



Teaching Documentary Filmmaking as Social Advocacy: The Case of the Yangon Film School

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[*Abstract*]

This is a descriptive case study of Yangon Film School (Yangon, Myanmar) in a setting of protracted civil conflict that has persisted since 1968. It examined the school's approach in the teaching of documentary filmmaking and analyzed key aspects of the school's operations. Findings show that the documentary filmmaking taught in the school was informed by social advocacy. This was fostered through the students' participation in films commissioned to the school by civil society organizations and the practice of participatory filmmaking. The school stood out in the Myanmar setting for its dual character as a training center and a production company, and for its goal of offering film education at par with international standards. Students were held to an international standard of documentary filmmaking by a faculty of reputable filmmakers, mostly Europeans. Applicants to the program were screened along principles of gender inclusivity and ethnic diversity while academic qualification was less emphasized. The school has trained a considerable number of young Myanmar documentary filmmakers, many of them women. A constant

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challenge the school faced was inadequate funding. With an eye on sustainability, it was envisioned that students would eventually take over instructional and management functions to reduce the school's dependence on foreign resources.

Keywords: documentary filmmaking, education in conflict setting, military dictatorship, social advocacy cinema, participatory filmmaking

I . Introduction

Disruptions in the educational system caused by conflict¹ have long-term consequences to society. Of crucial long-term significance is the loss of human capital suffered by children and youth who receive less education during periods of conflict. Ichino and Winter-Ehmer (2004) found that Austrian and German children during the Second World War, who received less education compared to individuals from countries not involved in the war such as Switzerland and Sweden, experienced a sizable earnings loss some 40 years after the war, which can be attributed to the educational loss caused by the conflict. The income loss translates to loss in gross domestic product. Hence conflict has been referred to as development in reverse (Roger 2002); it brings a country on a downward spiral.

It is imperative therefore to maintain education during times of conflict (ibid.). Studies have shown the importance of the continuity of safe education during conflict, pointing out that education can help prevent or reduce violence, contribute to rebuilding conflict-affected societies through social justice, equality and inclusive citizenship, heal psychological effects, address youth unemployment, promote a democratic environment, and contribute to economic and social development (Kheang, O'Donoghue and Clarke 2018).

¹ The term "conflict" is used to refer to violent conflict including civil and interstate wars and armed rebellions. The terms "war" and "conflict" are used interchangeably in the literature.

In an extensive review of literature, Soheil et al. (2024) found 14 educational scenarios and teaching strategies under various war contexts in different countries over time. Findings show that education during wars may involve the use of technology, hands-on or practical lessons, and home-based classes, among others. Teaching is not limited to trained teachers but could involve parents, neighbors and other non-professionals. Non-traditional education settings include learning centers in refugee camps and mobile schools where children and youth learn basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills, and obtain vocational training to prepare them for future employment and self-sufficiency (Froundfelker et al. 2019). International organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO, community-based organizations, and civil society groups provide support in various ways.

Indeed, education invariably continues during conflict in spite of a severely fractured educational system (Crawford 2023; Soheil 2024). There is however little literature describing in a comprehensive way the educational settings, programs, teaching strategies, learning outcomes, and related processes that characterize educational undertakings while conflict persists. Descriptions of educational programs are mostly published as news or feature articles by the leading organizations in this field like UNESCO and UNICEF (UNICEF n.d.) To respond to this research gap, Soheil et al. (2024) conducted an integrative literature review that drew data from different sources, regions and languages. The studies cited in the review however did not dwell into details of the educational settings, processes, courses, and teaching strategies involved in maintaining education during conflict.

1.1. Maintaining Education in Myanmar during Conflict

The experience of countries embroiled in a protracted conflict, like Myanmar, is instructive in building knowledge in this underexplored area.

Myanmar has been beset by conflict since it regained its independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Civil unrest and deteriorating conditions in the ensuing years led to a military

takeover in 1962. Conflict persisted, primarily driven by ethnic tensions and struggles for autonomy. As this happened the education system, at all levels, went into a precipitous decline. Student protests in 1988 marked the beginning of activism that erupted into violent clashes with the military in 1996 and 1998, in the aftermath of which the ruling junta closed the universities for about 10 years between 1988 and 2000, moved undergraduate programs to campuses away from urban centers, and shifted instruction to distance education (Fink 2001; Lall 2016).

