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Analysis Report on Expectations

of Independent Ethnic Media Beyond 2026

Burma News International
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Introduction

The Junta, led by military leader Min Aung Hlaing, held a sham election in 2025 and established a military-controlled civilian government. Since 2021, the political landscape has been marked by a surge in armed resistance. Resistance groups have emerged not only in ethnic states but also in regions like Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay, leading to escalated military conflicts. The 2025 election failed to garner domestic or international support; deemed illegitimate and politically unsound, it has left Myanmar's political crisis unresolved, resulting in military conflicts persist.

Since the February 2021 coup, the military regime has severely suppressed independent media. Journalists and outlets covering pro-democracy protests and activists have faced arrests, raids, and license revocations. More than 200 journalists have been detained, with nearly 20 still serving long-term prison sentences. Tragically, 7 journalists have been killed by the regime in the line of duty. Furthermore, ethnic media outlets operating in conflict zones face a complex environment, often navigating tensions regarding media freedom among ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), armed resistance groups, and various revolutionary forces.

Following the re-election of U.S. President Donald Trump, funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been significantly curtailed.¹ This cut has severely impacted independent ethnic media outlets that rely on international support. While these outlets utilize social media as a primary tool for survival², it remains an insufficient condition for long-term sustainability. Consequently, ethnic media houses continue to face evolving challenges and existential threats.

¹ Trump's order has a major impact on Myanmar media, Development Media Group, 22 March 2025, <https://www.dmgburmese.com/၆၆၆၆၆/dtitstmedisam.html>

² The Business of Independent Myanmar Media Post-Coup: Experimenting with business models inside the country and in exile, Media Development Investment Fund, Last modified on 13 September 2024, <https://www.mdif.org/news/the-business-of-independent-myanmar-media-post-coup/>

According to the World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) on April 30, 2026, Myanmar is ranked 166th out of 180 countries, placing it in the “red” category³. The regime, following its sham election, further tightened its grip by revoking four media licenses between January and April 2026.⁴ These included three ethnic outlets: Khonumthung Media Group, Shwe Phi Myay News Agency, and Chin World.

Amidst these immense challenges, independent Myanmar media struggle to maintain ethical standards. In this report, Burma News International (BNI) analyzes the current state of ethnic media and outlines the expectations for the future beyond 2026.

Research Methodology

For this study, a structured questionnaire was distributed to all 15 ethnic media outlets that are members of Burma News International (BNI), with 12 outlets providing detailed responses. To supplement this data, online interviews were conducted with key figures, including BNI members, editors-in-chief of partner ethnic media agencies, and independent media experts. A total of 11 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Furthermore, the study draws on a wide range of secondary sources, including official media releases, news reports, and relevant literature. Key reference frameworks used in this analysis include the World Press Freedom Index, Media Code of Ethics of the Interim Press Council of Myanmar (IPCM), BNI’s internal policies, and data from international freedom of expression advocacy groups.

³ Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, 30 April 2026, <https://rsf.org/en/index>

⁴ New junta announces closure of three news agencies, including Khonumthung Media Group, 24 April 2026, <https://khonumthung.org/khonumthung-media-group-အပါအဝင်-သတင်းအေဂျင်စီ/>

(1) Sustainability of Ethnic Media

In terms of sustainability, “generating operational income” remains the most critical challenge for ethnic media outlets. This struggle is compounded by a shortage of news workers, insufficient human resources, restricted cash flow, and limited investment opportunities. Currently, there is an urgent need for continued international donor funding alongside the exploration of new, diverse revenue streams.⁵

(1.1) Finding New Revenue Streams and International Funding

All respondents (12 outlets, 100%) unanimously stated that they will continue to rely on international donors for at least 80% of their funding in the future. Regarding alternative funding strategies, 50% (6 outlets) plan to collaborate with social enterprises, while another 50% (6 outlets) expressed interest in launching direct subscription or audience donation models. Additionally, 41.7% (5 outlets) intend to generate revenue through commercial services and local advertising.

Of the total respondents, 75% (9 outlets) identified “finding new revenue streams” as their top priority. Among the remaining outlets, 16.7% (2 outlets) prioritized “building relationships with ethnic armed organizations and local authorities,” while 8.3% (1 outlet) focused on “upgrading technology and digital skills.”

