
**NETWORKING DISSENT: CYBER ACTIVISTS USE THE
INTERNET TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**

Tiffany Danitz and Warren P. Strobel

Editors' abstract. If only social netwar could bring down dictators! This case reflects some of the limitations that activist NGOs face when confronting resolute authoritarians. Danitz (Pew Center on the States) and Strobel (Knight Ridder News Service) study the network of civil society actors who tried, during the 1990s, to free Burma from the dictatorial rule imposed by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). So far, that hierarchy has prevailed. Moreover, the United States Supreme Court recently overturned the selective purchasing legislation passed by some states and cities in response to the networked social activism that Danitz and Strobel describe. Despite this setback, the SLORC's transnational opponents have adopted a protracted strategy, one imbued with and enlivened by the belief that the information revolution sharply raises the costs of repression. We thank the United States Institute of Peace for permission to publish this condensation of the January 1999 report they sponsored and published under the same title (USIP, Virtual Diplomacy Series, No. 3, February 2000, www.usip.org/oc/vd/vdr/vburma/vburma_intro.html).

INTRODUCTION

On Monday, January 27, 1997, the huge U.S. conglomerate PepsiCo announced to the world that it was terminating its last business operations in Burma. News of the decision, one that the company had long resisted, raced across financial and political newswires.

But to denizens of the Internet who monitored events regarding Burma, it was already old news. A copy of Pepsi's statement, for which they had long labored and hoped, had crisscrossed the Internet the day before, a Sunday.¹ A battle by global, electronically savvy activists was finally over. With computer modems, keyboards, electronic mail, web sites, long hours, and organization, they had forced the soda-and-snack-food giant to leave a land ruled by a regime that the activists considered illegitimate and repressive. Stealing PepsiCo's thunder by spreading word of the decision before corporate officials had a chance to spin the news was a major coup for the activists.

The case of Burma raises intriguing questions about the effect of modern computer communications on the balance of power between citizens and elected officials, and among local, national, and international power structures and, ultimately, their effect on the conduct of diplomacy in the 21st century. Geographically dispersed but knitted together by the Internet, Burmese and non-Burmese activists from the United States as well as from Europe and Australia joined a long-standing effort to bring democracy to Burma (a small, and to many, obscure Southeast Asian nation). Their global campaign raised constitutional and national policy questions in the United States, as a state government and local councils passed foreign policy legislation without consulting Washington. Many of these decisions may violate international trade agreements between the U.S. federal government and foreign entities. Then, in April 1997, President Clinton signed federal legislation banning any new investment by U.S. companies in Burma. As this chapter will show, these legislative decisions were made because of a global grassroots campaign run to a considerable degree on the Internet, and despite the presence of only a negligible Burmese constituency in the United States.

We offer evidence that the Internet was crucially influential in enabling civil-society actors to force the passage of a series of laws regarding business and political dealings with Burma. The Internet was also used to sway international public opinion and pique the interest of more-traditional news media.

¹See Appendix C [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel].

In particular, we find that, among its many and still unfolding uses, the Internet—by its very nature—lends itself as a potent tool for advocates organizing for action on international issues.

Following the example of the Chinese student dissidents in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Burmese activists and their allies added the advances of technology to their struggle. Burma remains in the grip of a powerful military junta, known until recently as the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The representatives elected democratically in 1990 remain unseated. China's rulers found it difficult to stop the outside world from seeing what happened in Tiananmen Square or prevent student dissidents from communicating with the outside world in 1989. SLORC has found it even harder to clamp down on the surreptitious flow of information across borders in the Internet age. Burma's rulers have tried to stanch the flow by passing harsh laws fixing criminal penalties for unlicensed fax machines and computer modems and insisting on state control over international Internet connections. Inside the country, the technological structure is woefully underdeveloped, which is one of the reasons the prodemocracy campaign has been led from the United States instead of Burma.

While the role of the Internet is important, it is not a replacement for other forms of interaction and communication. But it is a powerful supplement. Traditional face-to-face lobbying is still more effective than computers. In addition, using the Internet has inherent limitations for grassroots activists. Its use is limited to those who have access to the technology, and its openness allows information to be manipulated by those holding opposing points of view.

TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION AND INTERNET ACTIVISM

There is much in recent history to suggest that the appearance of new information technologies has aided grassroots, or "citizen," activists in challenging nondemocratic regimes by widely exposing the offending issue, by facilitating public education about the issue, and by promoting and mobilizing "netizens" in actions against the regimes. In doing so, the activists have augmented the effects of their activities on international relations, challenging the management of diplomatic affairs traditionally carried out by states and their diplomatic repre-

sentatives. Nevertheless, is the promise greater than the reality? This study seeks to examine the use of the Internet by the Burma pro-democracy activists as a case study with that question in mind.

It is also reasonably well-established that new communication technologies, including the 15-year-old revolution in real-time television, have given new powers to nonstate actors, challenging officials' primacy in international and internal affairs.² Ordinary citizens have used the handheld videocamera, the telephone, the fax machine, and other communication technologies to make their causes known, from the "people power" revolution in the Philippines to the antiapartheid movement in South Africa and the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico.³

The past decade is replete with examples of how advanced-information flows have played a central role in helping grassroots activists, who seek democratic rule, to counter dictatorial regimes. The 1989 revolutions throughout Eastern Europe were fueled by both personal media, such as hand-passed videocassettes and newsletters, and mass media beamed in from abroad, allowing citizens in one place to learn of, and then mimic, political dissent elsewhere.⁴ While the peaceful demonstrations in Tiananmen Square were in progress, information was the crucial umbilical cord between the Chinese students, their cohorts around the world, and an international audience. One technology often blended with and fed into another, in a sort of "feedback loop," as news sent out of China by foreign reporters was "smuggled" back in via hundreds of fax machines. The dissemination of information and news facilitated by the new technology helped delegitimize the regime significantly in the eyes of the international community and the Chinese people.

²See, for example, Warren P. Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Impact on Peace Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

³For example, see Brook Larmer, *Revolutions Without Guns: Nonviolent Resistance in the "Global Village,"* unpublished work-in-progress presentation, U.S. Institute of Peace, April 27, 1995.

⁴*Ibid.*; Ted Koppel, "The Global Information Revolution and TV News," address to the United States Institute of Peace conference, *Managing Chaos*, Washington, D.C., December 1, 1994; Johanna Neuman, *The Media: Partners in the Revolutions of 1989*, Atlantic Council Occasional Paper (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council Publications, June 1991).

Nevertheless, because information and communications increasingly form the base of international transactions, the dictator finds himself in a dilemma. Modern states require citizens—whether doctors, businessmen, or inventors—to have access to the latest sources and forms of information in order to compete in the global marketplace. “But the more they [i.e., dictators] permit these new technologies, the more they risk their monopoly of control over information and communication.”⁵

Another view is that new information and communication technologies do not give an inherent advantage—either to governments or other centralized authorities, on the one hand, or citizens, on the other. In this analysis, new forms of information distribution cause temporary changes in the societal structure, but these soon dissipate. “When the political system absorbs a new technology, the public may know a temporary high of influence before the balance of power returns to a shared custody over policy.”⁶ Whereas McLuhan declared “the medium is the message,”⁷ in this view, the intrinsic characteristics of the medium are less important than who uses it and how. The fundamental nature of technology is “its irrepressible ambivalence.”⁸ Put another way, “Cyberocracy, far from favoring democracy or totalitarianism, may make possible still more advanced, more opposite, and farther apart forms of both.”⁹

A third point of view concentrates on what might be called the darker side of the destabilizing changes hailed by the technological optimists—that technology advances social disintegration, increases the divide between the information “haves” and “have-nots” and hastens

⁵Secretary of State George Shultz, quoted in David Ronfeldt, “Cyberocracy Is Coming,” *The Information Society Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1992, pp. 243–296. Also at www.livelinks.com/sumeria/politics/cyber.html. For a recent discussion of the “dictator’s dilemma,” see Christopher R. Kedzie, *Communication and Democracy: Coincident Revolutions and the Emergent Dictator’s Dilemma*, Dissertation (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1997).

⁶Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 255.

⁷See, for example, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁸Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 76, quoted in Ronfeldt, “Cyberocracy Is Coming,” 1992.

⁹Ronfeldt, “Cyberocracy Is Coming,” 1992.

the spread of racist, pornographic, or other undesirable materials.¹⁰ More to the point of this chapter, new technology is said to create a ruling “knowledge elite” and aid the powers of centralization—to the point where governments can threaten and intrude on the privacy of their citizens.¹¹ Critics of the Clinton administration’s policies with regard to electronic privacy and government databases have raised these concerns in a more than theoretical way.

