Bamar seemed to find common cause (Galache 2020, 83). Yet the formation of a coalition for violence required intra-group processes, including the informal administration of sanctions to enforce certain lines of action vis-à-vis the Rohingya. The administration of these sanctions—in-group policing—was sometimes undertaken by nationalist organizations such as MaBaTha (“the Association to Protect Race and Religion”) and the many groups that operated in its orbit. Sometimes they were enforced by state authorities, though the state did not operate as a single, coherent, entity, and different parts of the state also acted at cross-purposes. Sometimes the actors were individuals, acting in their own interests and capacities. In many cases it was impossible to know for sure who the actors were. This section analyzes some of the strategies used for in-group policing. Many of the examples include the use of Facebook, and the section that follows analyzes some of the unique contributions that this enabled.

In June 2012, for example, organized groups of civilians, supported by state security forces, attacked Rohingya and other Muslims in the capital of Rakhine State, Sittwe, displacing nearly the entire Muslim population of the city.<sup>12</sup> By October 2012, when another large series of coordinated attacks were launched across central Rakhine State, more than 120,000 Muslims had been displaced

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<sup>11</sup> Stanton first introduced the model in 1996, published it in 1998, and added two additional stages in 2013—discrimination and persecution. I use the original 8-stage model here for the sake of brevity.

<sup>12</sup> The next three paragraphs are based upon Matt Schissler, “Violent divisions of labor: Enthusiasm and terror in the Holocaust and the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar,” in progress. For another analysis of events in Rakhine State that highlights the significance of processes like in-group policing, see Kyaw Zeyar Win 2018. For thorough documentation of the situation in Rakhine State during the 2012 violence and after, see reports from IIFFMM 2018; Amnesty 2017; Fortify Rights 2014, 2018; Green et al 2015; HRW 2012, 2013.



into temporary camps and the lone remaining Muslim ward of Sittwe.<sup>13</sup> Violence and discrimination against Muslims in this part of Myanmar was not a new phenomenon, and had resulted from deliberate state policy, dedicated military operations, and initiative by organized groups of local residents (MacLean 2022; Zarni & Cowley 2014). At the same time, however, many Rohingya and other local residents of the region had long coexisted with relative quietude, if not peace, maintaining relationships of mutual dependence and even close personal ties (Ahmed 2023; Frydenlund & Wai Wai Nu 2022; Habiburrahman & Ansel 2018). In the months after the June 2012 attacks, however, organized campaigns of in-group policing developed, with Rakhine political parties as well as coalitions of civil society organizations and monks issuing proclamations demanding that Rakhine people cut off social relations with Rohingya and warning of consequences for those who failed to do so.

A 10-point statement resulting from a large meeting of monks in Sittwe during October, for example, called for the creation of “discipline preserving” groups and the distribution of photos identifying “national traitors... who support the Bengali *Kalar*”<sup>14</sup> (a slur often used to reference the Rohingya). The proclamations were enforced, including through the beating and public shaming of people giving or selling food and other basic supplies to Rohingya and other Muslims. In some cases, Rakhine “traitors” were made to publicly apologize or even walk pillory through busy areas, with humiliating photographs posted on Facebook. In the photos below, the placards hung from the necks of the two men read, from left to right, “I am a traitor” and “I am a traitor and slave to *kalar*” (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup>

Figure 1. Circa 2012<sup>16</sup>



The organized in-group policing that developed in Rakhine State following the 2012 violence continued, particularly as military operations against the Rohingya intensified during 2016-17 (Figure 2). In the image at right, the caption says the man was “arrested as a national traitor by local residents and monks” for transporting “ration, including rice” to the “infidel Bengali *kalar*.” Not long after, a report from Reuters indicated that monks and community leaders in the same area had been playing announcements over loudspeakers mounted on vehicles, “exhorting Buddhists to avoid

<sup>13</sup> While Rohingya Muslims have been accorded a singular place in nationalist propaganda, Muslims who identified in other ways, such as of the ethnic group known as Kaman, were also affected in these attacks. On the multiple forms of Muslim identity in Rakhine State, see Tharaphi Than and Htoo May (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Copy on file. This translation and all others are the author’s.

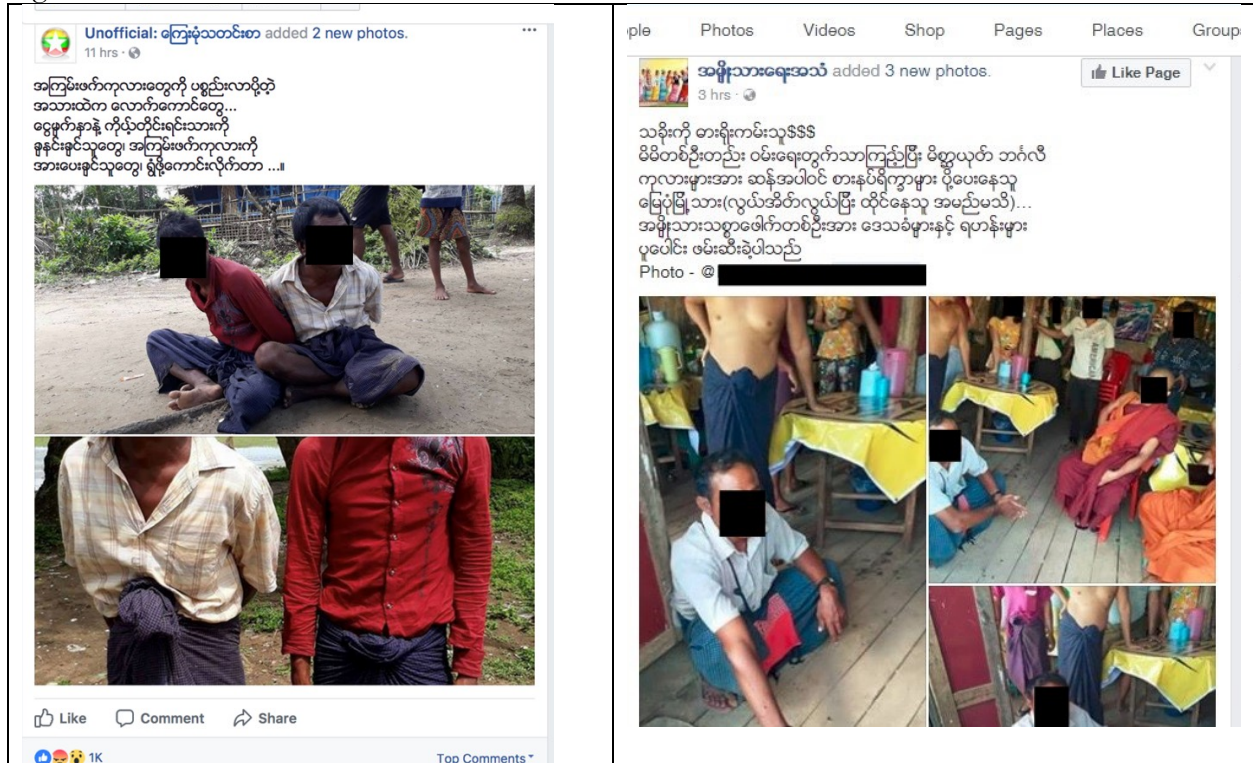
<sup>15</sup> In the image at left, the man’s head is wrapped in a woman’s sarong. In the traditions of Myanmar patriarchy, this would have heightened the public act of humiliation. See Ferguson 2023, Aye Lei Tun 2023, and Marlar et al 2023.

