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(Social)mediascapes Carved in Blood:
Digital Performance and Myanmar's Spring Revolution

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Despite a legacy of British colonialism, 60 years of military (or *Tatmadaw*) rule, multiple coups and revolutions, the 1 February military coup in Myanmar marked an undoubtable moment of change in the country's fraught political history. The brutal violence the Tatmadaw enacted in the streets of crowded cities—shooting protestors at random, beating people in front of their neighbors—was horrific, yet nothing new for a political organization that anthropologist Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson notes "has systematically sought to subjugate or eliminate virtually every ethnic minority in the country and any other entity aspiring for political representation" (2021, 5). Many from the Bamar majority presently share an experience of systemic violence with people on the nation's periphery, who have lived through it for decades (Bakali 2021, 54; Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2021). Despite the continuities of military brutality, this revolution is different: it is the first revolution in Myanmar where protestors are armed with social media, exposing the horrors of the coup to the world through their smartphones in open defiance of the military junta (Wittekind 2021).

In the weeks following 1 February, anthropologist Courtney Wittekind (2021) explored the question of if *Myanmar's protestors can succeed*. Wittekind finds that, "by day three, Myanmar's youth had begun their online campaign of civil disobedience, mobilizing a resource their parents and grandparents had lacked" in 1962, 1988 and 2007 (ibid). This digital shift in revolutionary performance calls for further investigation. *How do participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement strategically perform activism online to document military violence and gain political support for their struggle? How is the physical presence of military violence and the Spring Revolution performed in virtual space?* Risking surveillance or arrest for their posts, Myanmar activists from all walks of life continue to record military war crimes on their public Facebook walls. Given the intensity of this collective struggle, it is difficult to discredit protestors' sincerity as self-centered *performative activism*. Instead, this piece examines the digital performance of activism through the people who post (perform) the events of the coup for a wider (social)mediascape (Appadurai 1990).

Despite enthusiasm that social media may be the weapon that breaks the chain of coups and authoritarian violence in Myanmar, the political effects of this technology shift are more complex. After badly losing the 2021 election, the Tatmadaw echoed Trumpian claims of election fraud by using social media to spread disinformation; these claims became the rationale for the coup and arrest of the democratic parliament (Kipgen 2021, 5). Although Myanmar military users are now officially banned from most large social media platforms, the Tatmadaw swarms Facebook, TikTok and Twitter with propaganda. Over the course of the coup, the military has consolidated control over the internet infrastructure in Myanmar, seizing private data from telecoms providers and enforcing frequent internet blackouts (Padmanabhan et al. 2021, 1–2). Concurrently, the military returned to the pre-"transition" days of independent media bans.

Even with the growing threat of surveillance and persecution, many activists in Myanmar still believe in the revolutionary potential of social media. Anti-military protestors can now represent the coup for a wider mediascape themselves, no longer relying on the mediation of foreign news agencies to spread their message. Assuming great risk, social media activists ensure that the military's war crimes are documented across the world. Perhaps many protestors have placed too much faith on the gaze of international observers, believing in the United Nation's responsibility to protect citizens from genocidal state actors (Mennecke and Stensrud 2021, 112–15). Yet, the strategic use of digital performance is vital for the longevity of the movement. To demonstrate the importance of social media performance during the Spring Revolution, this article puts media theory and emerging scholarship on the coup together with observations from five years of off/online ethnographic research with journalists in Yangon.

The performative element of social media activism is highly contested. Particularly in the United States, where #BlackLivesMatter activism quickly became a rallying call for white liberals, there is widespread distrust in the authenticity of people's political engagement with activism over social media. Veronica Barassi (2017) calls shallow engagement with activism online "slacktivism," or self-centered participation in the political struggles of Others, fostered by neoliberal capitalist social media platforms that monetize performances of struggle. She finds that Facebook and other social networking corporations have a political and economic interest in making the "individual more visible over the collective" (2017, 71). Similarly, Kelsey Blair critiques much of "white allyship" online as an "empty gesture" of "performativity" (2021, 53). Crucially, she locates a shift in the way the term "performative" relates to digital activism: although "*performative* is often used to examine the relationship between utterances and their effects, this emergent notion of performative is used to name a gap between utterances and their effects" (Blair 2021, 54). This critique of performative politics on social media extends beyond white allyship with BLM in the USA, and marks a more global debate around social media activism.

