

12 COVER STORY

NEWS
UN-LIMITED

*How does a person go from being a computer science dropout to a media mogul, during one of the most tightly controlled censorship periods in Myanmar? Manny Maung speaks to **Thaung Su Nyein**, CEO of Information Matrix, the parent company that produces the 7Day News Journal.*

He has been hailed as a champion of digital technology and interviewed by international media outlets such as the BBC and CNBC for his entrepreneurial nous, but Thaung Su Nyein insists, "I'm a just college drop out!" His Facebook page (which has a following of more than 2000) says he 'graduated' in 1998 from City College in New York. But Thaung Su Nyein explains it as the year where he did what every good computer science student does – drop out.

It was shortly after leaving college that he was inspired to consider returning to his home country.

"I was at a newsstand, and from the corner of my eye I saw a magazine with the image of Shwedagon Pagoda on it," he recalls. "I knew instantly I wanted to go back there."

Thaung Su Nyein, had left Myanmar when he was 11. His father, Win Aung, was a military officer who had risen through the ranks to become an ambassador to Germany and the UK, before taking the post as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1998. At 23, Thaung Su Nyein's return would coincide with his father's new role in the dictatorship government of that time.

"I just wanted to go home and start an Internet and email cafe," Thaung Su Nyein says. "The Internet was already mainstream in other countries so I thought it would be a good concept to invest in."

It was not long before he realised the Myanmar government was seriously displeased with his choice of enterprise.

"Just before Thingyan in 2000, the authorities called



Centara Grand Hotel

Photos by Gerhard Jörén

me in and shut down the cyber cafe," he explains. "I hadn't realised, but the world 'Internet' was actually censored and I had been operating a business that was all related to that word."

Rather than make a meal of him however, the authorities actually gave Thaung Su Nyein his new business concept. They told him the leadership and officials knew the Internet was the future, but rather than continue with offering Internet services, why not start a publication skewed towards technology.

Perhaps it was serendipitous; perhaps it was the situation of being held in an interrogation room with officials known for a terrible human rights record;

Thaung Su Nyein felt that starting a technology publication was a perfect fit for him.

"I couldn't write in Burmese very well anymore since I'd left in sixth standard," he says. "I couldn't even speak that well or form whole sentences properly. But I knew the Internet."

The Myanmar Electronic Journal was his first step towards a media empire and was foundational as a game changer. The trade publication became hugely successful, albeit being actually able to use technical language such as 'e-commerce', 'online', or 'website'. As with many Myanmar people living through decades of dictatorship, strict censorship paved the

way for creative run-arounds to make an ineffective system, somehow work.

Thaung Su Nyein has since established a software house that caters for both private corporations and government departments, is now the CEO of eleven registered entities, and holds the distinguished titles of Coordinator of Administration and Finance Committee at the Myanmar Press Council, and Vice President of Myanmar Entrepreneur's Association.

He is also the Managing Editor of the *7Day News Journal*, the flagship newspaper that has brought the most attention to his success as an entrepreneur, and now, self-made media mogul.

The publication has the highest Myanmar-language distribution in the country, with the weekly journal distribution at 100,000 copies across the country, and the daily's distribution at 50,000. However, Thaung Su Nyein is a pragmatic man. He readily admits that the daily isn't making money but is confident the branding is strong and positions him well as a market leader.

"Print still has a few years to grow in Myanmar," he says. "The *7Day News Journal* has taken a leadership position among the private media and we've got a good following in Yangon and rural areas too."

Social media is another medium he has cleverly tapped into. With estimates of between 1-4 percent Internet penetration in the country, the *7Day News Journal* website has managed to attract 2.7million followers on Facebook, demonstrating its wide reach both within and outside the country.

But Thaung Su Nyein's successes haven't been without controversy or family tragedy. In 2004, his father was arrested during the purges of the notorious Mili-



tary Intelligence group and was sent to Insein prison. In 2009, Win Aung died while still imprisoned. The following year, in November 2010, the *7Day Daily Journal* was suspended for two weeks, for daring to publish the image of now-opposition leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, on its cover.

Asked about a recent controversy between a rival newspaper daring to print a satirical comic regarding Myanmar's armed forces (and subsequently being publicly rapped on the knuckles for it), Thaung Su Nyein remained wary.

"I haven't seen the cartoon so I can't comment about that," he replies.

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Thaung Su Nyein says he is confident he has not had to compromise anything professionally over the past 13 years of being in the media game. If anything, he wants to see more healthy competition.

"You don't want to be the only guy out there with no one else around," he laughs.

Of the future, there remains only one thing to concentrate on: digital.

"Digital is going to be a challenge," he admits. "In Myanmar, we've been riding elephants all our lives and now we're being told to ride a horse."

Thaung Su Nyein says the digital market is growing rapidly and he plans to invest further in the software sector by tapping into e-government solutions.

"I'll also look into how to move into the mobile space," he says. "About 85% of Myanmar's web traffic is through mobile platforms."

He adds that this is the time for Myanmar expatriates to consider coming home.

"So, if you have the skills and if your work is relevant, you should be in the country right now." ■



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6 STREETS OF YANGON

28th Street - prayer mats, a fifties barber shop, and no C.J Richards



8 ART

The artistic vision of San Minn, and his not so beautiful paintings

10 PHOTO ESSAY

Wonderful stories and images of Yangon heritage homes

12 COVER STORY

Manny Maung speaks to the producer of *7Day News Journal*, Thaug Su Nyein

14 MUSIC

Yangon underground hip-hop legend, J-Me gets down and talks to Aimee Lawrence



16 TRANSLATION

The famous (Sherlock Holmes) detective, San Shar, in the mysterious *A Strange Murder Case*, translated by San Lin Tun

18 TRAVEL

Keith Lyons takes us over-land, from Myanmar, through Thailand and Laos, to China

20 ADVENTURE

The Mergui Islands and Kawthaung, as encountered by Heinz Willems - Sea Gypsies, turtles, and coral reefs

22 SPORTS

The greatness of Manny Pacquiao and his rise from poverty to world boxing champion

24 BUSINESS

Yangon Bakehouse, tackling social inequity one cookie at a time - Mimi Wu reports

26 CHEF'S PROFILE

Aimee Lawrence talks with gourmet chef Zin Maw Win, now cooking up great food in the newest restaurant on the block, Hummingbird

28 BISTRONOMY

Eating like a king at the Bawarchi Indian, aflutter at the Hummingbird, and hiding away at the Windermere Hill Cafe



30 IN FOCUS

A half-century of exhibiting from Lokanat Galleries, and a new Burma travel book

32 HEALTH

Thet Ka Tho Soe Moe Naing shares some advice on the health properties of the lemon

34 HOROSCOPE

Our very own astrologer on the fortunes that lay ahead in May 2015

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DISTRIBUTION

InDepth can be found in hotels, restaurants, bars, cafes, business centres and embassies etc in Yangon. It is also distributed locally inside International New York Times, Nikkei, Bangkok Post, Nation, Straits Times, Business Times and Zaobao. Subscribe to any of these and get InDepth delivered every month. For more info contact indepth@myanmore.com

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