# Regulatory Gaps in Social Media During Humanitarian Conflicts: Facebook and Rohingya Genocide

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**A R T I C L E   I N F O**

**A B S T R A C T**

This study examines Facebook's role in the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, highlighting regulatory gaps that enable social media misuse. Using a qualitative case study approach, it explores how Facebook's algorithm, prioritizing user engagement, amplifies misinformation and hate speech, fueling ethnic violence. Key regulatory gaps include Facebook's inadequate local content moderation, Myanmar's weak legal oversight, and the absence of robust international regulations. Despite civil society's watchdog role, limited resources hinder effectiveness. The study underscores the urgent need for digital governance reforms to address these gaps, curb hate speech, and protect vulnerable communities from social media's harmful impacts.

## INTRODUCTION

Facebook's influence on Myanmar's social life is extraordinary. Facebook's strategy to install native apps on some smartphones has led to its adoption arguably too fast across the country. For many people in Myanmar, Facebook is not just a social media platform—it's the internet itself (Tähtinen, 2024). This unique position gives Facebook great power over public discourse. Unfortunately, this power is used irresponsibly by some parties.

In 2018, more than 18 million people in Myanmar used Facebook, which is about 30% of the country's population (Zaleznik, 2021). This rapid adoption is largely due to Facebook's partnership with the mobile phone company, which allows users to access the platform without being charged for data. As a result, Facebook has become a major source of news and information for many Myanmar citizens. The platform's dominance in the information ecosystem means that Facebook plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, often without any checks or balances.
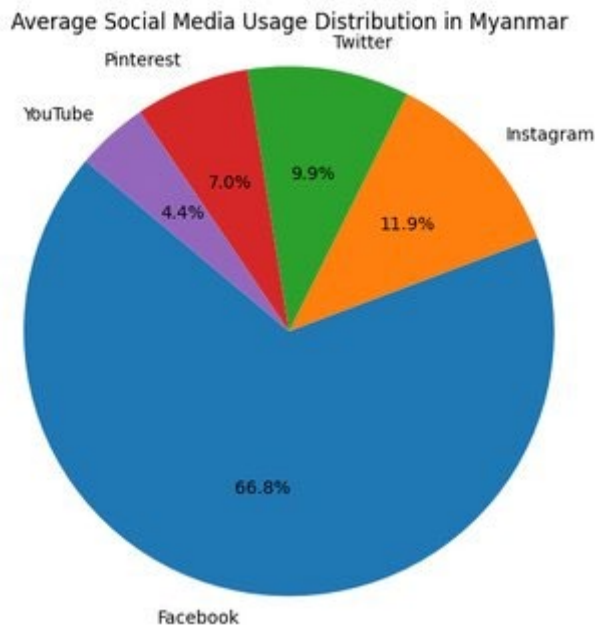
Figure 1. Social Media Distribution in Myanmar
Source: (Hamza et al., 2024)

Instead of encouraging dialogue and understanding, Facebook has become a breeding ground for misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. A 2018 UN report highlighted Facebook's role in the spread of anti-Rohingya rhetoric, noting that the platform "substantially contributes to the level of hostility, division and conflict" in the country. The platform's algorithms, which are designed to maximize engagement, prioritize sensational and divisive content over factual reports. As a result, Facebook has become a megaphone for extremist voices in Myanmar, amplifying hate speech that fuels violence against the Rohingya (Schissler, 2024).

This problem is exacerbated by Facebook's lack of investment in local content moderation. In 2015, Facebook had only two Burmese-language content moderators. Despite repeated warnings from civil society groups and researchers about the spread of hate speech on its platform, Facebook's response has been slow and inadequate. In 2018, the number of Burmese-speaking moderators increased to around 100, but this is still far from enough for a country as large and complex as Myanmar. The lack of proactive measures to curb hate speech and misinformation allows harmful content to spread uncontrollably, directly contributing to real-world violence against the Rohingya.

The role of misinformation in the Rohingya crisis cannot be underestimated. Fake narratives portraying the Rohingya as a dangerous and foreign threat are allowed to flourish unchecked on Facebook. This narrative is not just a lie; They became the basis of a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing. By failing to stop the spread of harmful content like this, Facebook provides a platform for hate speech to flourish, directly contributing to the dehumanization of the Rohingya.

Figure 2. *Rohingya Hate Speech Page* on Facebook

Worryingly, despite numerous warnings from civil society groups, human rights organizations, and even from its own employees, Facebook has taken only minimal action to address the rampant spread of hate speech on its platform. The company's failure to implement effective content moderation policies in Myanmar is not just a matter of negligence; It was a very careless act. By prioritizing profit and user growth over human life, Facebook shows a terrible indifference to the plight of the Rohingya.

