

FILL THE GAP

**CAN TOURISTS, AS A VECTOR
OF INFORMATION, FILL THE LACK OF
INFORMATION WE PERCEIVE
FROM MEDIA ISOLATED AREAS**

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ABSTRACT

The case study of this text is Burma. Burma is in the middle of a big political transition since 2012, and even more since last November. Indeed, after more than fifty years of dictatorship, fair and free elections occurred and the party fighting for democracy won. But as a result of fifty years of dictatorship, a lot of serious problems remain. Furthermore the network that the former military regime installed during the past years to be deeply settled in politics despite their defeat suggests that the situation will not change from one day to the next. But international medias neglect Burma, because it does not fit the audience criteria because it is too far geographically and culturally. We saw the number of articles increase fastly during the election period, and decreased impressively quickly just after. Burma is in a key moment of its history and greatly needs international awareness and support.

I want to put this element together with the growing number of tourists in Burma. Can tourism be used as an opportunity to make information more visible? Travel stories is an interesting genre because it combines emotions and real information. It has the power to attract thanks to the exotism of places and cultures described, and it shows information through the emotional perspective of the narrator.

Taking two major elements: media isolated areas and the power of travel stories, fill the gap questions the possibility of a positive influence tourists can have on these areas by sharing information they observe when traveling.

Information of my thesis are supported by my own material composed of both interviews I realised, and observations I made during the two times I traveled in Burma in 2014 and 2016. Consequently throughout this text you will find next to more theoretical information, extracts of my travel journal.

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FILL THE GAP

CAN TOURISTS, AS A VECTOR OF INFORMATION, FILL THE LACK OF INFORMATION WE PERCEIVE FROM MEDIA ISOLATED AREAS

“I hate travels and explorers”, wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book *Sad Tropics*.¹ Even though Claude Lévi Strauss expressed a clear aversion towards travellers and travel stories from the first paragraph, his book belongs to the travel stories literary genre. This sentence, and the book as a whole, exposes the interesting duality in travel stories, between useful report and subjective and romanced point of view, furthermore exotics, that intrigues and attracts. We could consider the early books of this genre, such as *Description Of The World*² by Marco Polo, as the first form of, if not journalism abroad, at least report about unknown areas.

Even though nowadays seasoned journalists offer us precise and reliable reports about places and situations all around the world, travel stories still have two interesting advantages. The first concerns these places where journalists are tracked, controlled or are refused access to, such as North Korea that recently opened its borders to tourists for economical reasons but still forbids journalists to work there, unless they are invited by the regime.²

The second situation in which travel stories could have an advantage concerns places that we could call media-isolated areas. These places could be placed under severe censorship, which makes real information gathering almost impossible. Or they become a blind spot for foreign reporters because their readers are just not interested in what happens there. These places could need a particular attention from Western politically influential countries, because they could play a role in the evolution of their political, social or/and economical situation by applying pressure on different levels. But they receive a lack of interest from the media and so are underrated from the mass. This is especially the case for Burma and that is why Burma is the center of my research. In these contexts, travel stories could be seen as a step between non information and precise information, such as specialized journalists, books, articles already existing... Assuming that travel stories have this capacity to attract a wider audience because of their personal and authentic aspects, it could be seen as a hook to gain people's attention and to push them to look for more information.

Next to these findings is the evolution of tools to circulate information. We see more and more participative news websites appearing, proposing another kind of journalism by publishing articles of non journalists. Blogs, micro blogs, social networks are new platforms allowing everybody to share stories or express his opinion.³ But all these new publishing possibilities also come with a lot of journalistic constraints.

In this context, I would like to question how the fact to consider travellers as an information tool can have an influence on media-isolated areas, through an analysis of the complexity of the Burmese political situation, the new possibilities of information circulation and the possibility to use tourists as a keypoint of this process. Further on, thanks to my graphic designer's position in this field, I would like to imagine a process that can answer these criteria, allowing a safe, credible and powerful circulation of information filling the information gap in certain areas or situations in the world.

1- LEVI-STRAUSS CLAUDE, *Sad Tropics*, Plon Later printing edition, 1955, 490 pages.

2- www.ilukasz.com

3- SHIRKY CLAY, *Here Comes Everybody., The power of organizing without organizations*, Penguin Books,, 2009, 352 pages.

My research process is based on my own investigation in Burma and on numerous interviews of both professionals, tourists and local Burmese. I've been in Burma twice, the first time was in 2014 as a simple tourist and the second was in February 2016, as a tourist but more expert than before and in order to gain material and proofs for my thesis. Throughout this thesis you will find abstracts of my travel journal that explains my observations during my travel and the importance of the conclusions I drew out of it.

BURMA

BURMESE HISTORY FROM COLONIALISM TO 2015 ELECTIONS

COLONIALISM AND ESTABLISHMENT OF DICTATORSHIP

To explain the complexity of the current Burmese political, economical and social situation it is necessary to go through a brief history of the country from the colonialist period until the recent elections. On the first of January 1886, Queen Victoria received Burma as a new year's gift, therefore the country became a British colony. A movement for Burmese independence led by Aung San, an influential politician, freed Burma from colonialism in 1948. But Aung San was killed with six of his cabinet ministers by his political rival U Saw six months before the independence. Aung San has played a big role in Burmese politics, and his dramatic assassination confers him a status of national hero. He is widely admired by Burmese and quoted as an example in politics even today. His political companion U Nu led the country to the independence and established a parliamentary democracy. In an already unstable political context, protest movements appeared and offered an opportunity to the opposition party for a coup d'état in 1962. U Nu is removed from the power and replaced by general Ne Win who took the power for 26 years. Ne Win established a socialist policy of autarchy and repression that led the economical evolution of the country to a halt. A lot of pro-democratic protests occurred across the country. In 1988 Ne Win was forced out of office and a new military junta took control of the country.