One of my Rohingya friends—who lives in a refugee camp in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh—frequently receives negative comments from his Rohingya followers for the way he performs activism on Facebook. He posts about Rohingya participation in CDM, and fundraises for his community by using photographs of him donating clothes and food to his neighbors. Some followers believe this approach is self-serving, or charity for the

sake of recognition. Yet, on a practical level, these posts are advertisements for future donors, and proof to current supporters that their money is actually being distributed to people in need. He places himself as a visible individual within a collective struggle, within neoliberal social media platforms that encourage this (Barassi 2017, 71). It makes sense that this performance of charity may offend certain sensibilities. Despite the performative element of my friend's activism, I take his motivations as sincere. He aptly recognizes the political economy of Facebook, and leverages a focus on the *individual* and the *visual* to materially support his neighbors in need. Taking account of Barassi's critique, I argue that the strong sense of "collective" identity amongst CDM protestors—from refugee camps to cities—mediates the "self-centered" logics of the "neoliberal capitalist" platform (2017, 66). Through sustained political engagement with CDM and the Rohingya struggle, my friend acts as "not an individual agent" but as an "autonomous self" "embedded into the collective" (2017, 75).

Blair concedes that even though "empty gestures" of performative allyship "are deeply inadequate," "sometimes they are the best available option. In such instances, an ethical approach to emptiness is necessary" (2021, 67). Lindsay Goss adds that performing solidarity with a political struggle online requires "flexibility, attentiveness, and commitment" that binds the individual with a collective struggle (2021, 102). Linking the Rohingya genocide to the 2021 coup, Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson highlights this collective struggle of people resisting military rule: "it is time that we recognize the peoples and cultures of the pro-democracy movement for who they are: survivors of a systematized campaign of violence and elimination" (Thein-Lemelson 2021, 5). One thing that the military coup has clarified for many Bamar urbanites, who were likely to deny the genocide before the coup (Wood 2019), is the extent of the Tatmadaw's systemic violence, which was under-represented in Myanmar media and often takes place in ethnic minority regions.

It is also important to add that the performative dimension of activism far pre-dates the rise of social media. Psycholinguist Julia Kristeva uses the term "subject-in-process" to describe the individual at "an intersection of intertextuality" and "dialectical crisis" (Kristeva, Clark, and Hulley 1990, 154). Particularly within a liberal democratic framework, revolution requires activists to take an active role as a subject in the process of history, as an agent pushing for change larger than the individual. For Kristeva, negotiating political subjectivity always involves "intertextuality," the pre-existing texts of particular discourses that we internalize and transform into seemingly original dialogue (1990, 155). Thus, activists perform the political from pre-existing "intertexts" (or social scripts) of struggle. Revolution, in Kristeva's linguistic formation, is then made possible through poetic play with the language of already existing "intertexts," which can be reconfigured to create new meaning (1974, 37; 1984). I would add that for social media performance in particular, images and videos (or visual texts) are a crucial site for the reconfiguration of meaning. This assertion is in line with Anthropologist Karen Strasser's (2020) notion of "image events" in mass media. As particular visuals become a site of political struggle, they take up an "eventfulness" of their own beyond their pure representational function (2020, 13). It is evident that CDM protestors engage with social media to shape the digital representations of the violence they face, thus translating physical acts of resistance into digital events with the potential to shift consciousness and power.

Social media platforms provide digital space for users to perform different versions of themselves, and explore emerging *subjectivies-in-process* within a set of options structured by the platform, which Nakamura and Chow-White call "socially enabled and constrained choices and performances" (2012, 15). The authors argue that "users don't just consume images of race" but actively perform race through the self-fashioning of the internet (2012, 8). Social media users are not just participating in protests off-line and consuming images of the coup and revolution on the internet; they actively perform the revolution for digital space. By recognizing the performative aspect of all social media activism on neo-liberal platforms, we can judge political participation on more complex terms. Rather than asking is this activist authentic or performative (*good or bad*), we can question *who is speaking and why? What are they trying to say? Is their message self-serving or does it have a wider impact? What are the political effects of each performance?*

Activist scripts, or the *intertexts* that subjects-in-process must contend with in order to speak (Kristeva, Clark, and Hulley 1990, 154), can be self-serving and appropriative of Other's struggles, or can be carefully performed to speak to particular collectivities. Memes and infographics become a key part of articulation (Li 2000) within the stage of social media activism (Strassler 2020). By presenting complex textual and numerical data in graphic form, social media activists articulate large amounts of information in an easily digestible way. For example, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma publishes a daily graphic report documenting the total number of deaths, arrests, and key events in the military coup in a very accessible way ("Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup" 2021). The organization selects different fallen protestor each day whose face is backgrounded behind the data, staring back at the viewer. Far from a self-centered approach to social media activism, the AAPP Burma does not present individual agents, rather a collective voice or eye. Young finds a mutually reinforcing dynamic between these offline/political engagements: "the content of these images engages spectators to act collectively online and offline to leverage their targets (2021, 54). The Blood Money Campaign Myanmar also publishes infographics that articulate the complex economic ties of Myanmar military-owned corporations in a form that is widely digestible to people across contexts ("Pillars of Flowing Blood" 2021). Indeed, these graphics made their way into physical space, plastered at protests around the world against corporations that do business with Myanmar military and their cronies.

