GETTING CONNECTED IN MYANMAR

After years of falling behind the rest of Asia in information and communications technology, Myanmar is quickly catching up

POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON SEPTEMBER 21, 2016

Aung San Suu Kyi is a celebrated human rights activist that led opposition to the military junta that took power in Burma (now Myanmar) in 1962. She was one of the founders of the country's National League for Democracy and a champion for the establishment of a civilian government. In 1989, she became a political prisoner of the military and remained under house arrest for 15 of the next 21 years. She was released in 2010, as Myanmar slowly began to embrace democracy.

While the rest of the world was a Google search away from following Aung San Suu Kyi's political career, few in Myanmar had the means to access digital information about her. State restrictions on communications and a lack of reform in the telecoms sector meant Myanmar spent years in a digital blackout, its citizens without the educational and entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by the web. The ruling military failed to develop telecommunications capacity even as many of their Asian neighbours forged ahead.

As recently as 2004, while broadband networks were readily available in nearby China for US$9.66 per month and in Sri Lanka for $21.71, in Myanmar the cost for a low-speed connection was a whopping $4,794 per month. In addition, "It cost $2,500 just to get a SIM card!" says Rohan Samarajiva, chair of LirneAsia, an information and communications technology policy and regulation think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

This information and communications technology hurdle, especially as it related to opportunity in the global economy, was one of the many reasons the once prosperous country remains classified by the UN as a "least developed country," a status it first attained in 1987. But after 2010, things began to change. As part of the transition to democracy, the Myanmar government sought reforms that could begin the rebuilding of a once prosperous economy, says Samarajiva.

"Telecom was a good candidate that could yield quick results for the people," he says.

LirneAsia, along with India's Centre for Internet and Society, came on board to help Myanmar make the transition to a socially inclusive, networked economy. While working closely with the Myanmar ICT Development Organization (MIDO) and with the support of funders such as Canada's International Development Research Centre, LirneAsia is helping support information and communications technology skills in Myanmar "by teaching through the process of doing," says Samarajiva.

In some cases this means consulting with government on how to manage companies to set up and share telecommunications infrastructure and products. In other cases, LirneAsia conducts large-scale surveys and research projects (one study had 4,000 participants) to evaluate the progress of development of information and communications technology, suggest relevant policy and build government accountability. The research programs are also designed to provide mentoring opportunities so that in time organizations like MIDO will be empowered to do the same.

Buddhist nuns in Myanmar take and examine pictures of each other in 2015. Myanmar has rapidly become digitally connected to the rest of Asia and the world in the last few years. In 2013, about 10 per cent of the population had phones; today, 90 per cent do. (Photo: Courtesy of LirneAsia)

As a result of these collaborations, Myanmar has rapidly adopted cellular technology. In 2013, about 10 per cent of the population had phones; today, 90 per cent do. Myanmar has also blown past the voice-only cellphone stage common to many developing nations, with 63 per cent of cellphone users owning smartphones. "It is one of the fastest growing telecom sectors I have ever seen, and I have been in this field for over 30 years," says Samarajiva.

The impacts of a digitally connected society have begun to show themselves. "One of the most significant results has been around the election," says Samarajiva, referring to the November 2015 election in which Aung San Suu Kyi and the NDL gained a majority government. Apps were developed to allow people across the country to monitor for election fraud, says Samarajiva, making election results difficult to dispute.

Phyu Phyu Thi, MIDO's research and development manager, works with LirneAsia to collect surveys in the field and has seen the benefits connectivity has brought. For example, during floods that commonly plague the countryside, villagers requiring assistance can easily ask for help from neighbours and emergency services agencies, which has in turn improved the quality of emergency relief work. In another example, she says rural youth are trying to overcome literacy barriers and improve future opportunities by learning English on their smartphones.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been quoted as saying "If you do nothing, you get nothing." Myanmar is doing a lot to move toward a networked society. Early results suggest it's paying off.

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READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. What is the article about? Provide a concise summary in your own words.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Identify the impacts of a digitally connected society in Myanmar.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. When speaking about telecom in Myanmar, Samarajiva says "It is one of the fastest growing telecom sectors I have ever seen, and I have been in this field for over 30 years." Why do you think it is one of the fastest growing sectors? Provide evidence from the article to support your answer.

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. Who is Aung San Suu Kyi? What if she didn't exist?

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. Analyze the picture in the article and complete the following.

   a) Make three observations about the image.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   b) Pretend that the smartphones are deleted from the picture, but everything else remains the same. Make three observations about the image.

   _____

   _____

   _____

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c) Compare and contrast the above observations.

COMPARE	CONTRAST

d) How was the message in the picture changed in the absence of the smartphones?

_____

_____

_____

6. Has the digital gap between Myanmar and Asia been closed?

_____

_____

_____

Think-Pair-Share

7. *Think*
    Aung San Suu Kyi says that "If you do nothing, you get nothing." What do you think this statement means to the people of Myanmar? Brainstorm an idea for an app that would further connect the people of Myanmar and their progression toward being a networked society. One of the examples provided in the article is that rural youth are now able to learn English on their smartphones to overcome literacy barriers.

    Pair
    Share your app idea with a classmate. Your teacher may ask you to research how to make an app.