As media outlets face the brunt of funding cuts from international donors and aid agencies starting in 2025,⁶ securing new income sources has become vital for long-term survival. Relying solely on grants is increasingly precarious as funding becomes scarce, making it difficult to cover operational costs and retain skilled staff. To maintain quality journalism and develop human resources, exploring non-traditional income sources is now a fundamental requirement for the sector.⁷

⁵ Findings from questionnaires and interviews

⁶ Trump’s order has a major impact on the Burmese media, Development Media Group, 22 March, 2025, <https://www.dmgburmese.com/၁၁၁၁၁/dtitstmedisam.html>

⁷ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

(1.2) Unpredictable Long-term Outlook

When asked about their long-term prospects beyond 2026, 33.3% (4 outlets) described their sustainability as “unpredictable,” while another 33.3% (4 outlets) expected the situation to “remain the same.” Conversely, 25% (3 outlets) predicted the situation would “worsen,” with only 8.3% (1 outlet) anticipating “improvement.”

By 2026, international aid may shift from “emergency humanitarian assistance” toward “development and institutional strengthening.” This transition poses a significant challenge for ethnic media outlets that are heavily dependent on international support, especially in regions with declining economies. Furthermore, border-based media outlets remain vulnerable to the shifting policies of neighboring countries, while the overall political landscape in Myanmar remains complex and volatile due to domestic and international developments.

Post-2026, while self-governance mechanisms in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) may strengthen—potentially improving access to information—the challenge of balancing local governance policies with media ethics will persist. Amidst the military regime’s repression and the surge of technological disinformation, ethnic media outlets have a unique opportunity to establish themselves as trusted fact-checkers. However, achieving long-term survival will remain a major struggle due to dwindling international support and economic downturns. Border-based outlets, in particular, will continue to face policy shifts and security fluctuations in neighboring countries, forcing this historically oppressed sector to confront multi-faceted challenges to maintain its independence.⁸

⁸ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

(1.3) Primary Revenue Sources and Conditions

The primary revenue sources for ethnic media include international grants, content sales, membership programs, audience donations, subscriptions, social media monetization, and Public Service Announcements (PSAs).⁹ The following sections further examine the specific conditions and effectiveness of these income-generation methods.

(a) Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are increasingly recognized as a significant revenue stream for the sustainability of ethnic media. Currently, PSA programs are being developed with institutional support, such as from the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF). This mutually beneficial business model allows non-profit organizations to disseminate educational content while reducing the media's over-reliance on traditional grants. However, there is a critical need to shift the perception of PSAs from being viewed as "free services" or "donations" toward a formal revenue-generating model. This transformation requires systematic impact metrics and long-term collaboration with partners to ensure financial viability.¹⁰

Ethnic media outlets are increasingly understanding the public service announcements (PSAs) as a fundamental way to sustain their operations, but in practice, they face many challenges. Despite their potential, PSAs currently account for only about 10% of total revenue.¹¹ Many outlets remain in the early stages of development, often viewing PSAs as short-term, donor-driven solutions. Although the model had existed for approximately two years, ethnic media houses face competition as some advertisers and organizations bypass media outlets to engage directly with communities.¹² Nevertheless, some outlets continue to collaborate with local civil society organizations (CSOs) to produce PSAs and cultivate long-term partnerships.¹³

⁹ The Business Of Independent Media In Post-Coup Myanmar (November 2022), MDIF, 4 November 2022. <https://www.mdif.org/news/the-business-of-independent-media-in-post-coup-myanmar/>

¹⁰ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

¹¹ General Assumption from the information collected during the interviews with some ethnic media outlets

¹² Response from an ethnic media leader on in-person interview

¹³ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

(b) Social Media Monetization

In response to declining international grants, ethnic news outlets are increasingly turning to social media monetization. Monthly earnings vary significantly, with some outlets generating between \$500 and \$1,000 from Facebook and YouTube, while the majority earn \$100 or less. Such revenue is insufficient to sustain a full newsroom, often only covering minor office expenses or a fraction of staff salaries, just for survival.¹⁴

A major obstacle to monetization is the misalignment between platform policies and news content. Reporting on military conflicts, human rights abuses, and casualties in ethnic areas is frequently flagged as “violent” or “sensitive” by Facebook and YouTube algorithms. Consequently, many outlets face ad suspensions or restricted reach, creating a constant struggle to balance journalistic ethics with platform compliance. Furthermore, there is a severe shortage of specialists within ethnic media who understand platform policy shifts and audience trends.