<sup>16</sup> My thanks to Kyaw Zeyar Win for the images in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



contact with Muslims” (Kyaw Soe Oo 2017). In the image at left, also from 2016-17, the caption says that the two men had sold things to “terrorist *kalar*.” The last line of the caption reads, “people that want to support the terrorist *kalar* should shrink in fear.”

Figure 2. Circa 2016-17

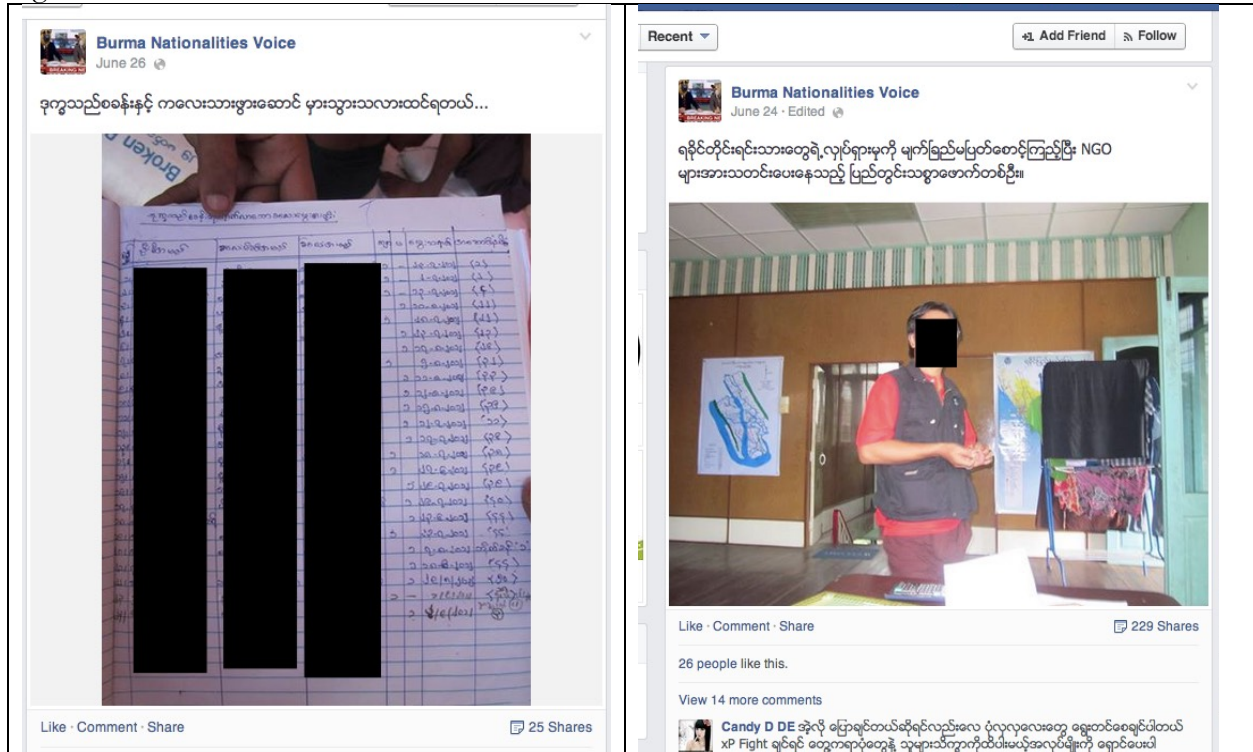


Throughout this time period, these campaigns also focused on humanitarian organizations, accusing them of “bias” in favor of Rohingya and, not long after the 2012 attacks, severely curtailing their activities. They also featured intimidation of local staff, which had been noted with concern by the UN (OCHA 2013, 1) and prompted the group Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to issue a rare public statement (Robinson 2013). “In pamphlets, letters and Facebook postings, MSF and others have been repeatedly accused... of having a pro-Rohingya bias,” the statement said. “[T]his intimidation... is the primary challenge MSF faces” (MSF 2013). “[S]ignificant number of [humanitarian workers] resign after threats to them and their families were posted on Facebook pages,” a journalist wrote in a follow-up some months after (MacGregor 2013). Five years later, the UN Fact Finding Mission also identified such threats as a “constant” fear expressed by “numerous interlocutors” in Myanmar (IIFMM 2018, 170-171, 319).