In the wake of widespread anti-government protests and international pressure, the junta took steps towards liberalization in early 2000. Economic reforms were implemented and in 2008 a new constitution was introduced as part of a seven-step roadmap to democracy. In 2011 a quasi-civilian government was installed.

The liberalization measures spurred an increased engagement of civil society groups, many of them seeking to fill the gap in education and training opportunities by running training programs and establishing training centers (Lall 2016). In the media sector, notable among these establishments was the Yangon Film School which started to offer training courses in documentary filmmaking in 2005.

1.2. Objectives and Methodology

The research reported in this article is a case study of Yangon Film School. The study sought, firstly to examine the school's approach in the teaching of documentary filmmaking, and secondly, to analyze the school's operations.

The study used the methodology of a descriptive case study wherein a social phenomenon is portrayed in detail in its real-world context using techniques of data collection that provide a holistic picture of the phenomenon (Yin 2014). Moreover, the study was also designed to be exploratory in light of the scarcity of literature in this area. As such it aimed to propose hypotheses and research problems for further investigation (*ibid.*).

Data was drawn from a qualitative analysis of in-depth

interviews of two key informants, the school's annual reports from 2007 to 2018, the report of an external evaluator commissioned by the European Union, and course syllabi. Primary sources found in the school such as programs, posters, and materials in the school's website provided additional data. To bring the longitudinal element into the study (Bryman 2008), all the annual reports were analyzed.

Limitations of the study due to social restrictions encountered during the time of data-gathering in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was starting to take hold, posed limitations which are discussed in section IV, below.

1.3. Conceptual Background: Approaches to Documentary Filmmaking

The approach to the teaching of documentary filmmaking is informed by the conceptualization of this media genre as an artistic form of storytelling that pursues social advocacy and as a form of journalistic narrative, albeit with a viewpoint (Kuhn and Westwell 2012; Johnson 2011; Combs and Combs 2013; Aufderheide 2007).

Documentary film, as art with a social purpose, is thought of as

A practice of filmmaking that deals with actual and factual (and usually contemporary) issues, institutions and people; whose purpose is to educate, inform, communicate, persuade, raise consciousness or satisfy curiosity; in which the viewer is commonly addressed as a citizen of a public sphere; whose materials are selected and arranged from what already exists (rather than being made up); and whose methods involve filming "real people" as themselves in actual locations, using natural light and ambient sound" (Kuhn & Westwell 2012: 126).

Socially engaged documentary films are known by other names, including "political films" (Tolentino 2016), "people's cinema" (Roque 2018), and "social advocacy cinema" (Cabasal 2023). Cabasal (ibid.) defines social advocacy cinema as

. . . the subgenre of alternative cinema in various forms (e.g., short film, documentary, animation, experimental, avant-garde, music video, and other works in video) that progressively and politically present social issues . . . based on the narratives of the marginalized

and subaltern sectors of society mostly composed of the people from the lower brackets of the socioeconomic divide (e.g., urban poor community; poor working class; peasant farmers; indigenous peoples; overseas Filipino workers; children and youth; women sector; and victims of all forms of oppression and injustice) which aim to advocate a course of action or a solution towards the desired social change by utilizing 'cinema as ideological tool to reflect, criticize, or provoke issues which have political relevance' (Deocampo 1986: 4).

Johnson (2011) notes that throughout its history, the documentary film has been used as a tool for promoting social change. It has been used for the advocacy of causes and beliefs and as a propaganda tool by governments and political organizations (Combs and Combs 2013; Aufderheide 2007).

Contrary to the subjectivity of films for social change the film as a form of journalistic narrative is informed by the normative principles and practices of news production typically identified with Western mainstream media. A film as a journalistic form may have a point of view but remains factual as it is produced using journalistic practices that are based on objectivity and detached observation (Cross 2018).

Accordingly, these two notions of documentary filmmaking require different teaching strategies in key areas as students are prepared for professional work as directors, producers, independent artists, or as members of production teams. Both approaches entail theory and practical courses taught using group and individualized instruction methods. In documentary filmmaking as journalism, the curriculum combines training in reportorial skills such as developing sources, verifying information and interviewing, skills in visual storytelling including camera work, sound recording and editing. The business side of documentary production is also taught, for instance in courses on grant writing, negotiations, and marketing (University of Missouri 2020; Columbia Journalism School 2020). Documentary filmmaking as social advocacy, on the other hand, may cover a wider range of subjects that includes film history, social sciences and dramaturgy (Film Academy of Performing Arts-FAMU 2019), and learning experiences that impart an attitude of commitment to social goals.