This chapter strives to cast fresh light on these issues by tracing the effects of the rapidly growing and changing global computer network known as the Internet. The Internet has characteristics in common with other technological innovations throughout history—the ability to more rapidly replicate information and transmit it in large quantities over great distances. But the Internet also has distinct advantages and disadvantages that flow from its particular characteristics. More than any other technology, it permits its users to create and sustain far-flung networks based on common interests or concerns of the members, where none existed before.

A SHORT HISTORY OF HOW THE INTERNET CAME TO PLAY A ROLE IN THE BURMA CRISIS

In the early 1990s, a few Burmese exiles opposed to the regime in Rangoon began communicating on the Internet via electronic mail. Among the first was Coban Tun, an exile living in California who redistributed newspaper reports from Bangkok, Thailand, and other information about Burma on the Usenet system, using an electronic mailing list called *seasia-l*.¹² The first regular and consistent source of information on Burma available on the Internet was BurmaNet. It took shape in Thailand in late 1993, the brainchild of student Douglas Steele. In October 1993, at the Internet Center at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University, he perused an online Usenet newsgroup called *soc.culture.thai* and Thai newspapers that carried the only in-depth English-language accounts of events in neighboring Burma. Steele re-

¹⁰See, for example, Stephen Bates, *The Potential Downside of the National Information Infrastructure* (Washington, D.C.: The Annenberg Washington Program, 1995).

¹¹Ronfeldt explores this concern in depth in “Cyberocracy Is Coming,” 1992.

¹²Various interviews and electronic correspondence with Coban Tun.

alized that the Internet could be used to provide information about human rights abuses and the usurpation of democracy in Burma.¹³ Steele began keying in, verbatim, reports on Burma from *The Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, and other sources and sending them out on the Internet without comment. Unadulterated news remains BurmaNet's editorial hallmark today. The effort got a vital boost before the year's end. Steele received a \$3,000 grant from the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute to purchase modems and electronic mail accounts, testing whether it was feasible to train the large Burmese exile community in Thailand to be active online.¹⁴

Far more important than the news that was transmitted was the new network itself, which provided information, and in so doing empowered members of the Burmese diaspora. This educated elite, scattered around the world in the 30 years since the events of 1962 and cut off from their homeland, for the first time had access to the same up-to-date information and a means to communicate. "Once it was so obvious that people were using it, that it was useful to them, more and more came on. Pretty soon you had, if not the entire Burmese exile community in the world, but all the ones who have \$20 a month and a modem," Steele recalled. "There's a lot of Burmese in exile, but they weren't together and the Net allows them, in one way, to be together." The Internet's power to connect and organize geographically disparate individuals and groups would be dramatically displayed in the activist campaigns behind the Massachusetts selective purchasing legislation and the Pepsi boycott.

BurmaNet—maintained on a computer server run by the Institute for Global Communications (IGC), a computer network serving peace and human rights activists¹⁵—grew rapidly. The number of electronic subscribers went from a handful, to 30, to 100, to 400 in its second year, until it was impossible to keep track of the real "readership," because BurmaNet's reports were posted on the Usenet system and re-

¹³Interview with Douglas Steele, Washington, D.C., February 2, 1997; A. Lin Neumann, "The Resistance Network," *Wired*, January 1996, Vol. 4.01, p. 108.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Neumann, "The Resistance Network," 1996; Martha FitzSimmon, ed., *Communicators of Conscience: Humanitarian and Human Rights Organizations' Use of the Internet* (New York: The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1994), p. 25.

printed in paper newsletters.¹⁶ As of January 1997, BurmaNet had 750 known subscribers worldwide.¹⁷

A difficult decision faced the activists in 1994: whether to allow the Burmese regime's embassy in Washington and other known SLORC representatives to subscribe to BurmaNet and "post" messages giving Rangoon's viewpoint. The decision was made to allow SLORC to join, in the interests of free speech and full debate—which is, after all, a strong part of the Internet's culture. According to Steele, "it's actually sort of beneficial to have this on the Net," because the regime, by its very nature, is able to communicate little beyond its standard propaganda. Activist Michael Beer of Nonviolence International agrees. "Very often they come across as looking ridiculous," said Beer, a veteran among those using the Internet and working for political change in Burma. But by seeing SLORC's viewpoint, like a Kremlinologist of old, "you can then get in their heads. . . . we can sit in their shoes."¹⁸

At about the same time BurmaNet was ending the international drought on news about Burma and helping both form and inform an international network whose members were dedicated to ending SLORC's rule, related efforts got under way to challenge the regime's choke-hold on information within Burma. This effort was and continues to be hampered by the regime's intelligence apparatus and the lack of any significant private Internet connections inside Burma itself. In September 1996, SLORC passed the "Computer Science Development Law," which metes out a prison sentence of 7 to 15 years and fines of up to \$5,000 for anyone who owns an unregistered modem or fax machine.¹⁹

¹⁶Steele interview, 1997.

¹⁷*The BurmaNet News*, No. 603, January 3, 1997. The full text of BurmaNet's daily news reports are archived at <ftp://Sunsite.unc.edu/pub/academic/political-science/freeburma/bnn/>.

¹⁸Steele interview, 1997. Interview with Michael Beer, Washington, D.C., December 19, 1996. See also, The Associated Press, "Asian Rebels Use Internet," *The (Annapolis) Sunday Capital*, April 23, 1995, p. A12.

¹⁹BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished manuscript. The writer, while known to the authors, requested anonymity.

Still, information seeped in and out. Despite SLORC's stiff controls, exile groups along Burma's borders with Thailand and India began feeding news—which had first been transmitted on the Internet—back into Burma on computer diskettes or simple, two-sided newsletters. (Rank-and-file SLORC soldiers have been among the customers.) The BBC and the Democratic Voice of Burma, a Burmese-language radio station operating in Norway, broadcast news picked up via the Internet into Burma.²⁰ Burmese prodemocracy activists use the Internet to publicize news from within Burma that is taken out of the country in other ways and for safe (encrypted) communications between various prodemocracy groups or between them and supporters in the United States and elsewhere. In terms of cost, rapidity, and ease of use, the Internet is a significant advantage over previous technologies for this purpose.²¹ These efforts and their effects inside Burma will be discussed in more detail later.

In 1994 and 1995, a new front was opened in the struggle for political change in Burma, as students and expatriates in the United States began to organize the Free Burma campaign, whose central goals included pressuring American and European companies to cease doing business with SLORC. The Internet was again the most frequent communication medium of choice for organizing and exchanging information. By this time, powerful new Internet tools were available, especially the web and associated technologies that make it possible to view and share audio, video, and graphics. With the necessary computer hardware and software and a click of a mouse, interested parties and, more particularly, activists anywhere in the world could listen to a speech by Aung San Suu Kyi; transmit Free Burma campaign materials, such as posters and flyers; or look through a virtual keyhole into Burma itself. Within days of the December 1996 student demonstrations—the largest in Rangoon since 1988—images of them, taken from a private videocamera that surreptitiously recorded the events, were available on the Internet.²² Dozens of web pages now exist covering every imaginable facet of Burma.

²⁰Ibid. Beer interview, 1996. See also Barbara Crossette, "Burmese Opposition Gets Oslo Radio Service," *The New York Times*, July 19, 1992, p. 11.

²¹Information provided by Mike Mitchell, International Republican Institute.

²²December 15, 1996, email message posted on BurmaNet.

SLORC has responded by paying an American company to set up its own web site, www.myanmar.com. The site, which was registered in Laurel, Maryland,²³ features pictures of the country and information about tourism, business, and development—no politics whatsoever. SLORC almost certainly monitors the public Internet discussion dominated by prodemocracy activists. A known SLORC representative, who uses the electronic mail address <OKKAR66127@aol.com>, regularly transmits the regime's official statements on BurmaNet and the *soc.culture.burma* newsgroup. Others who are believed to be representatives of, or at least sympathetic to, the regime also participate in the debate.²⁴

In the summer of 1997, SLORC and its representatives appeared to have begun a more aggressive attempt to use the Internet. While the timing may have been coincidental, it should be noted that this took place shortly after the United States instituted federal sanctions against doing business in Burma. In May 1997, the regime began its own electronic mailing list, MyanmarNet, to compete with BurmaNet. It was moderated—i.e., articles are selected or rejected for electronic distribution to the list's subscribers—by the individual known as Okkar. Okkar stated that his policy would be (a) to accept most of the submitted postings, omitting “only the junk mails and very rude usages,”²⁵ and (b) to welcome submissions of news, information, and comments about political, social, and economic affairs in Burma that have “not been posted elsewhere such as *soc.culture.burma* and other mailing lists.”²⁶ This ensures that BurmaNet cannot electronically “flood” MyanmarNet with its own content. In practice, MyanmarNet appears chiefly to echo the regime's point of view: Postings include text of the government-controlled *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper; other government statements; reprints of articles favorable, or at least neutral, to the regime; and information on business opportunities for foreign investors. However, in MyanmarNet's first weeks, Okkar did

²³June 28, 1997, email message posted on BurmaNet.