The effects of in-group policing in Rakhine State were felt beyond its borders. Images of victims being publicly humiliated as “traitors,” such as those in Figure 1 and Figure 2, were shared on Facebook and could thus be encountered by people across the country. Posts on Facebook also meant that people from elsewhere in Myanmar and their families could still be publicly targeted as “traitors” for their activities in Rakhine State, even after leaving the region. In March 2014, for example, the campaigns against humanitarian organizations escalated into crowd attacks on their offices in Sittwe, forcing the emergency evacuation of staff (RFA 2014). In the aftermath, photographs likely acquired from hard drives and cameras looted during the attacks began appearing on Facebook. Images of relief activities for Rohingya were posted along with captions designed to

further narratives about the Rohingya, while images of individual humanitarian workers were posted along with captions designed to condemn and intimidate members of the in-group (Figure 3). In the image at left, a roster listing the biographical details of children residing in a camp for displaced Rohingya is captioned, “One could mistake the refugee camp for a maternity ward.” The caption is an obvious reference to the claim that Rohingya will take over Myanmar through overpopulation. The image at right features an elder Burmese man standing in the office of a humanitarian organization, captioned, “An internal traitor who is closely watching the movements of Rakhine people and giving information to NGOs.”

Figure 3. Circa 2014<sup>17</sup>

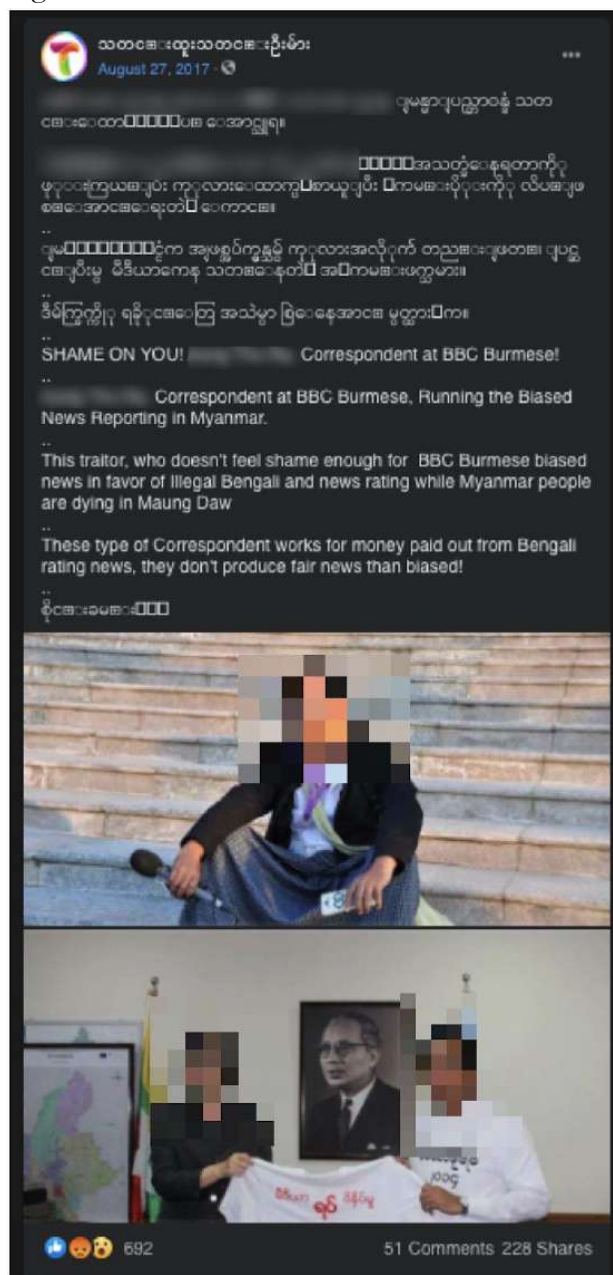


The post at left contributed to negative characterizations of the Rohingya. The post at right, however, was about not the out-group but a humanitarian worker from the in-group and thus would not fit within the understandings of “hate speech” or anti-Rohingya narratives that structured much research on Facebook in Myanmar. Even so, this research suggests just how widespread and impactful in-group policing has been across the country. One indicator: in the decade following the 2012 violence in Rakhine State, reports on hate speech and Facebook were published nearly every year and, almost without exception, each includes examples that could also illustrate in-group policing, though this interpretation is not often elaborated upon (Graphika 2020, 32; Phandeeяр 2020, 16; Rio 2020, 12; Progressive Voice et al 2020, passim; Ridout et al 2019, 15; BSR 2018, 24; IFFMM 2018, 339, 341-2; Stecklow 2018; Davis 2017; Rajagopalan 2017; C4ADS 2016, 8, 27-29, 38; PEN Myanmar 2015, 12-13, 22; Internews 2013, 25, 27).<sup>18</sup> In October 2020, for example, the

<sup>17</sup> Source: author’s files.

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, these reports included content that clearly served the function of in-group policing, but offered other interpretations of the examples, pointing to the way they characterized or harassed Rohingya and other Muslims (Phandeeяр 2020, 16; Davis 2017; Rajagopalan 2017); or demonstrated a “lack of media literacy” (Internews 2013, 25).

Figure 4. Circa 2017<sup>19</sup>



organization Graphika analyzed content posted by pages and groups that Facebook had removed due to “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” The section of the report on “disinformation and dangerous speech” includes a post attacking a BBC journalist, with photographs of him and a caption calling him a “traitor” for his reporting about the Rohingya (Figure 4).