II . Findings and Discussion

2.1. Context of Yangon Film School

Yangon Film School came into existence in a situation marked by a fractured educational system that has led to a scarcity of educational opportunities, a repressive regime that used education to suppress civil liberties, a climate of intense unrest among the populace especially among the youth, and continuing conflict in some parts of the country. At the same time, it was a period when liberalization measures were being implemented in the economy as well as in basic freedoms. Prior censorship was withdrawn in 2010 (UNESCO and IMS 2016) and this spurred the growth of media establishments and media activity. As this happened, the lack of competent professionals, as a result of the low literacy level and educational attainment of the Myanmar youth, came into sharp focus. According to the Myanmar Journalism Institute, many of the country's estimated total of 4,000 journalists lacked experience (UNESCO IPDC 2016). Similarly, the film industry was in a sad state. Myanmar was reputedly a film hub in Southeast Asia prior to the dictatorship, but the film industry has declined due to the lack of training opportunities, government control, censorship, equipment shortages and the steep decline in the number of movie theaters (Agence France-Presse, 2019; Kaung Myat 2018; Magnier 2013). This period also saw an increased activity in civil society as groups took advantage of every sign of liberalization (Lall 2016).

Amid this socio-political environment, in 2007 Lindsey Merrison, a British filmmaker of Burmese descent based in Berlin founded the Yangon Film School-Association for the Promotion of Young Burmese Film and Video Artists. Merrison is known for her Myanmar films notably *Our Burmese Days* (1996) which documents the journey of her Burmese-born mother and uncle back to the country of their birth, and *Friends in High Places* (2001) about life under the military dictatorship. The project obtained funds from foreign, primarily European donors like Heinrich Böhl Foundation (Germany), the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Goethe Institute Jakarta, and the Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (VIKES) (Documentary Educational Resources 2020; Yangon Film

School 2007). These same organizations and many other international organizations would sustain the school's operations in the succeeding years.

Yangon Film School's goals were a combination of institution and capacity building in education and the film industry, human resource development, and advocacy of social development. Clear articulations of these goals are not found in the school's early reports but appear in the later editions, such as the following text penned by Merrison:

Overall in 2018, Yangon Film School pushed forward with its valuable work and remained loyal to its brief to strengthen civil society and enhance intercultural dialogue between conflicting national ethnicities by training a young, skilled multi-ethnic media workforce that enables marginalized voices to be heard and is helping to create a diverse and inclusive media culture in Myanmar (Yangon Film School 2018: 1).

In the 2017 report, it was claimed that:

Screening YFS films at national and international festivals . . . give YFS the opportunity to convey information about democracy and diversity contained in its films and raise international awareness about the lives and concerns of the people of Myanmar, including the urban and rural poor and marginalized and disadvantaged groups." (Yangon Film School 2017: 44).

The 2020 annual report spelled out the school's capacity building objectives as follows:

To found a permanent media center with a steady film curriculum for the purpose of advancing the quality of local film production, (the) development of a pool of professional filmmakers who understand public interest, non-governmental organizations and development-related work and (the) strengthen(ing of) the local artistic community (Yangon Film School 2020).

The school's view of the documentary film was described as "a form of artistic expression that can engage like no other media with

a variety of humanitarian topics and provide incisive commentaries on everyday life in Myanmar” (Yangon Film School 2020).

Yangon Film School was unique for its dual nature as a training center and a film production company. Its production arm, Yangon Film Services, obtained film commissions from civil society groups representing a broad range of advocacies. Yangon Film Services is described as a social enterprise with the following objective:

To provide students with an opportunity to grow their filmmaking skills in a professional context. Primarily producing films in the area of humanitarian service and development in Myanmar, the production arm is income generating, nourishing local talent and empowering them to work independently (Yangon Film School 2014: 32).

Yangon Film Services produced works commissioned by local and international organizations in Myanmar and provided crew for international production companies filming in Myanmar and for local media outfits such as MRTV4. Claiming itself as a social enterprise, profits were reinvested in the school’s training and student film productions through a “Production Fund.”

Yangon Film School itself did not have a legal status as a registered company and did not have recognition from the Ministry of Culture and Education as an educational institution (Yangon Film School 2013). It was operating on the strength of the Ministry of Information’s approval in 2008 of its training courses and its filming and production activities. But it was the Yangon Film Services which succeeded to obtain registration as a local company in 2011. The difficulty of obtaining company registration reveals the precarity of the school’s existence under the military regime.