The data shows how severe this Facebook failure is. A 2018 United Nations report revealed that the platform became a major medium for the spread of hate speech, noting that the spread of anti-Rohingya content on Facebook "substantially contributes to levels of hostility and division" (Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020). According to research by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, more than 1,000 posts and comments encouraging violence against the Rohingya were found between 2016 and 2018, with only a small fraction being removed by Facebook. In addition, Facebook's own internal data shows a significant increase in reporting hate speech posts related to the Rohingya crisis, but the removal rate remains very low (Faxon et al., 2023).

The impact of Facebook's negligence is severe. International Crisis Group estimates that the spread of hate speech and misinformation on Facebook was instrumental in fueling the violence that led to more than 740,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh between August 2017 and March 2018 (Faxon et al., 2023). The Rohingya have experienced systematic violence, including mass killings, sexual violence, and arson, many of which have been fueled by dehumanizing rhetoric spreading on Facebook.
In addition, Facebook's inability to moderate content in Myanmar can be seen from the very small number of Burmese-speaking moderators compared to the platform's user base (Warofka, 2018). Despite the rapid growth of Facebook's user base in Myanmar, the number of Burmese-speaking moderators increased from only two in 2015 to about 100 in 2018, which is far from enough to handle the volume and complexity of hate speech and misinformation spreading (Clune & McDaid, 2024). These shortcomings exacerbate the problem, allowing harmful content to continue to exist and contribute to the crisis.

Overall, Facebook's handling of misinformation and hate speech in Myanmar has not only facilitated the spread of harmful rhetoric, but has also directly contributed to one of the worst humanitarian crises of the decade. The company's failure to take timely and effective action demonstrates a deep indifference to the ethical responsibilities associated with its role as a global social media platform (Febrinandez, 2021).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

- **Lack of Regulation in Myanmar**
  Along with the increasing use of Facebook in Myanmar, there has been no significant effort from the government to regulate or monitor the spread of content on social media. Existing regulations are often ineffective or not applied consistently, allowing the spread of hate speech and misinformation

without (International Crisis Group, 2021). The Myanmar government seems to have failed to understand the widespread impact of social media in influencing public opinion and increasing the potential for social conflict. A report by (Umiyati, 2021) shows that this lack of regulation makes Facebook a major platform for the spread of anti-Rohingya propaganda. In addition, the report (Amnesty International, 2022) highlighting that the government's failure to control social media content directly exacerbates pre-existing ethnic tensions.

The Myanmar government's inability to enforce effective regulations is also exacerbated by outdated legal policies that are irrelevant to the modern digital landscape. Research by (Tong & DeAndrea, 2023) revealed that Myanmar's legal framework related to information technology does not cover the regulation of social media platforms, thus creating a large legal loophole. This allowed for the massive spread of hate speech, which later became one of the main drivers of violence against the Rohingya group. Without adequate policy updates, the government remains unable to control the increasingly complex dynamics of social media (Cho et al., 2024).

- **Limitations of International Regulation**

  At the international level, regulations to regulate social media platforms in conflict countries such as Myanmar are also still very limited. While there have been some efforts to create a global framework regarding content moderation, its implementation has been inconsistent, especially in regions with low oversight capacity. According to a report by (Human Rights Council, 2020), the ineffectiveness of international regulations has kept tech companies like Facebook from facing significant consequences for their failure to tackle the spread of hate speech. This situation is exacerbated by the weak international law enforcement mechanism against technology companies based in developed countries, but operating in developing countries.

  In addition, research by (Kothur & Pandey, 2023) noted that cultural, legal, and political differences between countries are often obstacles in implementing social media regulations globally. For example, the content moderation standards implemented by Facebook in developed countries are not always relevant in countries like Myanmar, where the threat of ethnic conflict is more significant. In the absence of a uniform and context-oriented approach, social media remains a dangerous tool for spreading hatred in conflict countries.

- **Weaknesses of Facebook's Local Context Policy**

  Facebook, as one of the world's largest social media platforms, has failed to develop an effective content moderation policy in Myanmar. Although the platform claims to have increased moderation efforts, the results are far from adequate. In 2018, a report by the New York Times revealed that Facebook only had about 100 content moderators who could understand Burmese, even though the country had more than 18 million users (Gleicher et al., 2018). This shortcoming causes a lot of harmful content, including hate speech and misinformation, to slip unattended. This shows that Facebook is not investing enough in understanding the socio-political dynamics in Myanmar, which directly contributes to the escalation of violence.

  Furthermore, Facebook's algorithms designed to prioritize user engagement often promote sensational content that is divisive. Research by (Warofka, 2018) shows that this algorithm indirectly encourages the spread of hate speech because such content tends to attract more attention from users. In Myanmar, where ethnic tensions are already high, Facebook's failure to adapt its algorithm to the local context created conditions conducive to the dehumanization of the Rohingya group. This shortcoming reflects Facebook's inability to integrate its social responsibility into its global operations.