A particularly powerful illustration comes from the report *Hate Speech Ignited*, jointly published by 22 Myanmar civil society organizations and prepared in partnership with the Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School (Progressive Voice et al 2020). *Ignited* stands apart from other research because it did not begin by first defining its parameters for research, such as by offering a definition of “hate speech,” and then gathering a corpus to match. Instead, the research for *Ignited* involved a series of collaborative discussions among 35 activists who “have been or are at risk of being targeted by ultranationalist groups as a result of their work and/or their identity as ethnic and religious minorities” (2020, 2, 13). These discussions identified six narratives that reinforce an “overarching meta-narrative of Buddhist-Burman dominance;” the sixth is that “those [who] question or challenge the aforementioned... are ‘race traitors’ and foreign agents who are equally dangerous to the nation” (3, 39-56). Activists cited in the report described relationships with friends and kin made tense, even destroyed, when they voiced such challenges. Others described the effects of concern for such outcomes. “People... fear being kicked out of their society more than being

In other cases, examples that clearly involved in-group policing were included to illustrate failures on the part of Meta (IIFMM 2018, 341-342; Stecklow 2018). Some reports did include examples that were identified for their effects on the in-group, but these were linked to generalized impacts such as “hate speech fatigue” (Ridout et al 2019, 15) or consequences for groups said to warrant special protection, such as journalists, human rights defenders, activists, or political parties (Graphika 2020, 32; C4ADS 2016, 8; PEN Myanmar 2015, 12-13, 22), or rights to freedom of expression or association (BSR 2018, 24; IIFMM 2018, 339). In a few cases, research identified the way Buddhist nationalist groups used Facebook to assist in dominating the public sphere in Myanmar, yet still centered their analysis on “hate speech” about the victim out-group (Progressive Voice et al 2020 passim; Rio 2020, 12; C4ADS 2016, 27-29, 38). This paper build these analyses by highlighting the importance of distinguishing between speech that is about the victim out-group and speech that is about the in-group.

<sup>19</sup> Source: Graphika 2020, 32.



physically attacked,” said one activist. “So even if people disagree with ultranationalism, they prefer to stay silent” (Progressive Voice et al 2020, 84).

*Ignited* highlighted attacks on journalists and human rights defenders and argued that harassment by ultranationalist organizations was having a broad “chilling effect” (2020, 69). Reports from rights organizations focused on freedom of expression raised similar concerns (HRW 2019, 76-77; Crispin 2018; PEN America 2015, 22-23). So too did the same UN Fact-Finding Mission Report (IIFMM 2018, 315-320). “The Mission has seen many similar cases where individuals, usually human rights defenders or journalists, become the target of an online hate campaign that incites or threatens violence,” it wrote, after describing an incident in which an activist alleged to have helped the Mission with its investigation was subjected to a campaign on Facebook. Posts calling him a “national traitor” were shared or copied more than 1,000 times, accompanied by numerous comments calling for his murder (IIFMM 2018, 341-342). Even the human rights impact assessment commissioned by Meta concluded that it was having a “negative impact” on freedom of expression. “Facebook... is being used by bad actors to spread hate speech, incite violence, and coordinate harm,” BSR wrote. “This is resulting in increased levels of self-censorship, especially among vulnerable groups such as political activists, human rights defenders, women, and minorities” (BSR 2018, 24). Such analyses highlighted harassment of activists by nationalist organizations, including on Facebook, as consequential for its effects on fundamental rights such as freedom of expression or association. But in the context of mobilizing a genocide, the implications of such practices and their chilling effects should be clear.

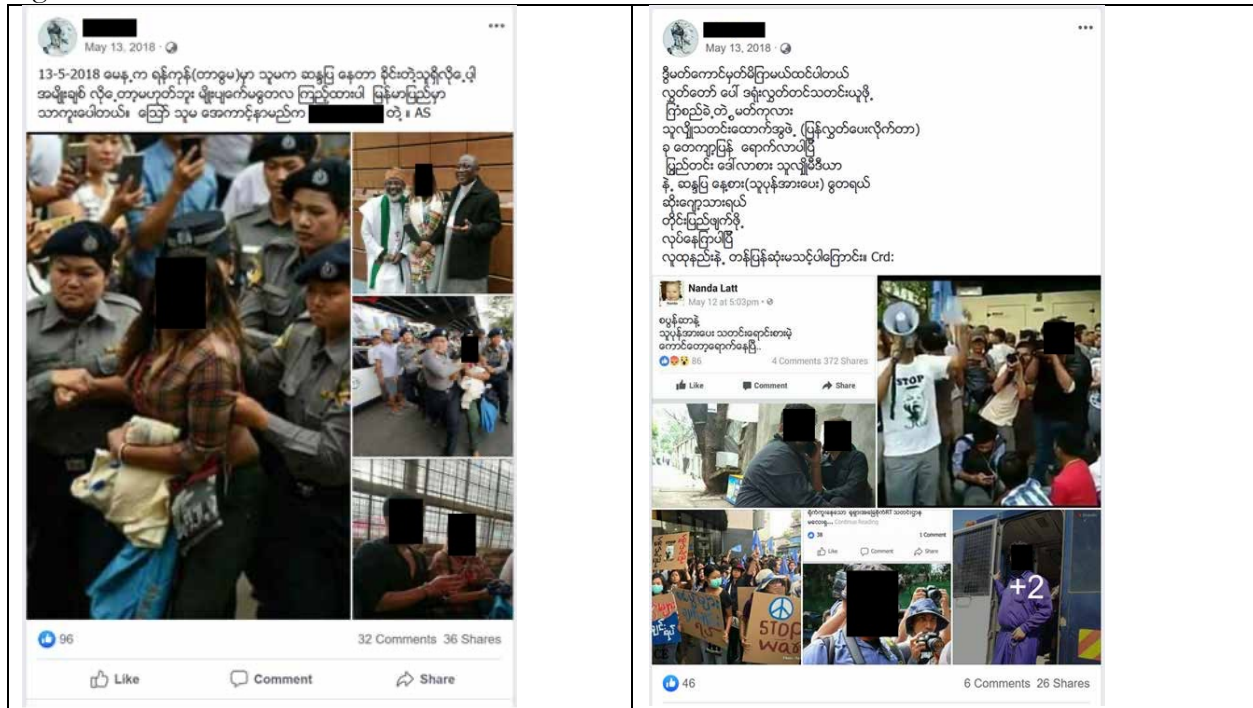
#### **IV. Unique contributions by Facebook**