This online/offline engagement of images and intertexts match Seinenu Thein-Lemelson's observations about embodiment and social media activism after the coup: "although they connect through social media platforms, at heart, this community is face to face and *embodied*. They utilize a fictive kinship system, common in groups and communities that have endured extreme bodily pain and sacrifice" (2021, 4). Wittekind (2021) finds that in the first days after the coup, digital activists played a key role in encouraging people to take the risk to embody revolt in the streets: "while many were hesitant to embrace large-scale protests, fearing the military's reaction, the disruption of online resistance pushed demonstrators into the streets of Yangon" (2021). These observations match Budka and Bräuchler's observations about social media being a space "where boundaries between producer and audience are frequently dissolving" (2020, 20).

Both producer and audience, CDM activists assume immense online/offline risk for the chance of freedom from military rule.

Despite the risks, social media engagement with the Spring Revolution remains strong more than a half year into the coup. Tatmadaw war crimes are well documented, and now fill Myanmar language social media for anyone to see. Activists continue to perform for us hopefully, writing in English for foreigners to read online, and calling for collective intervention through the UN. Yet international attention on Myanmar activists' performances has waned. Budka and Bräuchler predict the disappointing indifference of onlookers outside Myanmar; although activists seek "international outrage," they are "hardly fulfilled" in mediascapes saturated with violence (2020, 21–22). But Young is optimistic, regardless of an inattentive and uncaring audience: "in the era of social media and smartphone cameras, the effectiveness of this visual imagery, as a weapon, is now much greater than the conventional approaches" (2021, 69). Although social media activism will not overthrow the Myanmar military alone, it is a technological departure from past failed attempts at revolution, and a key weapon for the largely unarmed movement (Wittekind 2021).

The ongoing Social Punishment Campaign is perhaps the most controversial example of anti-military protestors weaponizing the potentials of social media. Recognizing how social media platforms foster emerging modes of public shaming, social media activists are using their platforms to call out and publicly dox Myanmar nationals who support the military (McMichael 2021). Contributors to the social punishment campaign post photos of targeted individuals online and screenshots of their social media feeds, alongside personal data; comment sections fill with users calling out individuals, chastising their targets in Myanmar language. Without recourse to physical violence, the unarmed movement has taken advantage of evolving forms of social/symbolic violence made possible by the rise of social media, which allows anyone to publicly shame anyone else for almost any reason.

There is debate inside Myanmar, and on Facebook feeds, about who deserves social punishment—from military officials and cronies directly implicated in Tatmadaw war crimes, to their children, or public figures who refrain from performing anti-coup activism on their pages. Although the social violence embedded in this form of digital activism may be uncomfortable and sometimes unsavory, it is difficult to moralize the strategy from behind the safety of computer screens far from sites of active conflict. What the Social Punishment Campaign does prove is that CDM protestors are aware of the emerging potentials of social media, with a keen eye on how social movements around the world have embraced its potentials for multiple means.

But direct confrontation is only one way that CDM activists contest violence through online/offline performance. Myanmar's visual and performance artists sprang into action immediately following the coup, taking great risks to create from active conflict zones (Wojcik 2021). One Yangonite performance artist, who has since fled the country, told me that most people in Myanmar rejected her experimental approach to art before the coup. Now, she said, avant-garde performances about violence are widely appreciated. The revolution gave rise to many performances, digitized from safe houses or embodied in open streets, many of which used blood and gore as a representational motif against state

violence. This process of articulation involves both the embodied performance of artistic practice, and the digital performance of activism, as social media becomes a stage to translate physicality for a worldwide audience. Now, many Myanmar artists have fled persecution to share their work across the world (Hileman 2021; Haynes 2021). From a position of exile, these artists use social media performance as a way to share work with their comrades and loved ones back in Myanmar. Thus, social media performance is not unidirectional, translating the physical revolution in Myanmar only for an audience outside the country; rather, the digital revolution is a two-way street in which people inside/outside Myanmar share a stage to express collective revolt.

As users play an active role in performing the revolution over social media, Myanmar military war crimes are visually re-articulated by survivors themselves, and directly shared with audiences across borders. This goes back to Wittekind's (2021) question from February—"can Myanmar's protestors succeed?" The movement in some ways is already a success despite an ongoing struggle with no end in sight and hopes for swift change waning after almost a year of living under the coup. Contending with surveillance and internet blackouts, social media activists continue to perform innovative strategies to cement resistance in digital space for anyone to see. Armed with smartphones and not weapons that kill, CDM has successfully operationalized what Bräuchler and Budka call "strategic media use" (2020, 21) by recognizing the strengths and limitations of these newly ubiquitous platforms for social life. Even if the Tatmadaw slowly gains control of all aspects of political and economic life in physical space once again, as it did in 1988 and 2007, the revolution will survive; the polis' sustained life and death commitment to peace and democracy ensures this. Unified in resistance, the digital Spring Revolution will live on behind screens for decades to come, as a rallying call and expanding script for future revolt.

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