SUNDAY 7TH FEBRUARY 2016
NAYPYIDAW
GHOST CITY

I'm on the bus from Naypyidaw to Yangon, the capital of Burma. It was the first time I visited the city. The last time I was in Burma, this area wasn't accessible to tourists. Clearly if I had not been curious about the way Burma operates and its political situation, I would have never been there. As there aren't a lot of things to visit and that I just wanted to get an impression of the city, I decided to stay there for only one day.

The story of its creation is a good example to show the absurd manner in which the former military regime operates. After being informed by his astrologist that his lucky number was 11, General Than Shwe announced that the new capital of the country was to be Naypyidaw, from the 11th of November 2005 at 11am. Naypyidaw is a 4600 km² city built in the middle of nowhere. It is 40 times bigger than Paris and 80 times bigger than Manhattan. The official justification given by the military junta was because they wanted to relocate the capital in the middle of the country for practical reasons. Unofficial rumors say that it was to avoid protests in front of government buildings.

I reached Naypyidaw yesterday at 3am with a night bus. I was the only foreign traveller on the bus. When I arrived at the bus station, supposedly to be located in the city center, I took a taxi to go to my hotel. It took me 30 minutes to the hotel. I could see on the side of the road big hotel signs shining in the dark. The rest of the landscape seemed to be desert. I decided to have a rest at the hotel. A few hours later I rented a motorbike to go around the city. It took me 40 minutes to get to the pagoda of the city, which is a replica of the Shwedagon pagoda but deserted. Roads were impressively huge and empty, there were four lanes on each side and some of them had six lanes on each side. But I rarely undertook anybody else. All the buildings I saw on the side of the road were government buildings or enormous hotels. After a long ride in this ghost city, I went back to the hotel for dinner. Earlier

that morning, I had the impression that I was the only guest in the hotel and when I entered the dining room, my impressions were confirmed. Fifty tables stood in the room, each on them fully set, but nobody else was here. I had my dinner, observed by the waiter who seemed to be surprised to see a guest. Everything was quiet, the only noise there was, was the one of my knife on my plate. The rest of the hotel had the same ambiance, everything was made to host a lot of people yet it was totally empty. The morning before my departure, I had my breakfast in the same room. This time it was a buffet, there were dishes full of scrambled eggs, fried rice or sausages. It was pity that I wasn't very hungry because there was enough food for at least 40 people.

I've never seen a city like this, everything is opulent: the roads, buildings, hotels, monuments... But nobody is there. For me, it looks like a demonstration of power, and it shows that something goes wrong if a lot of money can be invested to build a city for a minor part of the population while the rest of the country suffers from poor infrastructure.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung San's daughter who was formerly exiled in England comes back the same year to Burma to look after her sick mother. She arrived in the middle of a chaotic political context and felt the need to be committed in the pro democratic fight. She benefitted from a particular aura in Burma because she is Aung San's daughter. Right from the beginning she gained a big support from the Burmese population and the military junta started to consider her as a dangerous political opponent.

In 1988 she founded the National League for Democracy and in 1989 she was arrested by the military junta and put under house arrest. She would be under house arrest for 15 years over a 21 years period. In 1990, the military junta organised elections and the National League for Democracy won with 59% of the votes. Results of the elections are denied by the power in place. During her house arrest period, Aung San Suu Kyi continued her fight for democracy with the help of her political companions and British husband.¹ In 1991, she received the Nobel Peace Prize, which focused the lights of international community's attention on Burma for a short period and brought her admiration and support. It conferred to her an untouchable status and caused ambiguous relationships between her and the military junta.

2015 ELECTIONS

The 8th of November 2015 elections were organised in Burma to elect the new members of the parliament. Against all odds these elections happened fairly, and the impressive victory of the National League for Democracy was not contested by the loser party, Union Solidarity and Development party. Fearing a fraud during the election process, international community looked more closely at these elections than they did during the 1990 elections. International observers were present in a lot of voting places, and they also played an important role in helping to organise an efficient voting process. Both the Burmese and international communities were surprised by the result, not because they were doubting about the victory of NLD party but because this victory was so massive. The ex-leader Thein Sein congratulated his opponent for having raised such a majority on her side and the army admitted defeat.² But a question pops up: how could the elections turn out so quietly in a country known for its brutal repression and anti-democratic policies?

1- WIN TIN, MALIBEAUX SOPHIE, *Win Tin: A dissident life*, Michel Lafont, 2009, 297 pages.

2- ARTE F, *Burma: End of dictatorship?*, 2014

BURMA NOWADAYS

TOWARDS AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

I found the answer to this question during my investigation. Several journalists, both international and Burmese have told me that the reason why the USDP seemed to retire so easily was because they did not actually hand over the power. As a Dutch journalist Minka Nijhuis explained to me, "they took years to make sure that their power is still deeply settled, you can see it from the constitution: it excludes Aung San Suu Kyi for the time being from the presidency, they control the three key ministries that are concerned with internal security and they have over the past few months put various military and ex-military into positions in the administration. They can always step in if they want to. So they will be watching her very carefully."¹ Indeed the constitution of 2008 decrees that 25% of seats in parliament are automatically given to member of the military junta.² Furthermore, it decrees that to be adopted, a law has to win more than 75% of the votes in parliament. The military power also has a right of veto on any proposition of modification of the constitution. The 2008 constitution is the source of numerous human right violation and conflicts all over the country. Finally, they can anytime declare a state of emergency and take back the entire control of the country.³ Since this interview and a few month after the elections, I can already observe how hard it seems to be for the winning party to collaborate with the ex-government.