As a result of tightening of regulations in the wake of the Saffron Revolution in September 2007, the members of the YFS group were obliged to begin again their company registration application. Since the founding of companies with media links remains a sensitive area, it is difficult to say how much longer this process will take (Yangon Film School 2008: 7).

The school had to walk a tightrope to be able to persist in its work, sometimes necessitating compromises such as having to accommodate favors asked by the Ministry of Information:

Permits are still a time-consuming, sensitive area...A process of friendly, but firm negotiation has enabled the Project Director to continue to appoint all participants personally, although this will no doubt remain an issue for future workshops. In 2008, we conducted a separate 10-day introductory course on documentary filmmaking for two 'new' participants. . . Both of these candidates were suggested to us by MMPO [Myanmar Motion Picture Organisation]. . . (ibid.).

Moreover, repressive measures enforced by the military regime did not spare the school. At one point, students were apprehended by the military and the school underwent increased surveillance:

The workshops were overshadowed by the sudden arrest by the authorities of two YFS students one week prior to the trainings. The arrests were part of a broader crackdown in late October by the government against those suspected of having tried to help survivors of Cyclone Nargis as social activists. Fortunately, our two students were released one month later, mid-workshop. However, they were both too traumatised by their experiences in detention (which included sleep deprivation and beatings) to take part in the teaching activities. Another two students had decided to go underground in order to avoid arrest; one of them has now left the country. The other returned to Yangon in mid-January 2010 where he was interrogated by the authorities for one day and subsequently released.

As a consequence of the above events, YFS found itself subject to additional surveillance such as phone tapping and regular observation of the workshop's hotel venue. This created a psychological burden for many of the regular participants and tutors alike, all of whom were concerned about the fate of the detainees. The tutors felt more comfortable conducting their daily evaluations in the form of an evening walk rather than in the confines of the hotel; tutors were also obliged to make an exception to the rule and tolerate the use of mobile phones during class in order to allow students to receive tidbits of information—passed on via bush

telegraph—as to the detainees’ well-being. . . (Yangon Film School 2009: 8-9)

Yangon Film School took measures to maintain “good relations” and “constructive links” and undertake “strategic collaboration” with government entities such as the Myanmar Motion Picture Organization (MMPO), Myanmar Motion Picture Enterprise (MMPE), the Ministry of Information, and related institutions such as the University of Culture, Myanmar International Channel and MRTV. Thus, the school could operate, and indeed it even expanded its activities under military rule. It was able to obtain employment for its students, permits to authorize its activities, visas for international faculty, outlets for its films, projects such as the preservation of Myanmar’s film heritage, and the provision of services such as script development, editing, and post-production for government sponsored media projects. The 2009 Annual Report narrates:

The YFS was particularly pleased that two of the school’s films—*A Day with Aye Nan Lin* and *Peace of Mind*—were passed by the Myanmar censor and were broadcast on MRTV4 in April 2008. In a climate notoriously hostile to independent media, this marked a significant achievement. We are hopeful that MRTV4 and MRTV3 will become a regular showcase for the work of YFS filmmakers.

Filmmakers from the YFS Group are also sought after as crews for MRTV4 . . . (Yangon Film School 2008: 34).

2.2. Vocational Education Program in Documentary Filmmaking

The main program offered by the Yangon Film School was a three-year vocational education program in documentary filmmaking grounded on the notion of the documentary film as a medium for the representation of social issues and commentaries, especially those that impact the lives of the underprivileged (Yangon Film School 2020). It was a program that aspired to excellence and recognition beyond Myanmar’s borders as described by Merrison, its founder and director:

YFS does not seek to provide filmmakers with a convenient formula with which to merely illustrate a topic, but is determined to foster

the art of film by training a cadre of creative individuals who are capable of putting Burmese filmmaking on the map (Yangon Film School 2008: 41).

The program was designed to be completed within three years but there was no guideline governing this term limit. Students were allowed to continue taking courses until they completed all the requirements. No certificate was handed out as proof of completion of the program. The courses were intensive, often residential courses, lasting from one to six weeks. During a course, the participants were given the opportunity to grapple with the technical, artistic, and ethical aspects of documentary and fictional filmmaking by producing their own short films and/or film scripts.