In-group policing of the kind that appears in research on Rakhine State, on hate speech and misinformation, and on freedom of expression involved a host of strategies. Posts on Facebook could be seen as just one tool among many. Yet it is important to reflect on how uses of Facebook worked in concert with other strategies, and what unique contributions this may have enabled. The posts below in Figure 5., for example, were made after an organized peace demonstration in Yangon during May 2018. In the days before the appointed date, nationalist groups had issued public threats against the demonstrators. On the day of, they had assaulted demonstrators while police looked on, until arresting only the peace activists (Progressive Voice et al 2020, 82). In analyzing this case and others, *Ignited* argued that activists were facing a dual threat, from the state and its laws and from nationalists and their attacks, on Facebook, in the streets, and even at their homes. The report also argued that the former strengthened the latter, insofar as nationalist groups could operate with relative impunity while activists could not expect assistance from authorities (Progressive voice et al 2020, 74). In December 2015, for example, peace workshops involving Buddhists and Muslims in a city where there had recently been violence had to be cancelled after the organizer began receiving threatening text messages. “You want to die? Why are you pressuring our monks?” read one of the messages. The activist eventually had to go into hiding. He also decided against calling the police. “They would just pressure me to stop my work,” he told a journalist. Still, when he did resume work later, his approach was less direct. He took up an issue that affected both sides: waste-disposal (Wade 2015; see also Rajagopalan 2017).

Nationalist activity also sometimes helped generate or strengthen state restrictions. The journalist targeted in the post at right in Figure 5, for example, had previously been arrested on spurious charges relating to the use of a camera drone. Nationalists had agitated for stringent penalties against the journalist, who is also Muslim, and his colleagues (Barron 2017). Ultimately, they were only held for a few months, in large part because two colleagues were from Malaysia and Singapore (Shoon Naing 2017). But the incident was one of many instances in which individuals and

monks affiliated with nationalist organizations intervened in criminal and civil proceedings, both those that involved activists and journalists and those involving more quotidian affairs (C4ADS 2016, 27-28). Often they intervened in cases involving Muslims, but not only. In 2015, for example, the opposition politician Htin Lin Oo was sentenced to two years of hard labor for “insulting religion,” in a speech criticizing nationalist monks for stoking hatred. After the talk, nationalist organizations had denounced him and mobilized a public outcry by posting an edited version of the speech on Facebook. The outcry was followed by his eventual arrest (PEN America 2023; San Yamin Aung 2014).

Figure 5. Circa 2018<sup>20</sup>



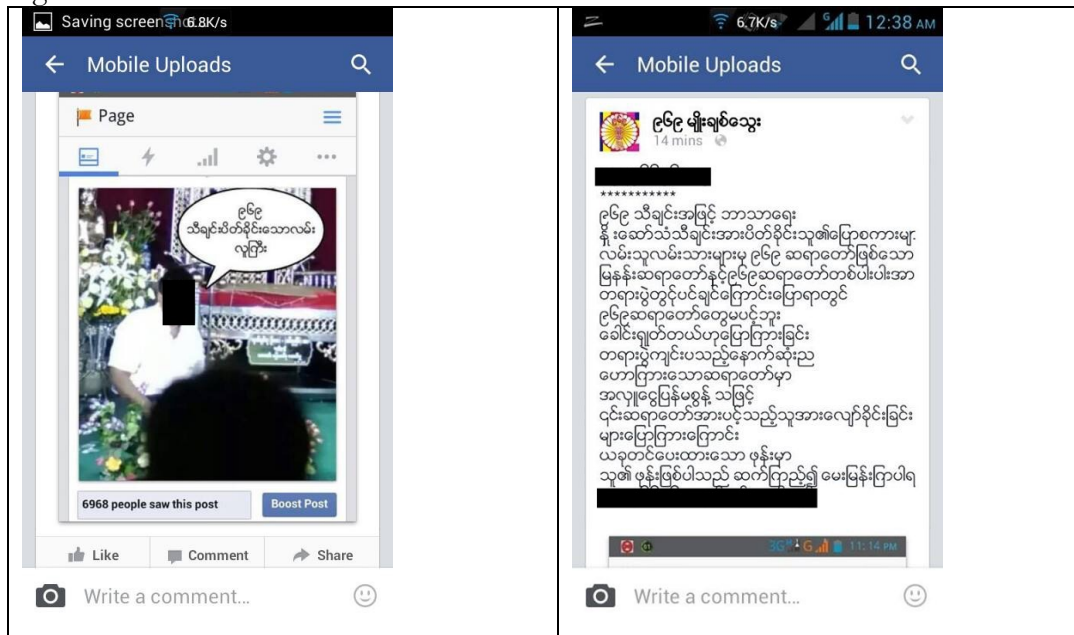
Posts on Facebook were used to generate public outrage, which helped motivate state action against Muslims and any who challenged “meta-narratives of Buddhist-Burman dominance” as well as provide the state an authorizing excuse. At the same time, those facing potential attacks by nationalist forces had to assume those forces could act with impunity. This heightened the seriousness of threats, whether those threats were received in the form of direct messages or messages publicly posted on Facebook. But public posts also involved a clear element of display that differentiates them from threats via other less public channels: attacks displayed in public could also serve as warnings to others (Fujii 2021). That posts attacking one or another individual as a “traitor” issued a warning to a broader audience was not always explicit, though it often was. The captions in Figure 5, for example, both contain subtle, but no less clear, indications that they aimed towards broader targets. “Myanmar has many opportunists,” says the image at left, while the image at right asserts that the journalist is part of a larger, secret, group. “They are working to destroy the country,” ends the caption. “The people must respond and discipline them in kind.”

Another example: after the prominent lawyer and political activist U Ko Ni, who is also Muslim, was assassinated outside the Yangon airport in early 2017, posts on Facebook celebrating the men

<sup>20</sup> Source: Progressive Voice 2022, 49-50

involved in his murder became common. One year after the assassination, meanwhile, a prominent monk, dubbing himself personal abbot to the shooter, circulated a video on YouTube and Facebook warning those who disrupted the activities of nationalist monks to “eat their fill” as well.<sup>21</sup> The statement invoked a commonly used idiom for death threats, akin to “eat your last meal” in English. It was primarily directed at the then recently-elected civilian government, which had temporarily banned him from giving sermons after an earlier celebration of the assassination. But it also clearly extended a pattern of threats against anyone attempting to disrupt the activities of nationalist organizations. Figure 6, for example, features the photograph and personal phone number of a local elder that circulated on Facebook in early 2015, after he had rejected a request to organize a public sermon featuring nationalist monks. “Here is his phone number,” reads the last line of the post. “You can call and ask him [about this].”