Before starting my investigation in Burma, I had in mind this complex position Aung San Suu Kyi had: she has been raised to an icon status during 25 years, she carries with her everybody's expectations and hopes. She can hardly satisfy all the expectations and even more if she has to collaborate with an ex-government that has installed a network of corruption and support to serve their interest. But now she is the one who represents the government, so she will be the one to blame in case of deception.

Friday 19th February
YANGON
VISIT TO THE NLD HEADQUARTER

While preparing my travel before I left, I found on Internet the name of a taxi company called Golden Harp Taxi. This company employs former political prisoners and thanks to micro-credits, helps them to reconstruct their lives. On the other side, it allows to tourists, by renting taxis for a day or half a day, to have a political insight on Burma and to make visits that show them another aspect of the country.

So yesterday I called the company to rent a taxi for a full day today. We leave at 9 am from my hostel in Yangon with Soe my taxi driver. Soe was sent to jail for six years because during his studies he participated student protests. Among the numerous visits, we stopped at the NLD headquarters. In front of the building, they sell key rings, T-shirts, pins with the portrait of Aung Saan Suu Kyi on it. I asked if I could talk to someone and a smiling old lady motioned me to come and sit at her desk. She spoke a good English and I asked her about her impressions regarding the result of the elections and her opinion about the future of the politics. Her explanations were similar to the ones Soe gave me an hour earlier when I asked him the same questions.

She told me that they were all very happy about the result of the elections, but that nothing is done and the most difficult part was to come. The political situation is very complex and she told me that they are all realizing that things would not change fastly. She also explained to me that it was really hard for the NLD to

1- MINKA NIJHUIS, Amsterdam, 13 november 2015

2- CÉCILE HARL responsible of Info Birmanie, via skype from Eindhoven, 20 January 2016

find financing and that they mainly relied on donations.

The conversations I had with Burmese about politics confirmed the idea I had concerning Aung San Suu Kyi's position. Burmese are slightly starting to be critical towards Aung San Suu Kyi's decisions, saying that she makes too much concessions and that she should be more direct in her politics. This feeling is very moderate, but it is a big step if I compare it to the way I heard people talk about Aung San Suu Kyi when I went to Burma two years ago. Thanks to Soe and to the visits organised, I have new elements that make me understand how people perceive the new political of Burma. People are all conscious about the intricacy of the democratic process and know that the transition will be slow. The euphoria after the elections is gone now and it has given way to doubts. I was surprised that doubts had appeared so quickly after elections.

RESULT OF 53 YEARS OF DICTATORSHIP, ACTUAL PROBLEMS OF BURMA

As a result of 53 years of dictatorship, the situation of Burma is critical. The government has installed a huge network of corruption mainly working with cronies. In Burma, the term cronies refers to financial magnates who maintained, or are still maintaining, crony relationships with members of the former military regime. Around 20 families of cronies have considerably enriched in the 90s, during the dictatorial era of General Than Shwe. Nowadays, the country is considered as one of the most corrupted nations in the world and is ranking 156 over 176 nations according to transparency international.

Concerning the freedom of speech, during the dictatorship period more than 2000 journalists got imprisoned. The Burmese president committed to free all the political prisoners, but 88 are still imprisoned and 400 are waiting for a trial.¹ And imprisonments still occur. On the 24th of February 2016, the activist Nilar Thein was sent to Insein jail because she attended to a protest against the education system one year ago.²

Burma displays a large ethnic diversity. 135 ethnic groups are officially registered by the government, they speak a hundred different languages and dialects. Some of these groups are engaged in major conflicts. It is particularly the case with the muslim community, and more precisely the Rohingyas. The source of this problem is partly the extremist Buddhism group called Ma Ba Ta led by Wirathu, an influential monk in Burma. Wirathu is known for his support to anti-muslim activities and for his speeches on this subject. Monks are highly respected in this mainly Buddhist country, and a lot of Burmese follow his words. On the other side, the government applies a politics of non respect of worship and persecutes this minority for many years. They even forfeited their Burmese identity making them stateless. In October 2012, violence against them increased and caused a lot of deaths, land confiscations and population displacements.³ Nowadays important refugee camps for Rohingyas are located in the Arakan state and a lot of them fled by boat.

This description of current problems existing in Burma is not-exhaustive, the list is long and concerns drug traffic, right to education, women rights, workers rights, guerrillas... But it shows how deep these conflicts are. Even though the situation has considerably changed over the past year, the transition process from a dictatorship to a democracy is slowed down by the former dictatorship and as a result of the complexity of existing problems.

1- CÉCILE HARL, *In Burma, liberation of political prisoners always comes with new imprisonments*, Info Birmanie, 25th January 2016.

2- CÉCILE HARL, *New Arrestations in Burma, elections didn't change political prisoners situation*, Info Birmanie, 25th february 2016.

3- HANNA HINDSTORM, *Burmese authorities targeting Rohingyas, UK parliament told*, Democratic Voice of Burma, 28 june 2012.