The program began with the intensive, residential seven-week beginner’s course “The Art of Documentary Filmmaking for Beginners” which was the only required course in the curriculum. This was followed by at least four electives which could be courses on editing, film history, film analysis, and postproduction, depending on what was offered on any particular year. Typically, the elective courses offered each year varied depending on the availability of funding and teachers. Records show that the school has offered 27 different courses since it opened in 2007, but many of these were offered only once or a few times. Those that were offered most often, i.e., for five times or more, are listed in Table 1, below.

<Table 1> Ten courses most frequently offered by Yangon Film School, 2007-2018.

Course	No. of times offered
Sound design	9
The art of documentary filmmaking: Beginners’ workshop	7
The art of screenwriting	7
The art of documentary editing/ Introduction to editing)	7
Participatory video training (Traveling Cinema project)	6
Other ways of seeing: The history of the film form	6
Post-production course	6
True fictions	6
How films work—film analysis	5
The art of storytelling—advanced editing course	5

The course “Teach to Train” was optional and was intended

for students who wanted to obtain qualification as trainers. At the end of the program, the students worked on a capstone project called “graduation film,” and took the trainers’ formation course “Teach to Train.”

2.2.1. Learning Social Advocacy

An analysis of the school’s practices reveals that coursework, practical training, and engagement in participatory documentary production combined to introduce the students to documentary filmmaking as social advocacy.

Coursework: The required course “The Art of Documentary Filmmaking for Beginners” culminated in the production of documentary film assignments along a theme which invariably featured social commentaries such as youth and peace in Myanmar and ethnic minorities in Myanmar. In 2018, among the films produced by the class were: *Lost Boy*, about a 12-year-old boy who migrated from rural Myanmar to the city of Yangon in search of work and a better life, albeit unsuccessfully; and *Going Home*, about a life of privation amid tradition in Kayah State. At the end of the course one student remarked: “. . . This course has made me determined to do something to promote rights for ethnic groups. . .” (Yangon Film School 2018: 46).

Practical training at Yangon Film Services: Throughout the program the students were given the opportunity to work on films commissioned to the production company by local and international NGOs. Yangon Film Services’ philosophy is that by researching and recording real-life stories for the development sector, the school’s filmmakers acquire a deeper understanding of their environment and themselves. As a matter of policy, novice filmmakers from the latest intake of students were involved as trainees and/or junior directors in the films. By 2018, the firm had produced more than 60 commissioned films on a broad range of topics representing the advocacies of a broad clientele of international and national NGOs and other social development-oriented institutions such as the British Council, the EU delegation to Myanmar, Germany’s GIZ, the Embassy of Switzerland, and USAID. In 2018, Yangon Film Services engaged 25 students and alumni in four commissions including the

following (Yangon Film School 2018; Yangon Film School 2015):

The Vanishing Forest—Working Together for a Greener Future in Myanmar: about the precarious condition of Myanmar’s forest and a project to avert that through a process that is bringing together the government, the timber industry, and civil society to develop ways to fight illegal logging and ensure all exported timber are legal.

Opium Farmer—the Lives of Producers of Prohibited Plants in Myanmar: a portrayal of the lives of two opium-farming families and upholding their welfare amid the drive to eradicate opium production.

Love & Other Matters: about the lives and rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

H is for Home: on gender-based violence in Myanmar .

In 2018, the students also took part when Yangon Film Services was engaged to oversee the final script development for the second series of the Myanmar TV drama *The Sun, The Moon, & The Truth* aired on MRTV. The series, commissioned by the British Council, was designed to teach Myanmar audiences about the rule of law. It also explores some of the pressing legal issues people are facing across the country and demonstrates how lawyers—and ordinary people themselves—can address them.

Outreach: In 2014, when a quasi-military government was already in place during the country’s planned transition to democratic rule, the school started to offer a participatory video course described as “a set of techniques which help a group or community to shape and create their own film” and a tool “to bring people together to explore issues, voice concerns or simply to tell stories.” As a participatory endeavor (Telo 2013), the course claims that the participants acquire video skills via games and exercises, identify and analyze issues important to them through the facilitation of the students, direct and film the short videos themselves, and share the videos with the wider community through screenings; the communities have full editorial control (Yangon Film School 2014: 19).

In offering the course the school aimed to train its students to “facilitate participatory video processes with communities across Myanmar and support these communities in exploring issues affecting them.”