Figure 6. Circa 2015<sup>22</sup>



In-group policing also took distinctive forms when it targeted women, with consequences that were also clearly gendered. In May 2014, for example, a coalition of more than 100 civil society organizations, led by prominent women’s groups, released a statement opposing a suite of four “laws to protect race and religion” that were being promoted by nationalist organizations (n.a 2014).<sup>23</sup> In response, the leading nationalist organization released an official statement denouncing them as “traitors,” which circulated widely on Facebook (Nyein Nyein 2014). Some of the women involved had their photographs Photoshopped into pornographic images and videos or received threatening phone calls and text messages. “Race traitor whore,” read part of one message, to an activist whose name and phone number were included on the statement as a contact person. “Sluts like you deserve... female genital mutilation,” read part of another message, to the leader of a

<sup>21</sup> The video is still available on YouTube, while clips of various length have become a meme that can be found on Facebook and, now that TikTok has become popular, the latter platform as well.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i14ghT7QTcI>

<https://www.facebook.com/100079350165372/videos/1893723560827873/> (accessed 27 Sep 2023)

<sup>22</sup> Source: Author’s files

<sup>23</sup> Disclosure: the author worked for one of the signatory organizations at the time.

signatory organization whose phone number had not been listed on the statement (Justice Trust 2015, 18). The activists who came together to prepare *Ignited*, meanwhile, also discussed these and other incidents. “[T]hreats and attacks on Facebook against women HRDs [human rights defenders] are more severe, degrading, graphic, and almost always sexual in nature,” notes the report (Progressive Voice et al 2020, 46).

In-group policing that targeted women drew on the gendering of anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim discourses. The claim that Islam would conquer Myanmar through overpopulation, for example, also included the claim that Muslim men were being instructed to seek out Buddhist women to impregnate, in a Myanmar-specific version of what has been called “love jihad” in other contexts (Frydenlund 2021) that also drew on older narratives about the importance of women for reproducing the nation (Ikeya 2011). One corollary to this was that women in relationships with Muslim men, both romantic and platonic, could be shamed with various insulting terms, such as “*kalar* wife” and “race destroying woman.” A variant of the latter phrase features in the post at left in Figure 5, above, for example. “See this race destroying woman? Look at her,” it says, in part. “Her name is [redacted].” Again, Facebook was only one of multiple tools, but, again, posting to Facebook provided a unique ability to make individuals into public displays and warnings to others. The images below in Figure 7, for example, are from Facebook accounts created for what appears to be the sole purpose of shaming women in relationships with Muslim men. The account sharing the first image is named “True news of good-looking Myanmar women with *kalar* men”; the account sharing the second is “Lesser wives of *Kalar*.”

Figure 7. Circa 2015 & 2016<sup>24</sup>



<sup>24</sup> Source: Author's files





That posting to Facebook provided a powerful means for policing the conduct of women was also likely reinforced by the way such attacks always contained the potential for both a broad public display and for targeting an individual's more intimate social networks. "I was followed by many people and my photo was being taken. Then it was spread on social media, mentioning where I had been and what my activities were," said one female activist quoted in *Ignited*. "Some of my close friends dare not talk to me anymore. They started to avoid me" (Progressive Voice et al 2020, 82). The efficacy of such attacks also has to be understood in light of the ubiquity of harassment on Facebook, which was particularly acute for women. A survey conducted by LIRNEAsia and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), for example, found that 58% of all female respondents had experienced online abuse in the previous 12 months (2018, 3). "The vast majority of both adults and young people believed that young people are not safe online, given the prevalence of online threats such as scams, hacking and harassment," concluded another study, jointly conducted by Save the Children and the University of Sydney, which also found that sexual harassment of girls was the single most common concern for young people (Ridout et al 2019, 7, 96; see also Phandeevar 2020, 22-23; Phyu Phyu Kyaw 2020, 23-25; Thant Sin Oo et al 2019, 39-41). Both studies noted that one of the most prevalent forms of harassment was the use of personal images to shame or coerce, often via images already posted to Facebook or photographs taken surreptitiously (Ridout et al 2019, 71; LIRNEAsia & MIDO 2018, 5; see also Ei Cherry Aung 2016). "He threatened to use my pics on Facebook for other use. I was so scared and begged him. I had to deactivate that account," one young woman told the researchers, describing her experience with harassment. "[A] stranger took her picture and posted it on Facebook. They [had] bad intentions. Some of the guys...photoshopped their photos and uploaded or open a new account [with them]," said another (Ridout et al 2019, 43, 53).

A final example illustrates how Facebook could be used in concert with other strategies, as well as how it could transform these strategies into warnings for larger audiences. In 2015, two peace activists, who are also both Muslim, were arrested for alleged links to "unlawful organizations," based upon photos taken while visiting the territory of a primarily Christian ethnic armed organization as part of large inter-faith delegation organized by a Buddhist abbot. The arrests came just a few months after posts on Facebook, and then an article in a prominent nationalist journal, had used the same photos to allege that one of the activists was an insurgent and "threat to Buddhism" (Figure 8). Following their arrest, nationalist monks attended all of their court appearances and held demonstrations outside the courthouse. Both activists were eventually