MONDAY 9TH FEBRUARY
YANGON
VISIT OF SHWEDAGON PAGODA AND THE DRUG ELIMINATION MUSEUM

It's 7pm, I am back from a big day of visiting Yangon. This morning I've been to the Shwedagon pagoda, the city's major monument, known all around the world. It's a huge pagoda covered by gold leaves surrounded by other smaller pagodas with different architectural styles. The Shwedagon pagoda is the major place of worship in the country. But it's also the place for important political events. In 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi made her first political speech in this place. Around the pagoda are small hotels corresponding to the days of the week, for Teravada Buddhists, it's important to know the day you were born and they come to pray in front of the hotel corresponding to the day they were born. During the years following Aung Saan Suu Kyi's speech and her house arrest, several cameras were placed next to the hotel corresponding to the day of her birth in the Shwedagon pagoda to control and avoid any meetings or beginnings of protests.

I've also been here two years ago and this place still has a strong effect on me. It is an impressive monument both in terms of architectural opulence but also in terms of the diversity of people it attracts at any hour of the day. During the sunset, you can observe groups of tourists holding their cameras waiting for the perfect moment to take a picture next to groups of monks, sometimes praying piously, sometimes taking selfies with a high-tech smartphone taken out of their saffron robes. In 2014 I saw a monk climbing on the pagoda to take a picture from a higher point of view. Knowing that this pagoda is more than 2 500 years old and that it is in perfect conditions, it gives you an indication of how much Burmese are devoted to religion. Burma is a poor country, but all the pagodas are preciously maintained thanks to numerous donations made by Burmese people.

The visit I made this afternoon was mystic in a completely different way. I've been to the drug elimination museum. I read a few articles about it before. This museum has been built by the former military regime and it presents the way military regime strongly fights to eliminate drugs in the country. When you are aware of the fact that the military regime actively participates in the expansion of the drug traffic and that they made a lot of money thanks to it, this museum is an intriguing place to visit.

I went there by taxi since it was far from where I was. The taxi didn't really know the place and we got lost for a while before finding it. A big pathway led to a huge white and green building, to the right were a dozen military pickups were parked. The entrance fee was 3\$ and you had to pay another 5\$ to use your camera inside. The museum consists of three floors, the first explains how foreigners brought drugs, mainly opium, into Burma. The second explains the dangers of drugs and its terrible consequences and the last floor demonstrates how the former regime eliminates drug in the country and provides farmers other ways to earn their living.

I was the only visitor of this giant museum and the caretaker turned on the lights for me. Thankfully I didn't pay the 5\$ camera fees, nobody was watching and I could take as many pictures as I wanted. In my opinion it's obviously a museum dedicated to tourists since the majority of the captions and descriptions were only in English. On the brochure of the museum I got at the entrance was a picture of happy tourists posing in front of the museum. Even though the museum is in good condition, the overall style is kitsch and aged. Furthermore, all the photos, wax statues, objects and others elements composing the "exhibition" were laid out in a very theatrical way. It shows how the military regime is wonderful, takes care of Burmese, and how foreigners took benefit of the situation by inserting opium in Burma and taking part in the drug trafficking. For me, all these elements rightfully represent the military regime's way of being and acting, attached to fusty values and showing a fake

reality to take benefits of situations. Sometimes the information presented was so obviously distorted that it was almost funny. But the wax statues of the second floor representing Burmese people dying because of drugs scared me and pushed me to hurry up and finish the visit. When I went out of the building, the caretaker came to talk to me. He wanted to know where I came from, how I liked my visited in Burma and I took this opportunity to ask him if a lot of people usually visit this museum. With a deceitfully convinced face he answered "Oh yes, a lot of tourists come here!".

JOURNALISM

EVOLUTION OF TOOLS TO CIRCULATE INFORMATION

The rise and evolution of the Internet changed the landscape of journalism. Now, non-journalists can publish their information on platforms of information such as blogs or websites dedicated to participative journalism.¹ This new wave of non-journalists publishing information is called citizen journalism. Citizen journalism has played a role in recent political events. The main event we think about is the Arab spring. During all the Arab spring and in similar cases, the advantage of citizen journalism is that it can fill the lack of official information brought by journalism because of a problem of access, or circulation of information. It was, and still is, especially the case in Syria. In reaction to disinformation strategies developed by Bashar El-Assad's regime, protesters have turned to videos, shot with mobile phones or small digital cameras, as the most immediate way to make their voices heard. When it comes to videos or photos, due to raw aesthetic reflecting an immediate, urgent and unfiltered recording, it has a particular impact on the viewer. It now belongs to a recognizable genre. The image and its diffusion has become a resource for protestors and activists, a way to fight.²

These new technologies of circulation of information expand the possibilities and diversity of available information, but also of actions as explains Clay Shirky in his book *Here Comes Everybody*: "Social networks such as blogs and microblogs, file sharing platforms and online collaboration platforms are the vehicle for conversations and group action that previously could only be done through institutions."³

The evolution of these information platforms generated also its own system of approval which can be called "buzz" in the Internet language. In newspapers, publication and organisation of news mainly depends on the audience. In the amateur documents field, it still depends on the audience but it is turned in another way. If we simply take the example of Facebook, information you perceive in your timeline is classified regarding the number of likes, sharing and views. The more the information is popular, the more it is visible. So the criteria to show information or not is not truthfulness but how many people read and liked this information. If we go further, we see that a part of the information generated, particularly in this amateur field, deliberately tries to fit this audience criteria by arranging information in a certain way that it will create a big audience.