²⁴Interview with Beer, 1996; authors' monitoring of BurmaNet and related electronic mail lists.

²⁵Posting in *The BurmaNet News*, No. 762, July 1, 1997.

²⁶This was contained in an email welcome message after one of the authors electronically subscribed to MyanmarNet.

accept several reprints of articles critical of SLORC's handling of the economy and its reputed drug ties, which had been posted on Burma-Net by members of prodemocracy groups.

SLORC's ability to fight back outside its borders when the Internet is used against it appears to be limited to monitoring public Internet discussions and trying to publicize its own point of view. "The delete key can't do very much to you," Steele said. "The only currency that works on the Internet is the ability to persuade, entertain, whatever."²⁷

Nevertheless, the year 1997 saw modest, but potentially significant, changes in SLORC's attitude toward the Internet within Burma. In mid-April, the government-controlled Myanmar Poste Telegraph and Telephone signed an agreement with a Singaporean firm for Burma's first digital communications link with the rest of the world. This modest-sized link, which uses Singapore as a gateway, will be available for businessmen with interests in Burma, as well as foreign businesses operating in Burma. The All Nippon Airways office in Rangoon, as well as several universities in the capital, reportedly now have Internet access.²⁸ It remains to be seen whether SLORC can keep its citizens' use of the Internet limited to business and academic matters.

THE MASSACHUSETTS SELECTIVE PURCHASING LEGISLATION

Supporters of this and other bills to impose sanctions on Burma have been particularly successful in their use of electronic mail to keep their movement going, leading one activist to describe this as the first "cybercampaign."

—Massachusetts Governor William Weld²⁹

On June 25, 1996, with a group of "cyberactivists" and Burmese exiles looking on, Massachusetts Gov. William Weld signed into law a bill

²⁷Steele interview, 1997.

²⁸Various email messages.

²⁹Gov. William Weld, remarks at Burma bill signing, June 25, 1996. Provided by the governor's office.

that bans corporations that do business in Burma from getting new contracts with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The “selective purchasing” legislation, as it is known, is one of more than a dozen such laws and ordinances directed against the SLORC regime that have been passed in cities and counties across the United States since early 1995. Forced to choose between lucrative local government contracts and the often-mediocre business opportunities in Burma, a host of American firms have chosen the former.

Such major brand names as Pepsi, Disney, Eddie Bauer, and Liz Claiborne have withdrawn from Burma, compelled by a combination of negative publicity, shareholder pressure, and selective purchasing legislation. The Massachusetts law alone was cited by Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, Apple Corp., and other major companies as the reason they pulled up stakes in Burma.³⁰ It has bitten hard enough that both the European Union and Japan have complained to the U.S. State Department and intend to challenge the law in the World Trade Organization (WTO).³¹

According to participants on all sides, the Internet—particularly electronic mail—played a defining role in the campaign to draft and pass the legislation. Activists had already organized on the Internet and used this ready-made network. The campaign itself was conceived through communications on the Internet. Information on conditions in Burma was fed to sympathetic legislators on the Internet. Email alerts were sent out at key points in the legislative process, generating letters to state legislators and Gov. Weld’s office.

Although different, “older” technologies such as telephones or fax machines could have carried out these functions; at least one role the Internet played here would have been virtually impossible before its existence. The Burma selective purchasing bill was consciously modeled on almost identical legislation passed in the 1980s, in Massachusetts and elsewhere, that sought to prevent American businesses from operating in South Africa under the apartheid system. (See Table 5.1.)

³⁰See, for example, Theo Emery, “Motorola, HP to Cut Ties to Burma: Cite Massachusetts Law Barring Business in Nation,” *The Boston Globe*, November 29, 1996, p. B11.

³¹See, for example, “A State’s Foreign Policy: The Mass That Roared,” *The Economist*, February 8, 1997, pp. 32–33.

However, unlike with African-Americans concerned about South Africa—or Irish-Americans about Northern Ireland, for that matter—there was no existing constituency in the United States, outside of a few progressive groups, in the case of Burma. The Internet, because of its ability to create geographically dispersed networked communities, created the constituency necessary for action. It drew together activists as close to the state capitol building as Harvard, and as far away as Burmese exiles living in Europe and Australia. “This was truly the first time that this legislature had gotten involved with foreign policy on the face of the issue, without any hyphenated constituency to drive it,” said State Rep. Byron Rushing (D), the selective purchasing legislation’s sponsor and leading proponent in the state legislature. “The first thing the ‘Net did in this campaign was to connect the Burmese wherever they are.”³²

The Internet also provided the advantages of stealth early in the Burma campaign, as long as the activists wanted it. Much of the networking took place outside the public eye. Once the drive to pass the selective purchasing legislation emerged with full force, it was a surprise to those who might have opposed it, including corporations and the of-

Table 5.1
States and Localities That Have Passed Selective Purchasing Legislation on Burma

Commonwealth of Massachusetts	Alameda County, Calif.
New York City, N.Y.	Berkeley, Calif.
Madison, Wisc.	Santa Monica, Calif.
Ann Arbor, Mich.	San Francisco, Calif.
Oakland, Calif.	Carrboro, N.C.
Takoma Park, Md.	Boulder, Colo.
Chapel Hill, N.C.	Los Angeles, Calif.
Portland, Oreg.	

NOTES: As of January 1999. List is meant to be suggestive; other localities also may have passed such legislation.

³²Interview with Rep. Byron Rushing, Boston, January 23, 1997.

office of Gov. Weld, who had a reputation as a pro-business Republican. When Weld's press secretary, Jose Juves, first heard about the legislation and checked into it—to do so, he used the web for the first time—"I was kind of shocked that the whole sort of ready-made organization . . . was out there."³³ Of all the companies with business in Burma, only the oil and gas concern UNOCAL Corp. took the effort to hire a local lobbyist. For many other companies, the first time they heard about the issue was after the selective purchasing bill had become law, and they were notified that they were on an official state list of affected companies. "They definitely came late to the dance," Juves said.³⁴

As the bill slowly made its way through the state legislature in 1995 and 1996, activists used the Internet to push it along. Rushing, working with Simon Billenness of the Massachusetts Burma Roundtable and other activists, sent emails from home and office to keep supporters apprised of developments and to urge them to make their voices heard when the bill was at a key legislative juncture or in trouble. The electronic missives generated phone calls and letters to state senators and representatives from their constituents inside Massachusetts and activists outside the state, explaining the need for the legislation and pressing for passage.

The legislation very nearly died several times. Activists using the Internet rallied to overcome each obstacle. An amendment that would have added virtually every totalitarian regime in the world to the legislation—and thus buried it under its own weight—was killed, and a March 1996 Senate motion to table the bill and postpone it to the next legislative session was reversed. Billenness, through the Burma Roundtable, was central in using electronic communication to keep the issue alive in the legislature, repelling obstacles to passage and maintaining an electronic community behind the bill. The Internet, he said, "is very good at getting one message sent to a lot of people, with minimal cost and minimal time."³⁵ It was vital in keeping sub-

³³Interview with Jose Juves, Boston, January 23, 1997.

³⁴Juves and Rushing interviews, 1997.

³⁵Interview with Simon Billenness, January 23, 1997.

scribers up-to-date on the status of the Burma bill and eliciting their support.³⁶

The Internet, and the electronic network that stretched from Burma's borders around the world and back again, also meant that timely information was a key ally for activists in the campaign. Culling the news from BurmaNet and many other sources, the cybercampaigners were able to get accurate information on the conditions endured by the Burmese people. Without the Internet, "it's hard to imagine that we would have had as much information," Rushing said. "The thing that makes these things work is that you can go up to a rep[resentative] and say, 'Look, this is what's happening there.'" The information flow allowed proponents to meet and counter the objections of opponents or skeptics. And, vitally, it allowed them to be confident that they were in tune with the positions of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. A campaign "can blow up" if it does not have the support of the pro-democracy groups within the affected country, Rushing said. With the Internet, "we always knew how Suu Kyi was on this issue." The Massachusetts lawmaker acknowledges the problem of misinformation on the Internet. But he believes there are enough "voices" out there that the communication network quickly self-corrects inaccurate information.³⁷

Weld had old-fashioned political reasons for signing the Burma bill. His opponent in the 1996 race for the U.S. Senate, incumbent Democratic Senator John Kerry, had wavered on the issue of federal sanctions against Burma and had supported continued U.S. antinarcotics aid to the SLORC regime. Weld saw an opening that would embarrass Kerry and help him pick up support among the state's progressive voters.³⁸

But the Internet campaign helped bring the otherwise-arcane issue of Burma to Weld's attention and kept the pressure on. "CONTINUE TO FAX AND CALL GOVERNOR WELD . . . CALL DAILY!" Billenness urged

³⁶See Appendix C [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel].