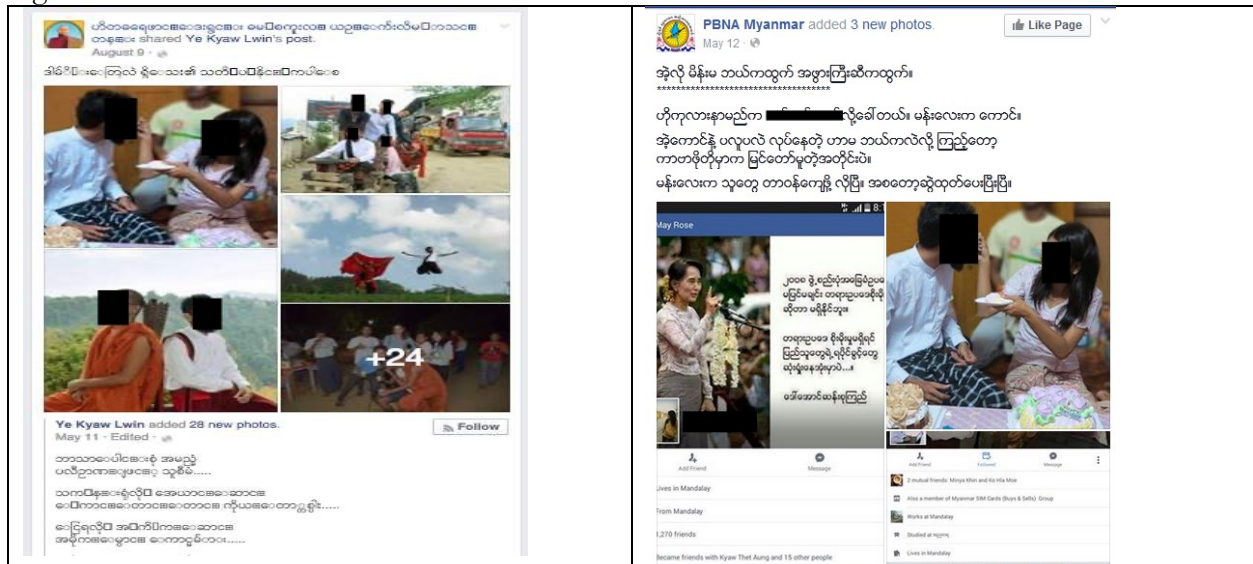
sentenced to two years hard labor, while others in the delegation were never charged (Fortify Rights 2016; Wade 2015).

Figure 8. Circa 2015<sup>25</sup>



Posts on Facebook about the case were not limited to the two activists, however. They often featured collections of photos, which, in the general pattern in online harassment, used photos the activists had posted themselves, to highlight their relationships with other activists (Figure 9, at left). Sometimes these posts also singled out specific women by name. In the image below at right, the young woman can be seen feeding the Muslim activist, in a show of friendship that can also be recast as part of a marriage ritual and imply a sexual relationship. “Mandalay needs to fulfill its responsibility for these two,” reads its caption. “Eliminate it at the root for us.” In the context of such an exhortation, meanwhile, the image of feeding can also invoke the idiom of a death threat: the activists have eaten their last meal.

Figure 9. Circa 2015<sup>26</sup>



<sup>25</sup> Source: Author’s files

<sup>26</sup> Source: at left, C4ADS 2016, 9; at right, author’s files

## V. Conclusion

In Myanmar, Facebook was used to cast those who contested narratives of Buddhist-Burman dominance or signaled solidarity, even empathy, for the Rohingya as traitors, questioning their loyalty and positioning them as outsiders to the dominant community. Women, in particular, were targeted in attacks that were especially severe and degrading and which drew on the gendering of both anti-Rohingya discourses and the broader logics of Buddhist-Burman supremacy. These practices represent clear examples of in-group policing. That this in-group policing was widespread is suggested by the way such practices appear in research on violence in Rakhine State and in reports on patterns in hate speech, even where these reports do not accord them significance. This suggestion is further reinforced by reports concluding that such practices were negatively impacting freedom of expression, including research commissioned by Meta, even where these reports do not link these impacts to violence. Scholarship on genocide and mass violence, on the other hand, suggests the significance of this in-group policing, both for the way people can be individually recruited to participate in violence and for the way that they produce the authority of a moral community from which victims are excluded. Indeed, these practices are so important that scholars have begun to see them as decisive in the difference between situations that are at risk of genocide and situations where genocide actually occurs.

In-group policing in Myanmar was pursued in a variety of ways and would have occurred even in the absence of Facebook. However, this paper has pointed to one way in which the use of Facebook transformed the in-group policing that did occur, with significant consequences: it offered a unique capability to transform threats into public displays. While threatening messages against individuals and their families were conveyed using multiple channels, Facebook's de facto monopoly in Myanmar meant that it was the primary means by which such messages could also address a larger audience. Such displays had to be taken seriously, because there were good reasons to believe both that nationalist forces were prepared to act on them and that protection or assistance from state authorities was unlikely. People also had to remain alert to the way such displays could generate public controversies that would provide state authorities with the impetus, or excuse, to act against them even as it was they that faced attack. These concerns were relevant for many more people than just those named in a given post: such displays enunciated a warning, backed by clear power, for everyone to heed or ignore at their own peril.

Ultimately, the important conclusion is that limiting concern for the relationship between Facebook and violence to “hate speech” and other content about the Rohingya and other Muslims radically narrows the scope of the problem. Such content is an important matter of concern, based on commitments to values just as dignity, justice, and truth. That should be enough to warrant action—without the additional burden of proving that such content helped cause violence, also. The question of what speech helped cause violence, on the other hand, should direct attention to a broader range of content on Facebook, which can be differentiated based upon both (1) who it referenced and (2) its function. This paper primarily has sought to introduce new evidence, or new interpretations of existing evidence, and analyze the way (1) content not about the Rohingya was (2) used for the function of in-group policing.<sup>27</sup> With important exceptions, extant analysis has excluded

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<sup>27</sup> It should also be noted that content used for in-group policing was often morally objectionable, such as when it took the form of direct threats or otherwise degrading and assaultive speech. Yet in-group policing could also be effectively accomplished through practices that may not seem to violate any particular standard. Let this be illustrated by one of the female activists who contributed to the report *Ignited*. “When people want to attack me... they post a status indirectly saying something, not using any hate speech,” she said. “They are more experienced. People wouldn’t blindly share something like, ‘please kill her,’ but they are using different strateg[ies]... They got into my photo albums and got one of the photos I took with one of my friends... [who] looks like a Muslim... [and] posted it saying, ‘look, who is she coupling with?’” (Progressive Voice 2022, 82-83).

this evidence on both counts, focusing primarily on (1) content about the Rohingya that (2) served what could be called a characterization function, helping to construct narratives about the Rohingya that were used to justify genocide. But even speech serving such a characterization function could also contribute to in-group policing, by signaling affiliation and affirming the existence of a public mobilizing against the Rohingya (Prasse-Freeman 2021; Bachtold 2023; McCarthy 2017). Sometimes speech about the out-group cleverly avoided the vulgarity and directness of hate speech, which reiterated the moral superiority of the in-group (Prasse-Freeman 2021, 184). Other times, when Facebook content about the out-group was more direct, even vulgar and aggressive, it served as a clear performance of power and impunity, especially in comparison to the negative consequences faced by those who tried to oppose it (Thant Sin Oo et al 2020).