    Share
    Discuss app ideas and the needs that would be met with your classmates.

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ONLINE

1. Locate Myanmar on Google Maps and explore the country. Using the quick facts section and other research tools find the following:
   a) the population
   b) a body of water that borders it
   c) the capital city
   d) a river
   e) a lake
   f) a city in the northern part of the country
   g) neighboring countries
   h) view some photos of the temples

2. Watch "Why Democracy matters: Aung San Suu Kyi at TEDxHousesofParliament."

3. Watch the TEDx video with Rena Pederson, "Who is Aung San Suu Kyi?"

4. Visit CBC News to learn more about Myanmar's parliament.

5. Watch Rohan Samarajiva speaking about telecom and LirneAsia.

6. Keep up to date with news from the Myanmar ICT Development Organization (MIDO) by viewing their Twitter account.

7. Learn more about the IDRC.

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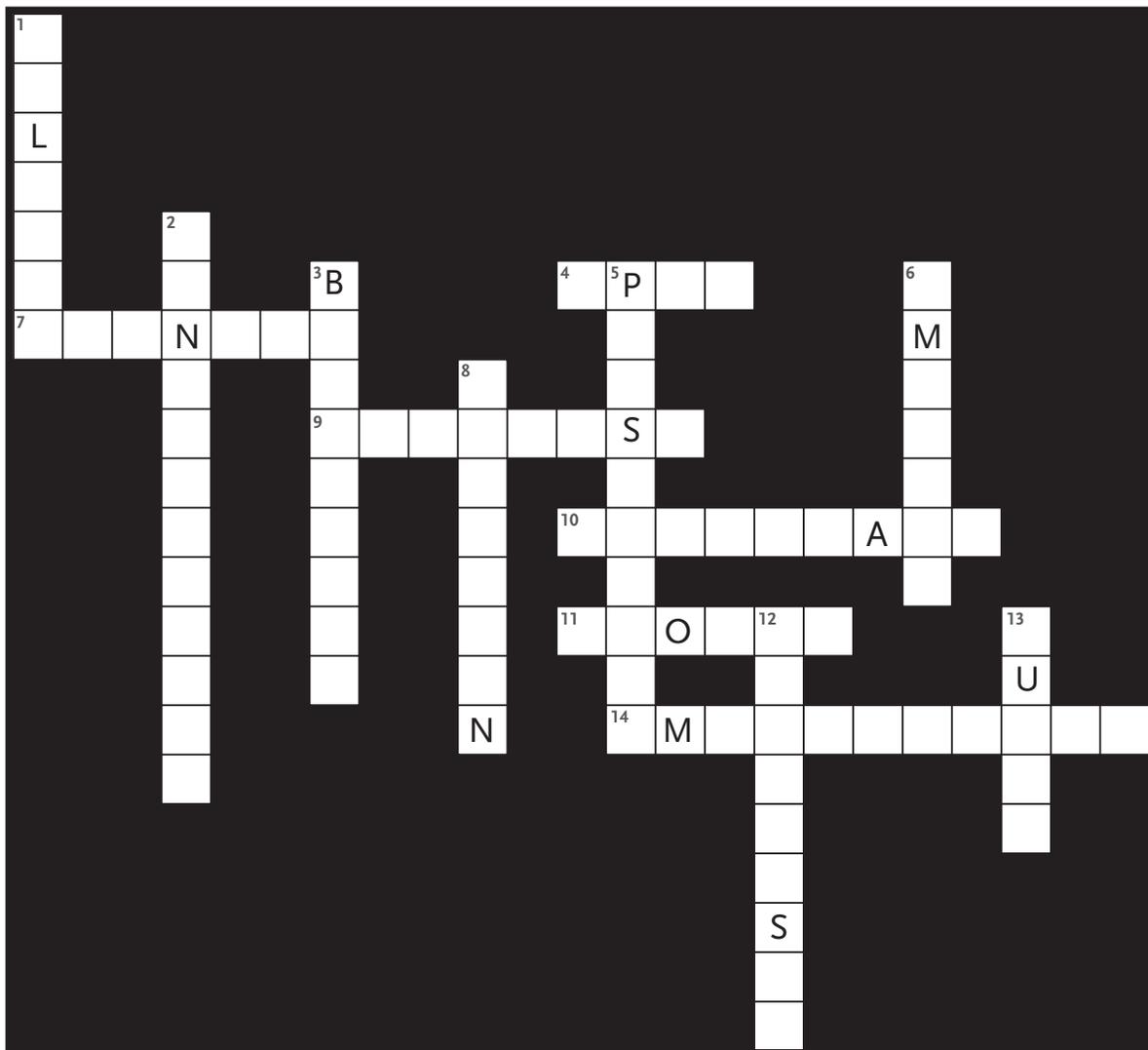
CROSSWORD:

Across

4. Specialized programs downloaded onto mobile devices
7. A country in Southeast Asia that was formerly Burma
9. A person who promotes social change
10. A form of government where leaders are chosen by the people
11. Search engine
14. Cell phones that perform like computers

Down

1. Short form of telecommunications
2. The ability to link and communicate with other computer systems
3. High-speed internet
5. Wealth and success
6. Accept willingly
8. A person not in armed services or police
12. An information and communications technology company
13. Military dictatorship