³⁷Rushing interview, 1997.

³⁸See Wayne Woodlief, "Burma Bill May Gain Votes for Weld," *The Boston Herald*, June 13, 1996, p. 35; Michael Kranish, "Proposed Sanctions on Burma a Hot Issue for Weld, Kerry," *The Boston Globe*, June 14, 1996.

in an update sent to supporters on June 12, the day before the bill landed on the governor's desk. For good measure, Weld's newest fax number was included. During mid-June, Weld received a flood of letters imploring him to sign the bill. They came not just from Massachusetts, but from around the United States, as well as Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada. One came from within Burma's western border, sent via a supporter in India. Sam Bernstein of Braintree, Massachusetts, was not alone when he told Weld: "If you do sign, your action will go a long way in helping me make up my mind about the upcoming U.S. senate race."³⁹ According to Juves, Weld received roughly 100 letters and 40 electronic mail messages regarding the legislation, which he described as a huge number for an issue that had nothing to do with bread-and-butter issues like street repairs, crime, or taxes. Weld saw samples of the letters. "I don't think it had an impact on his decision to sign the bill. . . . [But] it made him think about it more than he otherwise would have," said Juves, who disputed the widespread feeling that Weld had signed the bill merely for political advantage.⁴⁰

At first, the activists assumed that Weld would veto the legislation and that they would have to try to convince the legislature to override the veto. They approached the governor's office aggressively. But once Weld's office signaled that he might sign the legislation, the relationship changed dramatically. The governor's office wanted to stage a media event to highlight his position on the bill. The Internet activists put their network into action, using email once again to encourage a large turnout and to make sure the governor's office had the background information it needed and quotes from activists such as Zar Ni of the Free Burma Coalition in Wisconsin. "For me, it was a big logistical help," said Juves, who was in charge of setting up the event.⁴¹

³⁹Copies of letters provided by Gov. Weld's office.

⁴⁰Juves interview, 1997. This would be consistent with others' findings about the effects of media and communication technology on decisionmakers, namely, that these technologies chiefly push issues to the top of the agenda and accelerate decisionmaking. See Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, 1997, and Martin Linsky, *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986).

⁴¹Juves interview, 1997.

Finally, the Internet campaign in Massachusetts, because of its very success, had another, derivative effect. The more-traditional news media, fascinated by the idea that a state could craft its own foreign policy and that the Internet could be used as a grassroots tool of political power, began to give significant coverage to the prodemocracy groups and what had happened in Massachusetts. These stories, of course, also highlighted the struggle in Burma. Juves' phone rang with inquiries from BBC Radio, Australian Broadcasting, Cable News Network, Bloomberg Business News, the Voice of America, Newsweek, and many other media outlets.

Juves said that the legislation might not have come to fruition without the Internet, or at least would have taken much longer to do so. Significantly, many of the people he dealt with were geographically dispersed, but they had the Internet. "People were really focused in on Massachusetts," he said. "Everybody's connected to one place."⁴²

In the aftermath of the legislative victory, Rushing predicted that the issue of localities playing a role in foreign policy—something once unthinkable—will come more and more to the fore. Many cities and states are taking up the issue of human rights and whether and how to do business with nations that have a bad human rights record. Indeed, the issue of who controls foreign policy, and where economic sovereignty begins and ends, has become a more-than-theoretical concern.⁴³ Activists went back to the "cyberbarricades" after Japan and the European Union argued that the Massachusetts selective purchasing law violates world trade rules and urged Washington to "get its provinces back into line." Then, on November 4, 1998, a U.S. district judge declared the selective purchasing law unconstitutional, ruling in favor of the National Foreign Trade Council, an industry group, and stating that the law "impermissibly infringes on the feder-

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³One count found 27 state, county, and city sanctions dealing with Burma, Nigeria, Cuba, and Tibet. See Michael S. Lelyveld, "Massachusetts Sanctions Struck Down: Judge's Ruling May Set Precedent for State Bans," *Journal of Commerce*, November 6, 1998. For skeptical views of these developments, see "The Mass That Roared," 1997, and David R. Schmahmann and James S. Finch, *State and Local Sanctions Fail Constitutional Test*, Trade Policy Briefing Paper No. 3 (Washington, D.C.: The Cato Institute, August 6, 1998).

al government's power to regulate foreign affairs."⁴⁴ The issue is likely to be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.⁴⁵ Both sides continue to make their arguments, and the Internet remains a vital tool for those who gave birth to the Massachusetts selective purchasing law.

THE FREE BURMA COALITION AND THE PEPSI BOYCOTT CAMPAIGN

"This is the information backbone of a larger movement that aims to mobilize public opinion against the military leaders of Burma," Strider says. "It was the 'Net,'" he explains, "that helped mobilize activists on college campuses and elsewhere in their opposition to investment in Burma by Eddie Bauer."⁴⁶

The advent of computers on university campuses linking student groups into national and international networks seems to have invigorated social activism and has transformed the character of student protests. It has also opened up the world to these students, shrinking the globe into a local community that provides a great number of issues on which to campaign. "We are beginning to see the formation of a generic human rights lobby at the grassroots level (on the Internet). People care even though they don't have a personal connection to the country," explained cyberactivist Simon Billenness.⁴⁷

Computers have become so integrated into university life that they are a virtual appendage of scholars at study. Every freshman entering Harvard University is supplied with an email address and account. Students and student groups have united online, initially to converse—the outgrowth has been a heightened awareness on a number of issues, including human rights. Once on the Net, students meet campaigners and advocates. These people and the information they

⁴⁴Lelyveld, "Massachusetts Sanctions Struck Down," 1998. See also Appendix C, Email No. 3 [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel].

⁴⁵"L.A. Bans Trade Ties to Burma Despite Federal Ruling," Inter Press Service, Washington, D.C., December 17, 1998.

⁴⁶Neumann, "The Resistance Network," 1996.

⁴⁷Interview with Billenness, 1997.

provide have taught students techniques for organizing electronically, and in return the students have joined in the action.

At the press conference held to announce Gov. Weld's decision to make Massachusetts the first state to slap sanctions on SLORC, many students turned up. Juves, Weld's press secretary, says that the Internet was responsible for helping students turn out, and that there were more students there than at any other bill signing.⁴⁸

Plugging in has transformed the meaning of "tune in," at least on Harvard's campus, where "students cannot get by without using email. Most college organizations can't conceive of how this would be done without the Internet."⁴⁹

As the selective purchasing campaign to deprive Burma of American investment and ultimately all foreign investment gained strength, student groups caught on. The selective purchasing resolutions were presented to city legislatures, and with each small success, the sanctions campaign widened and bolstered the prodemocracy campaign. Students and other activists organized shareholders that had been writing resolutions for consideration regarding their corporation's business ties in Burma. Shareholder resolutions were presented at each annual shareholder conference to educate investors on their companies' dealings in Burma and to call for corporate withdrawals from the country.⁵⁰ These efforts grew out of the more traditional forms of activism, roundtable discussion groups, and letter-writing campaigns.

When PepsiCo became a target of the campaign, student activists were able to connect with a tangible product, process, and outcome. They could start small, on campus, by educating their friends about Pepsi's operations and its cooperation with the military junta ruling Burma. From there, they could pass student resolutions, instigate student boycotts of all of Pepsi's subsidiaries and possibly cause changes in university food service contracts. Then they could move on to the

⁴⁸Juves interview, 1997.

⁴⁹Interview with student activist Marco Simons, Boston, January 24, 1997.

⁵⁰For a fascinating example of how individuals using the Internet can affect investment policy, see Appendix C [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel].

town meeting where their university sits, to the city council, and eventually to the state legislature.

In 1990, Pepsi entered Burma through a joint venture with Myanmar Golden Star Co., which is run by Thein Tun, once a small-time exporter of beans. Most Burmese who were working for Pepsi were connected in one way or another to the SLORC regime, said Reed Cooper, of the Burmese Action Group in Canada.⁵¹ Pepsi ran a bottling operation in Rangoon that grew “from 800,000 bottles a day to 5 million” and added a new plant in Mandalay.⁵²

In a Seattle resolution on Burma, which urged an “international economic boycott of Burma until the human rights violations cease and control of the government has been transferred to the winners of the 1990 democratic election,” Pepsi was mentioned as one of the companies that supports the military regime and its “cruel measures against the Burmese people.”⁵³ The resolution passed unanimously just after a similar boycott resolution successfully passed in Berkeley, California.⁵⁴

Cyberactivist Billenness was building a campaign with a solid foundation at the local levels. His office was delivering ribbons of circular stickers proclaiming “Boycott Pepsi” across the country to various groups of activists. He had solicited and developed the support of the Nobel Peace laureates who attended the pivotal 1993 fact-finding mission to the border regions of Burma (they were not permitted into the country). The Nobel laureates joined in a call for an international boycott of products exported from Burma. The 1993 trip sparked a campaign that the grassroots organizers, like Billenness, Cooper, Larry Dohrs, and others, had slowly been orchestrating. The necessary definitive moment that legitimized their efforts had arrived.