These new possibilities also come with constraints. Indeed, it allows non-journalist to diffuse their information. So people without knowledge of journalism have to gather, analyse information properly and double check it. This could lead to misinterpretation, especially when it comes to tourists visiting an area they do not know. The second important constraint concerns the protection of sources that citizen journalists could tend to skip by directly publishing names, showing faces in videos or photos, or giving precise locations.⁴

1- www.rue89.fr; www.journalism.nl

2- BOËX C., *Show, tell and fight through images The uses of video in the Syrian revolution*, Vacarme, 2012.

3- SHIRKY CLAY, *Here Comes Everybody*, *The power of organizing without organizations*, Penguin Books, 2009, 352 pages.

4- MINKA NIJHUIS, Amsterdam, 13 november 2015

EVOLUTION OF CIRCULATION OF INFORMATION ON BURMA/IN BURMA

At the Burmese scale, these new possibilities played a big role in the Safran Revolution of 2008. Indeed, the subversive newspaper DVB secretly reported on these events thanks to hidden cameras carried by undercover journalists and they were transmitting information through satellites to bases they had in Oslo and Chiang Mai.¹ From there, information about this event were transmitted to media all around the world. They were at that time the only source of information about what was happening in Burma. Thankfully they succeeded in transmitting information, but the fact that they were the only source is to question when we look at these information.

FRIDAY 5TH FEBRUARY 2016

YANGON

INTERVIEW OF THAN WIN HTUT, PUBLICATION DIRECTOR OF DVB

It's 9am and it's already 27 degrees outside. I quickly have breakfast at the hostel I'm staying in, and walk outside trying to find a taxi. I'm staying in the South East of Yangon. The diversity of shops in the street I walk on is impressive. You can find a restaurant with tables installed in the pavement next to a metallurgic workshop with three guys working around a sparking machine. The street is dusty, a lot of rudimentary trucks full of workers pass by. The ambiance is effervescent and I could stay here all day, just observing everything that happens. Today I have a meeting with Than Win Htut, he is the publication director of Democratic Voice of Burma. DVB is the only independent newspaper in Burma. They have been reporting illegally and under covered for years and have only had the right to report "officially" since 2012. Than Win Htu promised me a visit of their offices and I'm curious to have his opinion on the new political situation and on the current and future condition of freedom of press in the country.

I stop a taxi and jump in it. 30 minutes later I'm in front of a modest building, the only element that makes me think that it is the DVB offices is a truck parked in front of the main entrance with the logo of the newspaper on it. Than Win Htut is on his way to the office, while waiting for him in front of the small building I converse with one of his coworkers. He explains to me that he was a political refugee in Thailand and Australia for 27 years in order to be able to report on Burma without having any risk to getting caught by the regime. When Than Win Htut arrives, he gives me a tour of the office starting with the ground floor, where a TV attached to the wall is broadcasting debates organised by DVB and a few people work on computers. On the first floor is a TV set where the debates occur. We keep on climbing the stairs, pass by the archive room where huge piles of newspapers threaten to fall at any moment, to finally arrive at Than Win Htut's office and meeting room where we sit to start our conversation. I briefly explain the project I'm working on to him and ask if I could record him. He immediately and enthusiastically answers yes, a first hint for me on freedom of speech but let's see how he reacts to sensitive questions.

I asked specialists before arriving in Burma if I should be careful by avoiding talking about certain sensible topics. I didn't want to put anyone in danger by pushing Burmese to give me risky information. They all told me that Burmese can now talk freely about a much larger range of topics than before (but not write about them), and that if I go too far in questioning, they will just tell me or they won't answer. But it's the first interview I make here, and it's the first time I ask such sensible questions to a Burmese, so I told Than Win Htut several times that if I ask too many questions he should tell me. But I notice that none of my questions lacks answers and that he doesn't seem to be embarrassed by my questions.

The conversation is long and touches upon a lot of topics concerning politics, the

evolution of freedom of speech, all current problems in Burma. He explains that journalists are way freer in Burma since the modification of the constitution in 2012. However you still cannot talk about sensitive topics such as the ones related to military power. Next to these banned topics, two important problems persist. The first one is that there are no laws protecting journalists. The second is that even though they now have the right to talk about a lot of subjects, the diffusion of printed press is limited for newspapers not supported by the government. He explains it in these words: "You can talk, but you are not heard". From what I perceive thanks to this interview is that the censorship is applied on a different level, a less visible one than before, effective through financial support or by controlling the visibility of information.

A recent development of the Internet and of the mobile phone created a big evolution in the spreading of information. Two years ago it cost approximately 200\$ for a Burmese to have a SIM card, now it's around 1\$. The same for the Internet. Two years ago it was a privilege that only the upper class could afford, nowadays 3G is available across the entire the country. I remember when I visited Burma in 2014, in the streets of Yangon, next to street food sellers, you could find people offering to use landline phones to passers-by who wanted to call somebody. Now I see everybody using brand new smartphones. The streets of Yangon are full of shops selling smartphones or smartphones accessories. Than Win Htut explains that him and his coworkers noticed that the number of connections on the DVB website increase rapidly and impressively. It's evidence that the Internet already plays and will play a big role in the circulation of information in Burma.

The only topic that seems to be more confusing for Than Win Htut is the one about Rohingyas. He has mixed feelings concerning this topic, and explains that a lot of elements have to been taken in consideration and that international press should not be so categorical about it. It is true that international media questioned the fact that Aung San Suu kyi did not really express herself about this problem, and I was also wondering why it was urgent.