- **The bad impact of Facebook's algorithm**
  The Rohingya crisis shows a fundamental failure of responsibility on Facebook's part. The company's unwillingness to take decisive action against hate speech and misinformation, even when faced with tangible evidence of its consequences, is not simply an abdication of duty (Smith & Smith, 2022). Facebook's response to the crisis has been marked by denial, diversion, and refusal to acknowledge its role in facilitating ethnic cleansing.

  This lack of accountability is not just a moral failure; This is a dangerous precedent for the tech industry. When a company as big as Facebook refuses to take responsibility for its actions, it gives others the courage to act with the same freedom. The Rohingya crisis is a stark reminder that without effective regulation and oversight, social media platforms can—and will—become tools for violence and oppression.

- **Platform Governance Triangle Theory**
  The Platform Governance Triangle theory is a conceptual model that describes the interaction between three main groups of actors: firms, states, and non-governmental organizations or civil society organizations (NGOs) (Gorwa, 2019). The model is in the shape of a triangle, where each corner represents one of the groups of actors. The position of initiatives or policies within the triangle shows the proportion of the contribution of each actor to a particular setting or regulation.
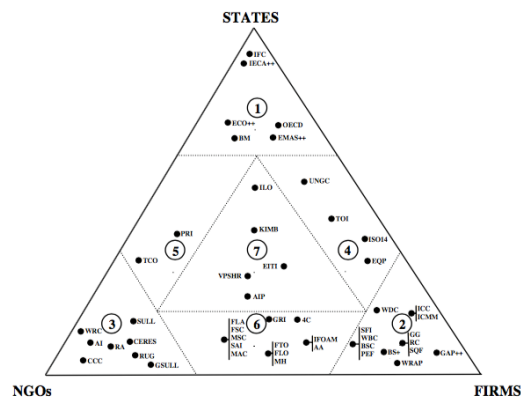


Figure 2. Platform Governance Triangle Model

- **Actors in the Governance Triangle Platform**
  1. Firms
  Companies, especially technology-based ones like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, have great technical capacity and resources to manage their platforms. They often lead content regulation through self-regulation initiatives, such as internal content moderation policies. However, the economic interests of companies can conflict with their social responsibility, so they often prioritize profitability over public welfare.
  2. States
  The state has the formal capacity to create legally binding regulations. In a digital context, the state often acts as a regulator through policies such as data protection laws or illegal content removal policies. However, this regulatory capacity varies between developed and developing countries, which creates gaps in platform governance in countries with low oversight capacity.
  3. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society
  These actors often act as independent watchdogs who play a role in ensuring the transparency and accountability of companies and the state. They advocate for values such as human rights, freedom

of expression, and privacy protection. However, limited resources are often an obstacle for NGOs and civil society to significantly influence policy.

- **Dynamics in the Platform Governance Triangle**
  This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics of interaction between these actors in the arrangement of digital content. There are three main dimensions to consider:
  1. Actor Competencies
  Each group of actors has unique competencies. Corporations have technical expertise, states have legal authority, and civil society has the legitimacy of representation. However, no single actor has all the competencies needed to create an effective setting. Therefore, cross-actor collaboration is very necessary.
  2. Legitimacy Politics
  Any arrangement or initiative requires legitimacy from all actors involved. This legitimacy is often at stake in the competition between corporate initiatives, state regulations, and civil society recommendations. When one actor is too dominant, the legitimacy of the arrangement can be questioned.
  3. Power Relations
  The distribution of power among these actors greatly influences how content arrangements are designed and implemented. In many cases, technology companies have great influence because of their control over digital infrastructure and user data.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the relationship between the absence of social media regulation and the spread of hate speech that contributes to the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. The case study was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific context involving Facebook as the main platform for disseminating information in Myanmar (Baxter & Jack, 2015).

The data used in the study was sourced from a variety of secondary documents, including official United Nations reports, academic studies from reputable journals, reports from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as internal data released by Facebook. This research also refers to publications that examine content moderation and social media algorithms in the context of ethnic conflicts.

The analysis method used is document analysis to identify certain patterns in the spread of hate speech and weaknesses in content moderation policies (Apriyani Indah, 2022). The authors examine the text of reports, journal articles, and other documents to understand the relationship between social media policies, platform algorithms, and the rise in ethnic violence in Myanmar. The validity of the research is maintained by triangulation of data from various sources and using a digital regulatory theory framework to interpret the findings.

This approach allows researchers to generate deep insights into the role of social media in facilitating humanitarian conflicts and provide evidence-based policy recommendations that can be applied to prevent similar cases in the future.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### Corporate Dominance in Content Governance

Facebook, as a corporate actor, has significant control over content governance in Myanmar. The platform's algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, but indirectly drive the spread of sensational and divisive content. In the Myanmar context, content like this promotes anti-Rohingya

narratives, which exacerbate existing ethnic sentiments. The ineffectiveness of local content moderation exacerbates the situation, with only 100 Burmese-speaking moderators serving more than 18 million users in 2018. Full reliance on algorithms without a deep understanding of the local context creates room for hate speech to flourish unattended.