⁵¹Telephone interview with Reed Cooper, Washington, D.C., March 1995.

⁵²Michael Hirsh and Ron Moreau, “Making It in Mandalay,” *Newsweek*, June 19, 1995, p. 24.

⁵³Press release by The Seattle Campaign for a Free Burma, April 24, 1995. Also in Seattle City Council Resolution 29077.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

“This is how South Africa started,” Billenness said. The strategy: to get selective purchasing legislation passed in town councils, then cities, then the states. Congress would be sure to follow, he believed.⁵⁵ Most of the roads and Internet lines connecting this network of Burma activists lead back to Billenness. So it is not surprising that he wanted to encourage a university campaign among American colleges to support the growing Burmese student movement.

The Pepsi Campaign at Harvard University

There are few Burmese in the States, and relatively few people who even know where Burma is. But those who care are organized and effective, and it’s because of the Internet. —Douglas Steele⁵⁶

Students at Harvard tapped into the Burma Internet network, and soon after, they were successful in preventing a contract between PepsiCo and Harvard’s dining services. Their activism also had an influence on the Harvard student body, by raising awareness as well as passing resolutions in the student government that affected the university’s investments in Burma.

One of the students who became a ring leader for the Burma campaign on campus was Marco Simons.⁵⁷ The summer before his junior year at Harvard, Simons, who had written a paper on the human rights situation in Burma while still in high school, tapped into the Net via the newsgroup *soc.culture.burma*. Soon after, Billenness, who worked at the Franklin Research Institute for Socially Responsible Investing, contacted Simons. Billenness was trying to initiate a Burma group at Harvard. At this same time, autumn 1995, the Free Burma Coalition (FBC) was first appearing online. The FBC’s web site was able to attract numerous students across the United States, and it became a hub for the network that would follow.

⁵⁵Billenness interview, 1997.

⁵⁶Quoted in Neumann, “The Resistance Network,” 1996.

⁵⁷This section is based on interviews with Marco Simons in Boston, January 1997, and Zar Ni in Washington, D.C., February 1997.

There were no Burmese undergraduate students at Harvard. There was one native Burmese graduate student and a few students who had either visited Burma or lived there as foreigners. For this reason, the three Harvard students who initiated the Burma group felt their first order of business should be to raise awareness. They set up a table at the political action fair at the start of the fall semester. They tested students who came by on their geographical prowess by asking them where Burma was on a map and which countries bordered it. Those who stopped to play the game were asked to leave their email addresses. Between 40 and 50 addresses were collected that day.

Simons describes the culture on campus as one that is virtually interactive. The only “real mail” (i.e., postal mail) he gets is from the university administration, he says. “Our internal organizing was done through email meetings,” Simons said. The group communicated almost exclusively by email. As the campaign developed to include lobbying the student government on resolutions regarding Burma, Simons said, the activists communicated with the student government via email also. Thus, they combined the traditional avenues for social activism with the technology that the university setting made available.

Once they had the student email addresses, members of the fledgling group began encouraging students to join them in letter-writing campaigns calling for university divestment from various companies. They also tried to organize an honorary degree for Aung San Suu Kyi. Harvard became the first student government to pass resolutions supporting the Burmese prodemocracy movement. Since then, many campuses have passed similar resolutions, and many used the Internet to seek advice from Simons on how to engage in this campaign.⁵⁸

Some of the resolutions passed by Harvard’s student government required that the university send letters to companies operating in Burma, calling for corporate withdrawal. Simons says the students believed Harvard’s name carried a lot of clout in corporate circles. These resolutions passed in January and February 1996.

⁵⁸Simons and Billeness interviews, 1997.

Harvard University is itself a large investor, with a \$7 billion endowment. The students decided to campaign for resolutions requiring Harvard Corp. to write to the companies it owns stock in that deal with Burma and register its desire for divestment.

The Burma activists at Harvard also attempted to localize their campaign whenever possible. Then they stumbled onto a link with Pepsi that allowed them to expand their campaign into a story that would later become a splash with the media.

“At first we didn’t think we would have a Pepsi campaign at Harvard because Harvard contracted with Coke for a long time,” Simons said.⁵⁹ Simons had been aware of the national campaign that Burma activists were waging against PepsiCo from his involvement with Billenness.⁶⁰ Billenness held a regular Burma Roundtable that was advocating for a “Boycott Pepsi” campaign, in conjunction with a national group of activists.

It was then that the *Harvard Crimson* ran a story stating that Harvard’s dining services were planning on contracting with Pepsi instead of Coca-Cola. “Pepsi was trying to get the beverage contract on campus the whole time,” Simons explained. “Coke’s dining contract was up for renewal, and they were so dissatisfied with Coke’s service, the dining services were thinking of going with Pepsi.”⁶¹

The Burma activists decided to protest this contract on two fronts: first with the student legislature and then with Harvard dining services. As part of the contract, Pepsi would be giving \$25,000 to student organizations at Harvard and \$15,000 directly to the student government. The activists’ strategy with the student legislature would be to attack the Pepsi donations with resolutions. These resolutions called for Harvard to explore investing options for the Pepsi contributions. They could outright refuse the money or, ironically, donate it to Burma-friendly groups like the Boycott Pepsi campaign. When they

⁵⁹Simons interview, 1997.

⁶⁰Selective purchasing laws were being considered across the country by local city councils.

⁶¹Simons interview, 1997.

began investigating these options, the students discovered that dining services had not signed the contract yet.

The students met with dining services in a lobbying effort. They also stayed in contact over the Internet with Michael Berry, then director of dining services, and Purchasing Director John Allegretto. Rand Kaiser, a PepsiCo representative, met with dining services and the activists to explain Pepsi's position. Simons says that Kaiser argued for constructive engagement with the Burmese military junta.⁶² Kaiser was successful in casting Pepsi's investments in Burma in a positive light. After the meeting, Simons and Berry contacted one another over the email system. This allowed students to voice opposing arguments to those presented by Pepsi. Simons made a deal: He told dining services that the students would feel that they had adequate information if PepsiCo released a list of their suppliers for countertrade in Burma.⁶³ Dining services agreed to this request. The Harvard students asked PepsiCo to fax its list of suppliers. Dining services also made a separate request for the information. Simons says neither the students nor dining services ever received a list.

Meanwhile, the 1996 Pepsi shareholders meeting had commenced and a resolution was introduced to withdraw from Burma. PepsiCo's management effectively blocked the filing of the resolution on the basis that Burma did not represent a significant portion of its business. In reaction, Billenness wrote a letter to Pepsi and the shareholders explaining the effects that the Boycott Pepsi campaign had had on the company. He included the clippings from events at Harvard. This proved to be a boost to the students, who felt their efforts were extending beyond their campus.

⁶²Constructive engagement is the free-market argument for investment in troubled regions. The argument goes that with investment, the standard of living is raised for the average person. This in turn raises the expectations for rights and freedoms from the government. At the same time, the heightened economy requires a free flow of information, which boils down to technology and freedoms of press and speech. These then open up a previously closed society.

⁶³In Burma, the currency is virtually worthless, so foreign investors have to repatriate their profits before taking them out of the country. The human rights community firmly believed that PepsiCo was buying agricultural goods to sell to recoup its profits and that those goods were harvested with state-enforced slave labor. Macy's department stores had published a similar list, and the resulting pressure proved destructive to its investment.

The Burma student activists requested that their student government pass another resolution that specifically asked dining services to sign a contract with Coca-Cola and not Pepsi. This passed through the student legislature, and dining services renewed their contract with Coca-Cola. Dining services then went on the record explaining that Burma was a factor in its decision.

A media campaign ensued, and the Harvard students were courted by mainstream news organizations. Students downloaded press releases, conferred over the Internet with other student leaders in the FBC, and then sent their statements to the press. Stories appeared in the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Boston Globe*, on the Associated Press wire, and in local newspapers.⁶⁴ In addition, Simons said he received overseas calls from the BBC and from a Belgian news outlet.

Other students who subscribed to the FBC web site and email list were able to follow what was happening at Harvard and use information generated there for campaigns on their own campuses. They also emailed and conversed with other students to discuss techniques and strategy, while learning from past mistakes.