After one hour discussion, the interview made me feel the same feeling as when I talked to Minka, the Dutch journalist I interviewed a few months ago. I arrived there with, in my mind, all the information I could gather at my scale on different platforms to understand the situation, and I ended with a much sharper perspective on the topic thanks to the new elements these specialists brought me. It shows the deep complexity of the current problems due to the strategic and dense network installed by the former military regime, but also that information visible on the platforms I regularly check do not go deep enough. It seems to me that DVB still have to fight to find financial support since the government does not provide.¹

Myanmar Journalism Institute is the only independent institute of journalism of Burma. It opened two years ago, opening such a school in Burma would have not been possible before 2012. Financed by NGO's and foreign embassies, it allows 20 students per year to follow a program of specialisation in journalism. It is dedicated to both students or professionals who want to learn new journalism perspectives in a country where the journalistic landscape is in rapid and huge mutation. Their training is mainly oriented to new technologies since for them, it is the future of information in Burma and a way to circulate more freely information to a wider audience. According to Sein Wein, the director of this institute, this evolution of Internet widens also the range of information available about Burma. Now Burmese have the possibility to circulate information about their country abroad. But, still according to him, even though the international press talks more about Burma, information published abroad is often shallow and hardly speaks in depth about major problem in the country.² We noticed it during the elections, in international press, articles published explained often the same constitution problem NLD was facing, and superficially.

1- THAN WIN HTUT, DVD's publication director, Yangon 5 february 2016.

2- SEIN WIN, MJI's director, Yangon 6 february 2016.

LINK WITH MY PROJECT

Over the past years, and especially during the hardest time of the dictatorship, transmission of information in and out Burma was a real problem. The former regime instilled a strong firewall avoiding information to go out of the country by applying censorship on the Internet, threatening journalists and any other activist willing to contest the regime. During this time, Burmese saw tourist as an opportunity to share information and convey it to the outside world. I had the chance to see this phenomenon two years ago. When Burmese talked to me about politics, they advised me to share this information in my home country and it was also the case in Cambodia. In my opinion, this phenomenon is also due to the place international media granted to the problems of these countries. In link to the audience aspect mentioned above, I think that an important event has to occur to make international media pay attention to the country concerned. We had a perfect example of it with the recent elections. Suddenly, after months of silence on the subject, a lot of articles appeared about the Burmese elections. And the number of articles about Burma rapidly decreased after the result of the elections. Furthermore, the articles were mainly repeating the same information rather than looking into important and actual problems that need a particular attention. This is a serious matter because Western countries can put pressure on Burmese politics that can be for example exerted economically. This is what happened when USA and France decided to sanction the Burmese military regime by stopping economical transactions with them. The more the international community is aware of Burmese problems, the more international leaders have pressure to apply sanctions. But to find precise and important information about Burma asks for a long investigation. I observed it throughout my research process. Articles about Burma are rarely on the front page of newspapers.

Groups of journalists already work on the possibilities of citizen journalism and its ambiguities, for example the program Whistleblower provides protection to any citizen who wants to report and spread information about a problematic situation. Obviously, regarding citizen journalism, internet and information access in Burma, citizen journalism and internet publication seems to be the perfect tool to use in my project. The angle I would like to take is not to find a solution for the problems citizen journalism encounters, but rather to show the complexity of it. Indeed, for example just by posting a tourist's information next to a professionals information on the same level, a contextualisation is made and the viewer is free to form his own opinion about the information he perceives. In such a context of transition, both social, political and economical information evolve a lot and fast. There is a permanent flow of tourists in Burma and all around the world. The advantage of using them as a vector of information is that it could be a sort of permanent report about the country. Of course their information should be checked and contextualized, but it could at least be a sort of indicator.

TOURISM

TOURISM, ITS FINANCIAL ADVANTAGE AND ITS INFORMATION TRANSMISSION RISKS

In countries in which exists a particular economical political and social context, such as under dictaorship regimes, tourism presents an interesting ambiguity. Tourism industry is needed because it brings a lot of money to the country, but allowing foreigners into your country also implies that they can take information about the state of the country to the oustide world. For example, North Korea is part of the Mondial Organisation of Tourism since 1987, but only since 2011 it is notably more open to receive tourists. The reasons for this are economical, but the government controls tourists journeys conscientiously.

Each foreigner willing to travel to North Korea, has to book his travel with a conformed agency. During the whole journey he will have two guides: one interpreter and one driver, both accredited by the government, it limits contacts between tourists and North Korean citizens which would not be intentionally organised by the government. Places to visits are also limited and are meant to show a constructed image of the country, far from its reality.¹ Marie Voignier shows this particular construction of reality through her movie international tourism.² After a travel in North Korea, she made a movie with the material she collected there and thanks to sound interventions, she shows how much is staged all that is presented to her: places she visits, guides giving information, citizens answering her questions... Underneath this control of tourists is an intention to control the image and information spread about the country abroad. But the example also shows the potential power tourists have in terms of spreading a particular image of a place they visit.

Monday 15th February
DAWEI
THEORY ABOUT TRANSPORTS

I'm on my way to Dawei, a city near by the sea in the South of Burma. It would have taken me 15 hours if I had decided to go there by bus and since I'm in Burma for only three weeks, I don't want to loose too much time in transports. Anyway it's a good opportunity for me to try domestic flights. I leave from the domestic flights airport in Yangon, and the security controls has nothing to do with the one I'm used to when I travel. While my backpack goes in the X-ray machine, the man supposed to control the screen smokes a big cigar and talks to his coworkers.