Recognizing the significance of content that served the function of in-group policing, whether its primary object of reference was the in-group or the out-group, also underlines the importance of paying attention to the experience created by encountering content as it accumulates over time. This would require seeking to understand not individual posts but their aggregates, such as the frequency of encounter with particular practices on Facebook. How often did a given user encounter displays of in-group policing, for example, whether targeting them or others? Once? Twice? Once a month, once a week—daily? Answers to such questions would help clarify the extent to which such practices saturated users' experience of Facebook and their effects (Williams 1977, 110). Significant research already indicates that gendered harassment was pervasive on Facebook, for example, particularly for young women. If in-group policing similarly saturated the Facebook worlds of Myanmar users, in general or for specific types of people, frequency of encounter could mutate into the expectation of probability: the lived certainty that signaling solidarity with the Rohingya would be met with swift response. Such an experience of certainty would underline Facebook's significance as a means for not just intimidating individuals but projecting the size and uniformity of a community aligned in their exclusion of the Rohingya, and in favor of their eventual destruction.

Recognizing the significance of in-group policing on Facebook has clear consequences for ongoing efforts to secure restitution and accountability. The class-action lawsuits on behalf of the Rohingya, for example, involve questions of how Meta's design and management of Facebook contributed to the proliferation of hate speech and misinformation. Advocates have also effectively demonstrated how the algorithms that Meta designed to automate decisions about what content to promote, as well as the option to purchase additional promotion, increased the reach of "hate speech" and other content about the Rohingya (Amnesty 2022; Global Witness 2022, 2021; Rio 2020). Similar questions should be extended to include the problem of in-group policing. How did content promotion algorithms or other features of Facebook's design contribute to the frequency with which people in Myanmar encountered in-group policing? Similar questions could be asked about how Facebook's design led to the promotion of specific examples of in-group policing. To how many people did Facebook broadcast the images of traitors being pilloried in Rakhine State during 2012 and after, for example? Or: how many people encountered images related to the campaign against the two Muslim peace activists and their comrades in 2014? Why did Facebook's algorithms promote such images in this way?

The lawsuits on behalf of the Rohingya have also raised the question of what Meta knew and when and, therefore, what it could meaningfully have done to act earlier. Highlighting the significance of in-group policing highlights the significance of early warnings that Meta did receive. In mid-2014, for example, a collective of activists in Myanmar were told they had a "special queue" for reporting dangerous content to the company. One of the first issues they raised was the broad issue of in-group policing, including the attacks using photographs looted earlier that year from the offices of humanitarian organizations in Rakhine State (Figure 3). Company employees initially refused to remove the post, citing policies that made such content allowable; even with the promise

of a “special queue,” the posts were only removed after more than six weeks (Stecklow 2018).<sup>28</sup> Four years later, activists had to resort to an open letter, after continued frustrations with how the company was responding to their warnings, prompting a public apology from CEO Mark Zuckerberg (Roose & Mozur 2018). Yet, at almost the same moment, the UN Fact-Finding Mission was having a similar experience, as the activist alleged to have helped its investigation was attacked in a campaign on Facebook. Only following several weeks of attempts, and working directly with a contact at the company, was the Mission able to get the posts removed. Several months later, meanwhile, at least 16 examples of the original attack continued to circulate (IIFMM 2018, 342).

The research here also suggests important queries for better understanding how the Myanmar military may have used Facebook. On at least seven occasions between 2018 and 2021, Meta removed clusters of accounts involved in “coordinated inauthentic behavior”: “coordinated campaigns that seek to manipulate public debate” in Myanmar (Meta 2021a, 4-6, 2021b). To what extent did such activity contribute to in-group policing of the kind discussed here? Attacks on a journalist as a “traitor” were included among posts promoted by the cluster of accounts analyzed by Graphika, for example, which Meta removed in October 2020. According to this analysis, these accounts were each followed by between 1 and 5 million people. Graphika did also conclude that “disinformation and dangerous speech” was a small portion of the content posted by this cluster, which was aimed primarily at generating profit by funneling traffic back to the same constellation of websites (Graphika 2020, 1-2). But other research indicates that the Myanmar military undertook substantial coordinated activity on Facebook, much of it aimed at the Rohingya (DFRLab 2020; Han 2020; Mozur 2018; Unleash Research Labs 2016), and operating out of both military installations inside the country and in Russia (Wai Moe 2021; Aung Kaung Myat 2020), where it has long sent personnel for training (Seekins 2023; ICG 2022, 6; Maung Aung Myoe 2009, 139). How much did this state-coordinated activity contribute to the total quantity of in-group policing on Facebook, for example, or to the saturation of individual Facebook worlds with such practices? In June 2023, the successor to the UN Mission that had earlier concluded Facebook played a “significant” role in the genocide indicated that it had completed a “major analytical report” on the organized spread of hate speech by the Myanmar military (HRC 2023, 6-7), after having received a substantial disclosure of Facebook data from Meta in September 2022 (OHCHR 2022). It would be worthwhile for this investigation and others to also take up the question of in-group policing, if they have not already.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Disclosure: the author was involved with these efforts.

<sup>29</sup> The “major analytical report” referenced in HRC 2023 is not currently available to the public.



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