Even with the help of the Internet, not every student campaign on Burma was a success. An effort at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., did not go very far.⁶⁵ Another Boston university, Tufts, also saw a spark of student activism on the Burma issue. The Tufts activists were hooked up to the Net, which they used to communicate with the Harvard group. But the Tufts students were unable to convince their student government to pass a resolution that would end their dining services' contract with Pepsi. Kaiser had been to the student government to lobby in favor of PepsiCo in the wake of the Harvard campaign. Tufts students also admit that they did not have as good a relationship with dining services as the Harvard students did. The director of dining services deferred the Pepsi decision to the university president, who renewed Pepsi's contract.

⁶⁴The many such articles include a front-page report by Joe Urschel, "College Cry: 'Free Burma' Activists Make Inroads with U.S. Companies," *USA Today*, April 29, 1996, p. 1A.

⁶⁵Steele interview, 1997.

The Network

The Harvard group worked closely with several activists who have come to define a core for the Burma prodemocracy campaign. They are Billenness, Father Joe Lamar, Zar Ni of the FBC, and Larry Dohrs.

As noted, the bulk of the Harvard campaign was conducted over the Internet. Simons would post condensed versions of the *Free Burma* daily digest (a news-like account of events in Burma and developments in the Free Burma campaign, similar to BurmaNet) for the Harvard students. Previously written press releases, with quotes chosen through collaboration, were used throughout the campaign. Furthermore, most of the Harvard group's meetings were held over the Internet via email. "This would not have happened without the Internet," Simons said of the Pepsi campaign. "The Free Burma Coalition and possibly the whole movement would not have been nearly as successful this far and would look completely different," he added.⁶⁶

The FBC, which is a network of student organizations, organized three international days of coordinated protest, one in October 1995, another in March 1996, and a fast in October 1996. These were coordinated almost exclusively on the Internet. The Harvard students joined in these events.

The Boston student network grew from contact with FBC and through outreach between local groups. Harvard University, Tufts University, Boston College, Brandeis, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Boston University are all in contact with the Burma Roundtable set up by Billenness. Now the Boston network is reaching into the high schools. The Madison, Wisconsin-area groups are the only others reaching into the high school level. Boston and Madison are using the Internet to coordinate an organized effort to bring activism on Burma to the public schools.

The FBC provides information, advice, and an organized framework for these students to plug in and perform very simple tasks that help push the campaign along. The Internet is appealing to the students because (1) they have easy access through their university; (2) infor-

⁶⁶Simons interview, 1997.

mation is available quickly; (3) it is affordable; (4) things that make a difference can be done quickly and with few individuals; (5) the network has the ability to coordinate internationally; and (6) it is social. The three students who initiated the Burma campaign at Harvard remained the core group, producing most of the work on Burma. Because of the group's small size, they say there is no way they could have been so successful and effective without the larger outside network.

"Phone trees and snail mail are suboptimal because they are labor intensive and expensive," explained Simons, who spends an average of a couple of hours a day on the Internet. He thinks another advantage to the web of "spiders," as the activists call themselves, is the up-to-the-minute information that comes from people in Rangoon or the surrounding areas. Zar Ni's updates hit the web immediately.⁶⁷

There was a preexisting network of activists that the FBC has drawn on. For instance, Simons was in his high school Amnesty International group. The actions were planned to raise awareness and strengthen the growing network of people. Very few activists are working on Burma exclusively. They may begin with the Southeast Asian nation but then expand to work on East Timor, Sri Lanka, environmental issues, and the like. Many of these smaller networks are relying on the FBC and the Burma campaign as a model for their own actions.

ASSESSING THE RESULTS

The prodemocracy activists are engaging in an information confrontation against SLORC. Both sides are producing information about events inside the country. Both are trying to paint a portrait of the other for the international community. But the prodemocracy advocates have used the Internet effectively in the Massachusetts campaign, U.S. citywide selective purchasing campaigns, and the Boycott Pepsi campaign. They have also used the Internet to contact journalists and inform them about their actions and about other issues in Burma, such as slave labor, student protests, and government crackdowns. For its part, SLORC has produced a web page and has relied

⁶⁷Ibid.

heavily on UNOCAL, the California-based oil company, and ASEAN, a trade association of Asian nations, to promote a good image of their rule abroad. But the regime has not to date taken full advantage of the technology available to it. The audience for both sides is the world, particularly possible investors in Burma; the means is attempting to gain information superiority over the other side.

SLORC has regularly retaliated on the Internet. In late June 1997, SLORC waged a misinformation campaign using both traditional and modern techniques. To begin, representatives of the regime held a press conference exposing several American nongovernmental organization workers as conspirators working on behalf of the U.S. government to bring down the SLORC regime. They named several names and published biographies with pictures of those individuals on the Internet. The individuals involved dispute the claims made by SLORC, and the U.S. State Department refuted the charge that it was engaging in the support of terrorism on Burmese soil.⁶⁸

The advantage of the Internet is diplomatic. It promotes dialogue between those in closed societies and the outside world. It can be argued that those in the Burma campaign are presenting their version of events to the world and SLORC via their Internet campaigns. It is a classic attempt at unraveling misinformation. If SLORC responds by matching the activists with its version of events, diplomatic resolution may be achievable. The opposing sides can utilize the forum provided by the Internet to develop their resolution within a global context. Currently, the Burma campaign has been trying to generate a cyberdebate with SLORC. "We keep asking the council to engage in a debate. This might not be much of a debate, but it's a start," a Burmese exile in Bangkok said in reaction to SLORC's posting of a web page and assigning Okkar to the Internet.⁶⁹

Using the Internet as a forum for this purpose places the debate in the context of the global community. The activists may be able to use international sympathy to sever SLORC's connection with the global

⁶⁸Tiffany Danitz, "Burmese Junta Says U.S. a Partner in Terrorism," *The Washington Times*, July 4, 1997, p. A9.

⁶⁹William Barnes, "Generals Fight Back Through Internet," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 1997.

community. On a limited scale, they have already been successful in doing so with sanctions legislation.

Although the Burmese activists on the Internet are not physically opposing SLORC's use of armed force, their "soft power" use of information may have some of the same effects. The information is being fed into the country through vehicles such as the previously mentioned Democratic Voice of Burma and *New Era Journal*, a newspaper written in Bangkok and distributed via refugees who make trips from the border regions into the country (this program receives partial funding from U.S. grants). The newly established Radio Free Asia is broadcasting into Burma in native languages. Information is also traveling into the country via computer diskettes that often are marked with a Disney logo or some other video game logo to deceive censors and customs officials.

In Burma, the Internet may just be a forum for the voice of the dissident, a place for the Burmese and the world to go to hear alternative information to what SLORC distributes in-country or internationally. If Burma's activists are successful in overcoming the SLORC regime and are able to institute democratic institutions, they may become an example of how the dissident voice in closed societies is capable of providing a rallying point for opponents to the government. However, it would only be one of many factors that created an atmosphere for success.

In theory, when a voice of opposition exists in a conflict where misinformation is used and the propagating party is in control of the state media and the opposition in an alternative media vehicle and its point of view is disseminated on a grassroots level, the opposition voice may eventually win over the constituency. A constant presence that provides alternative information, especially more-credible information, can have the effect of reversing the success of a misinformation campaign. Furthermore, outside the closed society or nation, the voice of dissent—which can flow more freely—will have the effect of countering the misinformation to the international community. If the international community chooses to believe the dissenters, it erodes the legitimacy of those propagating untruths.

The information-rich cyberhighway has inspired a number of people to engage in campaigns they may not have otherwise, because these campaigns are cheap and take little time and also little effort. Why else should an American Jane or Joe in Idaho take action on behalf of natives of Burma? These campaigns have educated a Burmese citizenship-in-exile in consensus building and in grassroots cyber-strategy.

THE INTERNET'S EFFECT ON ACTIVISM

Advantages of Using the Internet

Case studies and an Internet activist survey⁷⁰ indicate that the Internet, including electronic mail, the web, and its other facets, gives grassroots groups an important new tool for attempting to foster political change. Some of these advantages appear to be merely evolutionary improvements on “older” technologies such as the telephone and fax machine in terms of speed and cost. Other advantages appear to be truly revolutionary, reflections of the Internet’s unique nature. Of course, no technology by itself guarantees a successful campaign, but the Internet gives its users more power when other forces come into play.

The Internet is inexpensive and convenient. Sending messages via electronic mail is far less expensive than using the telephone, fax machine, or other technologies, especially when activists must communicate over long distances and reach members of the network who live in remote areas (as in the case of Burma’s borders). Moreover, as we saw in the PepsiCo case, organizers can distribute campaign materials (posters, photographs, recordings, and the like) far more cheaply—and, of course, more rapidly and easily—than would be the case if they used the postal mail or other means to distribute physical copies of the materials.

While some start-up costs are necessary (a computer, a modem, an Internet account), these are not beyond most individuals’ means. Our

⁷⁰See Appendix A [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel.]

survey revealed that many activists make use of freely provided university email accounts.

Cost and the labor of the core organizers are, of course, vital considerations to grassroots groups and nongovernmental organizations that rely on grants and donations that make up their shoestring budgets.