(c) Exploring the New Ways of Revenue Streams¹⁵

To ensure long-term survival, ethnic media are exploring innovative revenue models. There is a growing movement to establish membership, donation, and subscription systems centered on core audiences. Given the volatile nature of social media—often described as a “rented house”¹⁶—outlets are prioritizing their own websites as a permanent “home”¹⁷ for content and data documentation. Beyond traditional news, outlets are leveraging their technical expertise to offer services such as media training, video editing, and the sale of English-language news content. Additionally, some are experimenting with “soft news” and entertainment to drive engagement, while using organizational savings and co-funding strategies during crises.

¹⁴ Response from an ethnic media leader on in-person interview

¹⁵ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

¹⁶ Term used to give an example by a media expert

¹⁷ Term used to give an example by a media expert

(d) Audience-Based Revenue and Public Service Media (PSM)¹⁸

Audience-based revenue and Public Service Media (PSM) models are identified as the most promising paths for ethnic media sustainability. For outlets with strong community ties, direct support through memberships and donations offers a more stable future. For media serving smaller populations with limited commercial advertising markets, such as Chin and Karenni outlets, a PSM system supported by the public or a future democratic government is the most viable solution. Ultimately, a PSM model rooted in audience trust and political stability is essential to preserving ethnic languages and cultures.¹⁹

(1.4) The Diversified Revenue Model

To survive the long term, ethnic media must transition from a single-source funding dependency to a Diversified Revenue Model. A strategic management approach that spreads across multiple income streams—grants, commercial services, and audience support—is the most effective way to ensure financial stability amidst fluctuating social media policies and donor shifts. This integrated approach must be understood and enforced organization-wide to balance editorial independence with economic viability.

(1.5) Assignment of Media Sustainability Officer

A persistent challenge for ethnic media is the lack of specialized staff to separate editorial functions from business management. Journalists are often reluctant to take on commercial responsibilities, creating an urgent need for dedicated Media Business Managers. The absence of expertise in proposal writing and fundraising further hampers organizational growth. Therefore, to achieve financial health, media houses must appoint dedicated business managers to oversee revenue generation and business development.²⁰ These officers will be responsible for implementing the “multiple revenue generation” strategies essential for the organization’s future.

¹⁸ Responses in personal interviews with a ethnic media leader and an media expert

¹⁹ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

²⁰ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

(2) Policy and Legal Challenges under Interim Administrations²¹

Since the 2021 coup, the military regime led by Min Aung Hlaing has systematically suppressed independent media, including ethnic outlets. This crackdown has involved the arrest and killing of media workers and the widespread revocation of media licenses. However, as armed resistance has strengthened and territorial control has shifted, independent media outlets are now operating within areas governed by ethnic armed organizations (EOs) and interim administrations—a transition that has introduced new operational frictions.

Several interim administrative bodies have begun formalizing media regulations. For instance, the Karen National Union (KNU) issued its Press and Information Policy and Regulations on April 21, 2024. Prior to this, on April 16, 2024, the Karenni Interim Administrative Council (IEC) issued a statement²² requiring local and foreign journalists reporting on military operations in Karenni State to follow specific rules, warning that violations could lead to a ban on information access. Following a meeting between the Interim Press Council of Myanmar (IPCMM) and the IEC on October 16, 2024, a joint statement was released on October 23.²³ The IEC clarified that its regulations were intended to ensure accountability and professional responsibility rather than to control the media, affirming their value for press freedom. Additionally, it has been noted that the United League of Arakan (ULA/AA) has a draft media policy that remains officially unpublished. In other regions, media operations generally rely on informal understandings rather than codified policies.