The course was tied to the school’s outreach program dubbed as the “Traveling Cinema” which took the students to far-flung areas to co-create video projects with grassroots communities. During the final two days of the course, the trainees reflected upon their learning and the essentials of participatory project design and management to prepare for their “Traveling Cinema” trips. Social advocacy through the course and the “Traveling Cinema” outreach is articulated in the following statement of course objectives:

- To use documentary as a medium for transporting crucial messages about democracy and diversity.
- (To) encourage behavioral change and reconciliation, including raising awareness about human rights and gender equality.
- (To) build bridges, also between YFS filmmakers and different ethnic groups.
- (To) recruit participants for YFS courses from diverse marginalized, ethnic and religious groups.
- (To) create short testimonials by rural dwellers, sharing stories from their lives which are often marked by conflict and privation.
- (To) share via social media, TV, mobile phone networks and screenings a “video map” of multi-ethnic Myanmar.
- (To) raise awareness among Myanmar’s parliamentarians and urban elite about the lives of the rural poor and different ethnicities (Yangon Film School 2014: 23; Yangon Film School 2015: 10)

At its first implementation, the students traveled to a remote part of Kachin State in December 2014 where they worked with Lisu nationals using the participatory tool “community map drawing” to uncover issues confronting the community. The participants chose two key issues to address using participatory video—heroin addiction and the plight of children—and produced two short videos: *Poison*, about heroin addiction, and *Future Stars*, about the lack of opportunities that would secure the future of Lisu children.

It might be said that the knowledge, attitude and experiences derived by the students from their courses, the film assignments in their classes, as well as the civil society-commissioned films and the community immersion that led to the co-creation of videos on social issues, enabled them to realize their role as advocates for the issues raised in the films. This is evident in the themes of the films produced by the students in their courses. A scrutiny of the school's film archive shows that community concerns such as water scarcity, drug addiction, environmental degradation, gender-based violence, and vanishing cultural traditions are invariably the themes of student films such as *Dirty Water*, *A Tea Planter's Struggles*, *No Water No Light*, *Time to Change*, *Myitsona Forever*, *Our Culture*, *Towards a Clean Future*, and *Safe Migration*.

The social orientation of the students was also observed in the findings of a donor-initiated evaluation of the program (Forrester 2013: para. 2.2.9), as follows:

. . . students themselves want to show their films at festivals, in the media etc.—not for profit, but to raise awareness through the films of the issues that concern them—e.g. disability, the environment etc. . . . Through the way in which the courses are taught and the encouragement of students to make films that reflect the realities of life in Myanmar, many (if not all) of the students have raised their levels of awareness of social action, and of the link of filmmaking and public policy. One past student founded an organization—Better Life—after her course at YFS, to work for community development and women's empowerment.

2.3. Key Elements of Yangon Film School's Operations

The following sections describe key processes in the operations of the school in the context of the socio-political situation prevailing in Myanmar in early 2000 until about 2020.

2.3.1. Admission Policies: Inclusivity and Diversity

The principles of gender inclusivity and ethnic diversity and the applicant's commitment to Myanmar's development were major considerations in the screening of applicants to the documentary filmmaking program. Successful candidates came from all walks of

life and from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. Previous media or filmmaking experience was deemed an advantage but not essential. Rather, evidence of an aptitude for, or a marked interest in filmmaking and storytelling, as well as a commitment to building a career in Myanmar were important considerations in the evaluation of applications.

Holders of at least a high school certificate were preferred but applicants who had finished only elementary school were accepted if they demonstrated an acceptable level of literacy skills and a working knowledge of English that would enable them to follow the courses.

To ensure gender inclusivity, the 12 student slots for each cohort were allotted equally to men and women. Enrolment data show that 25 ethnic nationalities had been represented in the school's student body, although about 60 percent were Bamar. The school is credited for the increase in the number of women filmmakers in Yangon (Forrester 2013).

2.3.2. International Faculty and Implications to Teaching

Yangon Film School was dependent on a pool of foreign film experts for its faculty and did not have fulltime faculty members. Most of the teachers had taught in the school only once and this is reflected in the large number of courses that had been offered but not on a recurring basis. During the period 2007 to 2018, the school had 46 teachers from 13 countries, 33 (72%) of whom were Europeans, notably Germans (14, or 30%).