The Internet is an organizational tool “par excellence.” Without the Internet, it would have been virtually impossible in the case of Massachusetts—or many other cases not cited here—for activists to coordinate and bring the pressure to bear that they did. Burma activists were dispersed around the United States and around the world; but, because of the Internet, they might as well have been around the block. Neither did the fact that Massachusetts has a minuscule Burmese population matter. A “virtual community” for action was created and acted in concert once its members saw a target of opportunity in the selective purchasing legislation. Coordinating such a campaign via traditional telephone trees or fax machines would have been all but impossible because of the need to act quickly and the sheer physical distances involved.

Moreover, because the Internet permits them to rapidly exchange messages or send the same information to hundreds of recipients around the world, activists are better able to coordinate with a greater number of individuals and refine ideas. “Listserves” like BurmaNet are particularly suited for rapid brainstorming, because a single individual can send an idea in an email and can rapidly receive feedback from many different sources.⁷¹ A handful of organizers can rapidly generate dozens of letters and emails to decisionmakers, the “cyber” equivalent of lobbying, with a few well-timed online appeals. The number of people involved in a campaign doesn’t matter as much—it can be quite small—as it does in other activities, such as demonstrations and protests.

This seems to be a revolutionary state of affairs. Perhaps for the first time, the Internet allowed members of the international community to comment on and affect domestic, local legislation, a privilege once

⁷¹See BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished.

reserved for lobbyists or, at the very least, registered U.S. voters. This might be called “cyberdiplomacy.”

The Internet puts information in the hands of organizers fast. In the Massachusetts and PepsiCo cases, proponents of measures against SLORC used the Internet to gather and transmit up-to-date information about conditions within Burma and the policies toward that country of various governments around the world. This helped make their arguments particularly effective and ensured there was no “disconnect” between them and the prodemocracy movement inside Burma. Knowledge, as they say, is power.

The Internet allows rapid replication of a successful effort. Organizers of a successful Internet campaign can immediately share their winning (or failed) strategies with cohorts anywhere on the globe.

A success in one locale does not automatically translate into success in another, because of local conditions and factors. But in the selective purchasing campaign, activists in New England emailed the text of proposed legislation, press releases, and other material to colleagues who wanted to wage a similar effort elsewhere.⁷² They could then tailor the materials to their own local conditions. This, of course, is similar to the use fax machines have been put to for years. But with the Internet, many more sources can be reached at once. And with the web, for example, the materials can be posted permanently for downloading, anytime, anywhere.

The Internet also helped other related campaigns coordinate and “compare notes.” These included activists trying to foster change in Nigeria or Tibet, or those who are primarily interested in environmental issues, such as the destruction of teakwood forests in South-east Asia.

The Internet allows users to select their level of activity. Using the same type of computer and communications equipment, different activists can choose how active they want to be in a given campaign. They may elect to simply keep up on the news, by subscribing to BurmaNet, reading *soc.culture.burma*, and browsing the various Burma web pag-

⁷²Ibid.; Billenness and Beer interviews, 1997 and 1996.

es. At a higher level, they may post articles and comments on the various newsgroups, add their names to electronic petitions, fill out surveys, and download campaign materials for use. At the highest level, they may use the Internet to organize and carry out a specific campaign for political change.⁷³

The Internet helps publicize the cause and the campaign. Obviously, this is especially true when a campaign scores successes. There seems little doubt that the Internet—as the pamphlet, telephone, and fax machine did for previous generations of dissidents—helped activists broadcast news around the world about their campaign and about the situation of the people in Burma, prompting a wider public debate. This, of course, is the first goal of any global grassroots campaign.

In the Massachusetts selective purchasing and Pepsi cases, the campaign led to dozens of articles in the Boston newspapers, as well as articles in such national publications as *USA Today* and *The New York Times*. Once it became clear that Gov. Weld would sign the selective purchasing legislation, traditional media from around the world descended on Massachusetts. Radio and television outlets from Europe, Asia, and Australia were suddenly—and probably for the first time—focused on a local bill in a U.S. state legislature.

Wielding political power via the Internet is sufficiently new that many of the traditional media seemed to be drawn by the novelty of *how* the cyberactivists were doing what they were doing as much as what they were doing. Whether this novelty wears off as the Internet becomes a more widespread tool of political activism remains to be seen.

Either way, it has been noted elsewhere that grassroots political campaigns, which do not use force or violent coercion, depend heavily on words and images, as well as reason.⁷⁴ The Internet helps spread these words and images to what the activists hope will be a sympathetic public.

⁷³BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished.

⁷⁴Larmer, *Revolutions Without Guns*, 1995, p. 9.

The Internet-based activists have a leg up on non-Internet-based groups. Grassroots organizers, whether involved in the Burma campaign or other efforts, were among the first to understand the political powers of the Internet. While SLORC and international corporations doing business in Burma have begun to realize the power that the tool gives their adversaries and have tried to emulate it, the prodemocracy movement has been consistently ahead in its use of the Internet. This raises the question of whether the Internet is by its very nature more suited to decentralized groups and inimical to hierarchical organizations.

SLORC, because of the relatively impoverished nature of the country it rules, does not have the full infrastructure needed to make maximum use of the Internet. Even if it did, it is far from clear that it, corporations, or governments sympathetic to it could use the Internet in the same way. It is far easier for activists using a worldwide network to play “offense” by exposing SLORC and campaigning for change, as was done in these cases, than it is for their opponents to play “defense.” It is unclear what SLORC would use the Internet for. Answering the activists’ charges directly only gives them wider currency. The alternative is advertising and image making, such as that represented by www.myanmar.com. But many, if not most, Internet users are instinctively wary of authority and organization and are unlikely to warm to the enticements of a government or corporation.

Disadvantages of Using the Internet

There are several disadvantages, or potential disadvantages, to using the Internet that can limit its usefulness to grassroots groups engaged in political action. Many of these “downsides” depend on how the Internet is used. Like the advantages of the Internet noted above, some have to do with the medium’s unique characteristics.

It is dangerous to rely solely on a single source of communication. Although the Internet was designed for robustness during an emergency, disruptions can and have occurred. In July 1997, Internet traffic “ground to a halt” across much of the United States because of a freak combination of technical and human errors, presaging what some Internet experts believe could someday be a more catastrophic melt-

down.⁷⁵ On April 20, 1997, the Institute for Global Communications' computer server, which hosts BurmaNet and many other listservs related to peace and human rights, "crashed." Two days later, President Clinton announced that he was imposing federal economic sanctions on the SLORC regime. The IGC server was not restored until April 24, which meant that activists were seriously impaired in getting news and discussing this watershed development for several days.⁷⁶ The Free Burma Coalition "would probably fall apart if the Internet connection were all of a sudden turned off," Marco Simons said. "Maybe we rely too heavily on it."⁷⁷

Other technologies, such as the telephone and the fax machine, still have advantages in particular situations, particularly if the sender needs immediate acknowledgment that the information has been received.

Communications over the Internet can be easily monitored. Without a doubt, SLORC and its sympathizers monitor the public discussion on BurmaNet and other channels of discussion. Such monitoring allows the Burmese regime and perhaps even corporations targeted by the campaign to electronically eavesdrop on prodemocracy groups' activities. However, several respondents to our Internet activist survey, as well as several interviewees, did not see this monitoring as necessarily a bad thing. As one BurmaNet subscriber put it: "I hope they read some of our stuff. They must learn in some manner."⁷⁸

Private, one-to-one electronic mail messages are slightly more secure, but these can be "hacked" by anyone with sufficient technical knowledge.

A more potent option is strong encryption, which, in theory, allows only sender and receiver to read the decoded message. The encryption system known as Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) has allowed U.S. or-

⁷⁵Rajiv Chandrasekaran and Elizabeth Corcoran, "Human Errors Block E-Mail, Web Sites in Internet Failure: Garbled Address Files from Va. Firm Blamed," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1997, p. A1.

⁷⁶See *The BurmaNet News*, No. 701, April 23, 1997.

⁷⁷Simons interview, 1997.

⁷⁸Electronic mail message on BurmaNet, dated May 27, 1997.

ganizations backing the National League for Democracy and other prodemocracy groups to maintain regular contact with groups on the Thai and Indian borders. It has been used to set up meetings inside Burma and to transmit, almost in real-time, debriefings of activists who come out of Rangoon or other cities to the border areas. A more recent development, in reaction to increased pressure by the Thai government against democracy activists, is the construction of secure web pages that require passwords for users to enter secure “chat rooms” where real-time conversations take place.⁷⁹ These and other technologies, however, remain out of reach of many Internet users.

Opponents may try to use the Internet for sabotage. This is related to the concerns noted above but represents a more active use of the Internet by the target of a political campaign, in this case SLORC, to trick, disrupt, or otherwise sow dissension in activists’ ranks.