This reminds me a conversation I had with Anne, a French tourists I was recently travelling with for three days. She told me that she was really surprised by how hard it is to get around the country, and also for Burmese who do not have as much time as travelers either the same budget. Indeed, to go from one point to the other you have three choices. You can take a bus, bus roads are in poor conditions so it takes a lot of time. As an example to go from Yangon to Inle lake, it takes 13 hours to make 600km. The second option you have is to take the train, but it's usually two times longer than the bus. The last option you have is to take the plane, but it is quite expensive, around 100\$ one way. The condition of the roads is surprising as well, indeed as I mentioned most of them are in bad conditions, except the one from Yangon to Naypyidaw which is brand new. The railway has not been renovated since the colonialist period. All these facts reinforce the difficulty to travel around the country. In my opinion, government could have made the transportation network renovation his priority, but intentionnaly didn't. Controlling the displacements is also controlling the transmission of information. Indeed, when you travel you learn how other people in other areas of the country live, what they think about politics. By isolating different groups from each other, Burmese government avoid any communication and so limits the risks of meetings and protests.

1-www.llukasz.com

2-Voignier M., *Tourisme international*, 2014.

TOURISM IN BURMA

Due to complex political context in Burma that still prevails today, tourists have a special position there. It has not been possible to freely visit Burma since more than 50 years. During the socialist period from 1962-1988, it was only possible to obtain a 24h visa for Burma, a restriction imposed by the government in order to “preserve traditional Burmese culture” and to avoid any foreign influence. The military regime decided to open the borders to tourists in 1990, mainly for economic reasons. A campaign called “Visit Myanmar year 1996” was created to attract tourists. But the military regime possesses all the touristic sites such as restaurants and hotels and Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition party strongly discouraged tourists to come because it meant supporting the government.

Nowadays, the number of tourists in Burma increases extremely fast so that it has been declared ‘2015 Destination of the Year’ by Singaporean travel magazine TTG Asia.¹ But it is necessary to zoom in on a few aspects that define the complexity of tourism in Burma. Firstly, half of the country is off limits to tourists.² Burmese government justifies this restriction by saying that these zones are unsafe for tourists³. It is partly true because a lot of armed conflicts between ethnic minorities and government still occur in a lot of regions. But I have interviewed three journalists who claim that the ban on these areas is also because government wants to hide certain facts.⁴ For example, the North part of Burma is a restricted area, and we know that it is the scene of the opium traffic in which the military power plays a big role and finds a lot of economical advantages.⁵ In the same category of restrictions are a few more examples: tourists have to be registered each night, so that the government can easily localise exactly where they are. Burmese citizens are not allowed to host a foreigner in their home, and in some regions they are not allowed to transport them by car or motorbike. So movements, places to visit, contacts with local people are controlled. These facts support the idea previously mentioned in relation to North Korea, that governments of these countries cautiously control the image of the country tourists will see and bring home. Secondly, all the tourist infrastructures have to obtain a licence delivered by the military power, and to pay taxes.⁶ The military power also asks tourists to pay entrance fees when they arrive in the main touristic places of the country. Part of the money tourists spend during their travel goes to the military. It is possible to minimise this amount of money by choosing the right places where you eat and sleep because some of them are more independent than others, but it is not possible to avoid it completely.

MONDAY 15TH FEBRUARY 2016

DAWEI

INTERVIEW OF NICHOLAS AUNG KYAW, WORKING IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

The area around Dawei has big touristic potential that has not yet been exploited. A lot of virgin islands are located near by, with clear water and paradisiacal atmosphere. A lot of investors are considering developing tourist businesses there and I’m meeting one of them today, Nicholas Aung Kyaw. Nicholas is working for a company that wants to build an eco-responsible resort specialised in diving. I won’t mention the name of the company he is working for since the project has not yet been realised and he told me information that could hinder its achievement. I meet

1- *Burma ‘2015 Destination of the Year’, says TTG*, Democratic Voice of Burma, 5 october 2015,

2- www.tourismtransparency.org

3- www.myanmartourism.org

4- MINKA NIJHUIS, Amsterdam, 13 november 2015

THAN WIN HTUT, DVD’s publication director, Yangon 5 february 2016.

SEIN WIN, MJI’s director, Yangon 6 february 2016.

5- *Crime gangs, not farmers to blame for Burma drug trade*, Democratic Voice of Burma , 15 november 2015,

6- NICHOLAS AUNG KYAW PAING, working in the tourism sector, Dawei, 15 February 2016.

Nicholas at the hotel he is staying at, squeezing me in between two meetings with tourism ministers.

The company Nicholas is working for, rented an island located near Dawei to the government. The Nicholas's job is to obtain government authorisation to construct resorts and host tourists in the island. The military has control over every touristic infrastructure, you cannot open one without their permission. He explains that he has been fighting to have this authorisation for months and that it is very hard to get. The reason why being that the island detained by Nicholas' company is located 15km from an island where a military base is located. The government is afraid that tourists would try to cross over to visit the military base. Nicholas unfolds maps he is working on on the table, clearly indicating that this fear is absurd. A tourist would have to cross 15km of sea and climb a high mountain to finally arrive in the military base. It is easy to imagine that tourists on holidays do not have this kind of goal. But even though the documents he has are precise and obviously showing that the theory is illogical, his authorisation demand stays stuck.