Since it was dependent on an international faculty and aspired to global recognition, the program used a global language, namely English, as medium of instruction. English facilitated the recruitment of an international faculty, but it presented pedagogical issues due to the students' low English proficiency. In Myanmar, English is learned in primary school but since it is not the country's lingua franca and is not used outside of school, the students had little opportunity to develop proficiency (Chua 2013). To make learning possible, interpreters were hired. As many as eight interpreters may be employed during a course. Teachers acknowledged the crucial

role the interpreters played in the teaching-learning process as a course's success may lie not only on the interpreters' proficiency in both Myanmar and English but, more significantly, on their understanding of the local culture and their ability to remain invisible, that is, to act as conduits rather than participants in the communicative exchange taking place during class. But the situation is not ideal. An instructor has observed: "Students' film appreciation and analysis would improve greatly if their English were better" (Yangon Film School 2009: 32).

The development of local trainers has been at the forefront of the school's vision and was the aim of the course "Teach to Train". In 2009, the school started to tap advanced students who had finished the course to assist as trainers in order to augment the teaching staff. This step was intended also to achieve, gradually, the aim of turning over the school eventually to local management. It was envisioned that the students would in the future takeover the school's management.

2.3.3. Revenue Sources: Role of External Support

All students admitted to the program were granted a scholarship; students from regions outside Yangon usually received grants that included living allowances. In 2014, it was estimated that Yangon Film School spent about USD13,000 for each student. While extremely prohibitive for Myanmar, this was apparently inexpensive by Western standards. It was estimated that this amount was "40 percent less than the annual fee for an MA course at a state-funded film school in the UK and represents only a quarter of the price of the annual fees for many private film schools across the world" (Yangon Film School 2014: 34).

Without tuition revenues, the school was dependent on external support, and this was obtained primarily from government and non-governmental institutions in the international community. Indeed, the liberalization measures especially from 2011 onwards attracted numerous international organizations and donors to invest in Myanmar. At the Yangon Film School, funds came from 31 organizations based in 10 western countries, mostly agencies under the European Union and the United Nations. The largest number of

donors came from Germany (11, or 35 %). Leading the institutions that had provided funding support for the school for the longest period were the Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (Vikes) and Heinrich Böll Foundation (Germany), 11 and eight years, respectively.

The school's dependence on foreign funding has engendered an economic vulnerability that made it susceptible to the donors' power and influence. Funding shortfalls had caused delays in schedule or the cancellation of courses. Indeed, the availability or non-availability of certain grants could conceivably shift the school's training agenda to fit the priorities represented by the donors (Clarke 2000) and shape the training that its students obtain, for instance in the form of available courses. In an analysis of journalism training in Cambodia, Clarke (2000: 95) warns of the "danger that foreign aid will impose outside values on the Khmer media through an overly narrow view of what the media ought to be or overambitious targets for professional standards." Lall (2016: 159-160) describes the influence of various international actors in the education reform process in Myanmar:

. . . the education sector [has] become a battleground as the government and various international actors jostle over how best to influence the next generation. Often, they are intent on propagating international 'good practice,' linked to Western political agendas. Education has always been used as a political tool, and in Myanmar things have been no different. . . The education reform process not only showcases how different power hubs within the government (the president, the parliamentary speaker, the NLD and the Ministry of Education), jostle across party lines, but also how INGOs with diverse political agendas fight over what is seen as a crucial area of development in Myanmar. . .

III. Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

A descriptive case study of Yangon Film School was undertaken to examine how it implemented a vocational program in documentary filmmaking and to explore and analyze key aspects of the school's operations.

The Yangon Film School was established in 2007 in a situation that was marked by a fractured educational system, a repressive regime, and a climate of unrest among an oppressed and impoverished populace. Its goals encompassed institution and capacity building in media education and the film industry, human resource development, and social advocacy. The school negotiated the challenges it faced by mustering support from national and international government and non-government organizations and nurturing a relationship with the government to its advantage. The main course offered by Yangon Film School was a three-year program in documentary filmmaking guided by the notion of the documentary film as a medium for the representation of social issues and commentaries especially those that impact the lives of the underprivileged. Coursework, practical training, and engagement in participatory documentary production combined to introduce the students to documentary filmmaking as social advocacy.

The school was founded by a British filmmaker with Myanmar origins and its operations were supported by foreign donors, notably government and non-government institutions from Europe. Admission to the school required minimum qualification, i.e., in certain cases an elementary school certificate and low proficiency in English sufficed. Rather, the principles of gender inclusivity and ethnic diversity and the applicant's commitment to Myanmar's development were major considerations in the screening of applicants for admission to the program. The school's faculty consisted of a pool of foreign experts, none of whom served full time. The school's dependence on grants posed challenges such as restrictions on course offerings due to funding shortfalls, and the program's long-term sustainability. To meet these challenges and realize the vision of an eventual turnover of the school's management to locals, the course "Teach to Train" was offered to advanced students.