As a global company, Facebook has failed to integrate social responsibility into its operational policies. Its priority on user growth and economic profits ignores the social impact of its operations. Facebook's failure to understand Myanmar's socio-political dynamics is an example of how tech companies often don't invest enough in adapting their policies to the local context. This reflects the great risks of a company-dominated regulatory approach without adequate oversight from other actors.

The impact of this company's dominance is evident in the escalation of the conflict in Myanmar. Facebook has become a major platform for the spread of misinformation and hate speech, which not only influences public opinion but also facilitates real-world violence. The ineffectiveness of Facebook's content moderation policy indicates the need for deep reform in the company's approach to content governance, especially in conflict areas.

## State Absence in Regulating the Platform

The state of Myanmar, as an actor with the authority to regulate, shows a significant absence in the governance of digital platforms. Myanmar's outdated legal framework cannot accommodate the challenges presented by modern technology, especially in overseeing the spread of digital content. The existing regulations do not cover the regulation of social media platforms, thus creating a large legal loophole. As a result, Facebook operates almost without constraints, with great power to shape public opinion without adequate accountability.

In addition, the Myanmar government does not seem to have the political and administrative capacity to enact relevant policies. In some cases, the state has instead used platforms such as Facebook to promote discriminatory narratives against the Rohingya, exacerbating existing conflicts. The government's reliance on digital platforms to spread this propaganda reflects the complex power relationship between the state and technology companies, where the state often exploits regulatory loopholes for its own interests.

The absence of this regulation not only has an impact on the Rohingya group but also on Myanmar society as a whole. By allowing global companies like Facebook to operate unattended, governments are failing to protect their citizens from the destructive effects of digital technology. Going forward, the Myanmar government must strengthen the regulatory framework and create relevant policies to face the challenges of the digital era.

## The Limitations of Civil Society in Balancing Power

Civil society in Myanmar faces a major challenge in balancing power between tech companies and the state. Although various organizations have warned about Facebook's destructive impact, their voices are often ignored. This reflects the weak influence of civil society in the governance of digital platforms, especially in regions with low economic and political capacity.

Lack of access to resources is a major obstacle for civil society to play a more active role. Most local organizations don't have the capacity to monitor content consistently or put pressure on companies like Facebook. This limitation is further exacerbated by the fact that civil society often does not have direct access to influence the algorithmic or content moderation policies implemented by tech companies.

However, civil society still has an important role as a supervisor and early warning provider. In the context of Myanmar, they have provided various reports revealing how Facebook facilitates the spread of hate speech. Civil society collaboration with international actors can be a strategic step to increase their influence, while ensuring that the voices of local communities are heard in global content settings.

**Governance Gaps in International Perspectives**

At the international level, the oversight mechanism for technology companies such as Facebook is still very limited. The absence of a binding legal framework gives global companies great freedom to determine their own policies. Voluntary content moderation standards are not strong enough to address the complexity of the issues that arise in countries like Myanmar.

The main obstacle in international arrangements is cultural, legal, and political differences between countries. Facebook's one-size-fits-all approach is often irrelevant for local contexts. For example, content moderation policies that worked in developed countries cannot be effectively implemented in Myanmar, where ethnic conflict is a major threat. This creates a situation where global companies can avoid responsibility for the impact of their operations in developing countries.

To address this gap, a more inclusive and context-oriented approach is needed. International collaboration, such as through multistakeholder forums, can help create a stronger global framework. However, to ensure success, local civil society must have a place at the discussion table, so that the resulting policies truly reflect the needs of vulnerable communities.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that social media regulatory gaps play a significant role in exacerbating humanitarian crises, such as the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. Facebook's dominance as a major source of public information, which is not balanced with effective content moderation policies, allows for the massive spread of misinformation and hate speech. Facebook's algorithm, which is designed to maximize user engagement, indirectly encourages divisive content, exacerbating existing ethnic conflicts. The Myanmar government's inability to develop relevant digital regulations further exacerbates the situation, while civil society faces limited resources to address the problem.

To overcome this problem, a more inclusive reform of social media governance is needed. The government must update the legal framework to regulate digital platforms strictly, especially in conflict areas. Facebook and other tech companies need to increase investment in local content moderation and align their algorithmic policies with local socio-political contexts. At the international level, a binding regulatory framework is needed to ensure the accountability of technology companies in dealing with the impact of their operations in developing countries. Collaboration between governments, technology companies, and civil society is a crucial step to create a safe, fair, and responsible digital ecosystem.

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