Nicholas shares with me his opinion on tourism in Burma. He says that tourism has grown impressively over the past years and still is. The more the political situation is stable, the more tourists arrive. It is a sudden transition for Burma and there is need to be very cautious. Indeed, he fears that it could become a second Thailand, which is now known for sex tourism and develops touristic infrastructures against environmental priorities. A fact that reinforces Nicholas's fear, he explains, is that the government sees tourism only from a financial point of view, they have no consideration for eco-responsible initiatives. When he proposes his idea of a resort specialized in diving but respectful of the environment, as well as today's importance to consider environment friendly ideas as a priority, they do not understand and they do not see the urgency of it.

WEDNESDAY 17TH FEBRUARY 2016
DAWEI
ADDITIONAL NOTES

I spent three days with Nicholas and realised how complicated it is for him to obtain the authorisation. He was running from one meeting to the other, with suitcases full of papers proving his good intentions, but each time he came back with bad news. While he was in meetings, I visited the surrounding area by motorbike. In this region, the military is very present. This is because it is an area not far from where ethnic conflicts occur. If you go further South, a lot of areas are forbidden to tourists. It reminds me of my visit in Kalaw, a city near Inle Lake, in the middle of the country. It is also a city where I saw a lot of military. This is also where I met Dave, an American working for an NGO, who explained to me that it is a central point between lots of conflicting areas. Cities located near these conflicting areas are more controlled, and for tourists a lot of the access is restricted. For example, here it is not allowed to get your own boat to visit the islands near by the coast. And if a Burmese brings you to these islands, you cannot stay overnight, you have to come back to your hotel located on land to sleep. This confirms the feeling I had concerning how the government controls tourist displacement in the country.

The cost of hotels on the coast near Dawei is high because they still have a kind of monopole since there are very few hotels. On the beach, owner of restaurants have small huts, as they know that travellers look for cheap places. When you walk on the beach with your backpack, Burmese sometimes come up to you, and after some small talk they whisper that if you are really discreet, they can rent the small huts to you for a cheap price. But they are very explicit in explaining that if they got caught, they risk a lot.

In reaction to these elements and regarding the evolution of tourism in Burma, independent initiatives appear such as www.tourismtransparency.org. These independent activists promote a responsible tourism towards environment and local communities, encourages tourists to invest their money in local structures rather than in the ones supported by military power, and push tourists to help spreading information about Burmese situation abroad.

LINK WITH MY PROJECT

Regarding all these information and the ambiguity tourism presents, it seems interesting and relevant to analyse what kind of info tourists bring from countries, and so what image countries deliver to tourists. Put in perspective with professional's information about this country such as journalists articles and reports, it can give an interesting point of view on the situation and bring another layer of information about it.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the flow of tourists around the world is most of the time permanent. Therefore it offers the possibility of a permanent report, which could be useful for countries where the situation evolves rapidly, such as Burma. Indeed, in the present new political context of Burma due to elections, things change quickly and they will for the next few years. These changes are observable on different layers and some of them are accessible to tourists: for example the landscape of cities, the way Burmese citizens talk more or less freely, the no-go zones becoming accessible..

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

Throughout this research, I have put three important elements together: the tense political context of Burma, new possibilities of circulation of information, and the potential power of diffusion of information tourists could have. I started my research before the Burmese elections, it was for me a relevant case study because of the serious political situation they had, the lack of visibility of information Western world had from it and the special position tourists have there. My project was based on this impactful assessment. During and after the elections, my perspective on it slightly changed. International press suddenly started to talk a lot about Burma, and the positive result of the elections surprised everyone. The first rapid analysis I draw from this event was that my project was not relevant anymore because my first assumptions seemed to become wrong.

But researches, interviews and my investigation there proved firstly that there is still a huge lack of diffusion and visibility of information. Indeed, what we see in Western media articles about Burma is superficial and would make us believe that the political problems are solved since the elections. You always have to dig and take time to look for information to realise the extent, the intricacy and the gravity of the situation. Secondly, since the former military regime still has and will have an important control on politics, the transition process to a democracy will be slow and difficult. Furthermore, positive result of elections does not solve from one day to another all the complex existing problems. The conclusion I draw from these elections is that even more than before, Burma will need international community's attention.

In this context of evolution, tourists have a strong role to play because there is a permanent flow of tourists, so permanent potential flow of witnesses who would report about observable changes. I am a proof of this assessment. Indeed, with two travels in two years, I could witness changes at my scale such as for example how Burmese dare to talk about politics and how they talk about it. Or how the landscape of shops has changed since the accessibility of mobile phones, how they react regarding the increasing mass of tourism arriving... These information are observable from a different angle than the one we have on medias, the journalistic point of view. It is information of everyday life that you get by walking in a city, talking to the owner of a hotel or a taxi driver. Of course I did not have access to very deep information, and tourist will not, but the kind of information collectable by tourists has advantages. As travel stories, as travel documentaries, as travel blogs, this kind of information presents an exotic and proximity aspect that attracts. I would like to use individual information, anecdotes linked to bigger political, economical or social aspect. In other words, to show information linked to a human aspect, to instaurate a climate of proximity that we rarely have in the media. The goal would be to catch the attention of a bigger or a new group of people on Burmese current problems.

Concerning my target group, I know that it is not a huge group since a lot of tourists visiting Burma go there for its virgin sand beaches and beautiful resorts regardless of the politics. But I discussed with an eclectic group of over fifty tourists, and asked them about their opinion of the country, about what they knew about Burmese politics and how they felt and observed the tensed political context. More than half of them confirmed me their curiosity and interest about politics, wanted to learn more and were willing to share their information to a wider audience.

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