Although operating on the fringe of established education and without formal accreditation, the school played an important role in Myanmar's fractured educational landscape as a provider of opportunities for education and vocational training in filmmaking to many young people. As the only institution that offered a long-term

program in documentary filmmaking during the early 2000s, the school is to be credited with the training of a considerable number of young Myanmar documentary filmmakers along the concept of film as social advocacy. The students' works articulate the concerns and aspirations of marginalized groups. By bringing their films to a broad audience during public screenings in urban as well as remote communities, the films have the potential of a broad impact as tools for social transformation.

Questions may be raised in the representation of marginalized groups in the films (Ong 2009; Sontag 2003) and about the benefits that accrue from the portrayal of their lives. Expounding on the contradictions of media advocacies on behalf of the underprivileged, Nikunen (2019:60) asks:

Who are the ones that benefit from solidarity productions? Ideally, they should improve the lives of the marginalized and undo injustice, provide agency and a sense of solidarity across societies. Often such productions of solidarity, however, end up polishing the brand of a media company or NGO . . . the field of advocacy media seems to be growing . . . with deeper marketization and an effective economy that commodifies 'doing good.'

Likewise, the dominance of western influence in the school should be problematized. The school's program is based on an education and training system that is founded on a foreign model and delivered predominantly by foreign teachers—bringing their perspectives, methods and materials into the learning experience. Notwithstanding its efforts to integrate contextual conditions into the training curriculum and its orientation towards social commitment, the challenge is for Yangon Film School to develop a curriculum that fuses the teaching of technical skills with research and theory building that will lead to the accumulation of local knowledge and understanding that will form the basis of Myanmar textbooks and resources, and the education of Myanmar media teachers.

Yangon Film School is an ambitious project that is resource intensive. Given the Myanmar setting, it could be sustained only through aid funds. Indeed the school came into being at a time when the country was attracting donor funds when liberalization

measures were introduced in the early 2000s. Data on the school's operations show that it is sustained totally by development aid and grants provided by European and other western countries. However, given the prestige and credibility that the school has achieved and the steps it has taken to ensure long-term sustainability, it appears well poised to persist even under repressive political conditions.

IV. Limitations of the Study and Issues for Further Research

Data was gathered in February 2020, at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic was emerging and restrictions in social interactions had become imperative. In addition to the in-depth interviews of key informants, no further attempt at face-to-face data collection was made. As the health emergency had to take priority in everyone's lives, plans to pursue data-gathering online were likewise shelved. The idea of returning to the country for further data-gathering was also abandoned as the Covid-19 pandemic persisted and the political situation deteriorated in the aftermath of the coup staged by the military in February 2021.

Further research could be done on the mode of production, distribution, and exhibition of the films in the context of social advocacy films. It is noteworthy that apart from being a training institution, Yangon Film School was also a production company. Its production arm, Yangon Film Services, produced works commissioned by local and international organizations in Myanmar and provided crew for international production companies filming in Myanmar and for local media outfits such as MRTV4. These two faces of Yangon Film School—the educational institution and the business firm—are locked in a symbiotic relationship. The students and alumni served as production staff of Yangon Film Services and so they obtained the practical experience they needed to hone their skills while they also derived income from the services they provided. Social advocacy cinema, Cabasal (2023:165) argues “seeks to challenge the notion that film is a product of which the primal motivation is in pursuit of profit.” How do the student's documentary films fit in the mold of social advocacy cinema?

The production of films that critique social injustices also raises questions as to whose voices are privileged for dissemination. Couldry (2006: 96) points to symbolic and social inequalities that are “questions of value, requiring a change of priority over which sources are allowed to contribute to the images and information flows we receive as tokens of the world’s events, and which are not.” It could also be asked what media ethics guide the school in the decisions it makes about the production of documentary films.

Moreover, the question of the social impact of the films ought to be investigated in greater depth. Screening films in public spaces spur conversation, connect people and communities, trigger social action, promote civic participation, and possibly lead to concrete outcomes that promote social justice. The annual reports produced by the school abound with anecdotes referring to such effects. It is important to examine these claims and understand the social processes involved in any impact the films could have had.

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