The available materials, including interviews, discussions on BurmaNet and other online forums, and our Internet activist survey indicate that this can be a problem at times. But it is not a debilitating one, nor one that erases other advantages of the Internet for global activism. Most of those who responded to the survey said they had not experienced incidents of attempted sabotage by SLORC and expressed little or no concern about damage to the campaign from such activity.

Nevertheless, because the Internet allows for anonymity, it is possible for provocateurs posing as someone or something else to try to cause dissension or sidetrack the campaign by posting messages for that purpose.⁸⁰ Okkar, who is obviously in sympathy with the regime, has from time to time posted messages on BurmaNet designed to confuse or undercut the anti-SLORC campaign. One such message, posted in February 1997, was purportedly a letter sent by a “Dr. Myron Segal” and relayed how the National League for Democracy had urged Japan not to help build schools and supply polio vaccine in Burma, in order to increase the people’s suffering and dissatisfaction with SLORC rule.⁸¹ Just a month earlier, movement leader Zar Ni had posted an

⁷⁹Information provided by Mike Mitchell, International Republican Institute.

⁸⁰BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished.

⁸¹See Appendix C [in original full paper by Danitz and Strobel].

email warning of SLORC attempts to cause dissension in the ranks. “Not just what we read as news but how we read it is going to help shape the course of action many of us take. So let’s be careful in ‘consuming’ Burma news and reports,” Zar Ni advised. He quoted from Rudyard Kipling: “Things are not quite what they seem. This is the Orient, young man.”⁸²

At other times, the Internet discussion has degenerated into rounds of finger pointing over real or imagined SLORC provocateurs, discussions that are often heavily tinged with Burmese history or ethnic politics. But U Ne Oo, a Burmese exile in Australia and long-time Internet user, argues that more recently, the Internet “seems to reach its maturity: there are less instances of SLORC being able to instigate the users [into] getting into squabbles.”⁸³

Information transmitted on the Internet is “unmediated” and can sometimes be of questionable accuracy. One of the advantages of the Internet for activists and many other users, of course, is the fact that it allows them to dispense with the traditional “filters” for news, including reporters and government officials. It allows users to self-select information they are interested in and retrieve data in far more detail than available in a newspaper or, certainly, a television program.

This same lack of structure, however, can present dangers, allowing for wide and rapid dissemination of information that is factually incorrect or propagandistic, including material that is racist, sexist, or otherwise hateful and incendiary.⁸⁴

In the case of Burma, the problem of false or malicious information from SLORC was discussed above. Our research came up with no instances in which the prodemocracy movement in Burma and its international supporters took a major action or made a major an-

⁸²Zar Ni, “How to Read Burma and Burma Reports,” email posted on free-burma list-serv, January 10, 1997.

⁸³U Ne Oo, “The Grassroots Activism and Internet,” article posted on BurmaNet, May 16, 1997.

⁸⁴For example, see Graeme Browning, *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*, Wilton, Conn.: Pemberton Press, 1996, pp. 79–81.

nouncement of policy based on information that later turned out to be false.

Much appears to depend on the level of sophistication of the Internet user. As Rep. Rushing said of information, "Early on, you have to get it through your head, the fact that it is coming through a computer [does not] make it real, true." But, he added, "People pretty quickly tell you [if] something's not true. . . . I'm comfortable [that] the system's self-correcting."⁸⁵

Access to the Internet is not equal and may highlight divisions between information "haves" and "have-nots." Not all who wish to play a role in the campaign for change in Burma, or in Burma's future generally, have access to the most modern tools of communication, including computers, modems, and the necessary telephone lines or other means to connect to the Internet. As already noted, access to encryption methods that allow for more-secure communication may be limited.

Our Internet activist survey found that English is far and away the language of choice for Burma activists. While few respondents said that language was a barrier to their participation, it may be that those for whom it is a problem simply are not online at all. There has been growing use of special fonts that permit the use of Burmese-language scripts on the Internet, but English still dominates the Internet discussion.

Thus, the discussions are dominated by non-Burmese activists and those Burmese who can communicate effectively in English. As organizing and development of leadership revolve more and more around effective use of the Internet, those who cannot write fluently or persuasively in English risk becoming marginalized.⁸⁶

Like language, funding is also a major issue here. Those exile groups that are better financed (usually by Western nongovernmental groups or charities) and are located in urban centers, as opposed to jungle border areas, may have more access to the Internet and more chances

⁸⁵Rushing interview, 1997.

⁸⁶BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished.

to shape the opposition to SLORC. The concerns of Burma's many minor ethnic groups may go uncommunicated and unaddressed.⁸⁷

The Internet cannot replace human contact in lobbying and other campaign activities. This warning was made virtually unanimously by those we interviewed. The Internet and other communications media cannot replace human interaction. Rather, the Internet has its own distinct advantages and disadvantages, and is only one of the "arrows" in an activist's "quiver."

Even in the Massachusetts selective purchasing campaign, tools other than the Internet, including phone calls and face-to-face meetings, "were more important," said Michael Beer of Nonviolence International. "At some point, local, physical interaction is going to predominate."⁸⁸ Rushing, in describing the campaign, talked about the Internet's crucial role in electronic lobbying and in rapidly delivering information to those who needed it. But he also returned repeatedly to how he arm-twisted his colleagues in the state legislature. The Internet "supplements" that kind of lobbying, he said. "It can fill a big void if you can't do [it] face to face."⁸⁹

In terms of a campaign's internal organization, the Internet can also bring changes in personal interaction. Because the Internet has become such a powerful tool of communication for campaigns, especially global campaigns,

face-to-face group meetings are necessary less often. The function of group meetings, particularly of geographically dispersed people, is now less to work out detailed strategies and more to strengthen bonds of friendship and bring in outside speakers.⁹⁰

Finally, a campaign that focuses on little else but external communication and publicity—rather than human contact and internal organization—may be in danger.

⁸⁷Ibid. For more on this problem in U.S. society, see Browning, *Electronic Democracy*, 1996, pp. 76–79.

⁸⁸Beer interview, 1996.

⁸⁹Rushing interview, 1997.

⁹⁰BurmaNet Editor, *The Free Burma Movement and the Internet*, unpublished.

There is . . . a troubling tendency among modern nonviolent movements to fixate on the media to the exclusion of other important factors. . . . [The media] have a notoriously short attention span, and there are always other conflicts that step up to take center stage. Once the media leave, what happens to the movement? If there is little in the way of sustaining organizations—or if the mobilization was media-driven—then it may crash and burn.⁹¹

The Internet may contribute to a lack of historical memory and archives for a full-scale political campaign. This is a general concern with the growing use of computers and media that work without ever putting documents into printed form. However, as noted elsewhere, archives of the BurmaNet News and related materials are kept electronically.⁹² For the sake of their successors, activists should pay careful attention to storing records of past debates, decisions, and actions.

Internet campaigns, because of their decentralized nature, may be unstable. It is at the very least worth pondering whether—because of its fast-changing, organic, and decentralized characteristics—the Internet gives rise to campaigns that grow, take action and then disappear more rapidly than in the past. Centralization and hierarchy have many disadvantages, especially in the modern world, but they do tend to lend themselves to stable structures.

CONCLUSION

In these cases of networked social activism aimed at the military regime in Burma, relatively insignificant constituencies in the United States were able to influence American foreign policy using the Internet. The constituency's members—backed by a loose coalition of activists around the globe, with the modem as their common thread—were so influential that they thrust the United States into negotiations with the Europeans and Japanese at the World Trade Organization. There, a complaint has been filed over the Massachusetts selective-purchasing law aimed at Burma. Resolution of that case could have a profound impact on local sovereignty issues.

⁹¹Larmer, *Revolution Without Guns*, 1995, pp. 18–20.

⁹²See Emery, 1996.

However, the Internet does not guarantee the success of international grassroots campaigns aimed at social or political change. It is a powerful tool when used to organize far-flung activists; to rapidly share news or replicate successful strategies from one location to another; or to focus activists on a single, well-defined goal. Traditional approaches, such as face-to-face lobbying and “retail politics,” remain vital to success in many political campaigns. In addition, reliance on the Internet brings risks of electronic sabotage, monitoring, or disruption by opponents.

Still, in the cases we studied, the Internet’s capabilities provided a new tool for grassroots activists to counter powerful forces of multinational corporations and the regime in Rangoon. Since the Burma campaign raged across phone lines and fiber-optic cables, the use of the Internet to advance work on human rights and democracy has spread to Indonesia, Nigeria, Tibet, and East Timor, and has taken up such subjects as global warming and East Asian teak forests.

These and other campaigns are prime ground for further study of when and how the Internet can be best used, its limitations, and its still-to-be-felt effects on political power and sovereignty.