When asked about the impact of these regional media policies, 66.7% (8 outlets) reported that they can “operate with some limitations,” while 25% (3 outlets) noted a “lack of clear policy or law.” Only 8.3% (1 outlet) found it “difficult to operate due to strict limitations.” Regarding legal guarantees, 50% (6 outlets) identified a “Law on Freedom of Information and the Right to Information” as their top priority. Another 33.3% (4 outlets) prioritized “laws

²¹ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

²² KNU releases rules on reporting in controlled area, KIC, 12 April 2021, <https://kicnews.org/2024/04/နယ်မြေအတွင်း-သတင်းရယူခ/>

²³ Joint Statement of Independent Press Council of Myanmar and Interim Executive Council of Karenni, October 23, 2024, <https://ipcmm.org/လွတ်လပ်သော-မြန်မာသတင်း-2/>

ensuring the safety of journalists,” while 16.7% (2 outlets) sought “formal regional legal registration and status.” These findings highlight the urgent need for a framework that guarantees media freedom within revolutionary and interim administrative zones.

The transformation of the military junta into a “new government” following the 2025 sham election is viewed as a superficial change rather than a genuine political shift. The regime’s ongoing actions and attitudes toward independent media demonstrate a complete lack of political will to uphold press freedom. Instead, they remain prepared to exercise control under various pretexts. Consequently, most independent media outlets will continue to operate from border areas or neighboring countries. Stronger guarantees for freedom of expression and workplace security are essential before these outlets can consider relocating their operations back into the country.²⁴

Operational Realities in EAO-Controlled Areas In areas controlled by EAOs and resistance forces, the degree of media freedom varies significantly and often lacks institutional safeguards. While some organizations have developed policies, in practice, “military security” is frequently prioritized, leading to restricted access to frontline information and discrimination against certain journalists. Grassroots-level reporters often face threats or arrests due to a lack of mutual understanding regarding the role of the press. Media outlets striving to maintain ethical neutrality frequently find themselves under pressure or accused of bias by opposing sides. Furthermore, the lack of formal legal recognition and security guarantees even in controlled territories suggests that full media freedom remains elusive during this period of intense conflict.

Policy reforms and specialized training are essential to improving the relationship between armed groups and the media. A significant lack of mutual understanding currently exists between armed organizations, civil society, and the press regarding the principles of media freedom. Urgent dialogue is required to build trust and bridge these gaps. Specifically, there is a need to establish systematic mechanisms for identifying legitimate journalists to prevent arbitrary arrests and interrogations, especially given the varying policies across different regions. To reduce violations arising from ignorance, subjects covering human rights and media freedom should be integrated into the training curricula for officers and personnel of armed groups. Such measures

²⁴ Meeting on May 1, 2026 with members of Board of Editors of the Burma News International (BNI)

would ensure that media policies move beyond theoretical frameworks and are effectively implemented on the ground.²⁵

The operational environment for media varies significantly by region. While administrative institutions in Karenni State demonstrate a high degree of independence, media outlets in KNU-controlled areas often face discriminatory limitations. The most restrictive environments are found in Rakhine and Shan States, where independence is severely curtailed. Meanwhile, in areas under the National Unity Government (NUG), while principles of press freedom are recognized in theory, the rule of law and robust security guarantees for journalists have yet to be fully established in practice.²⁶

(3) Ethnic Media Capacity in Ethnic Content Production

The core advantages of ethnic media lie in “language” and “identity,” which serve as pillars for the future vision of a federal democratic system. Protecting and promoting the languages, cultures, and customs of ethnic groups is a fundamental human right and a central responsibility of the media.²⁷

This study evaluates the current capacity of ethnic media to produce specialized content in these areas.

(3.1) Analysis of Content Production and Awareness-Raising²⁸

Research into the content production of ethnic media reveals significant weaknesses across various sectors. The production of content related to ethnic traditional culture, history, and the arts is at an alarmingly low level, with an average score of 1.58. Similarly, reporting on the daily socio-economic lives and local achievements of communities remains weak, scoring 1.92. Respondents indicated that awareness-raising efforts regarding federalism, political education, health, and environmental issues are predominantly at a “low” or “very low” level. Although reporting on armed conflict and humanitarian aid received the highest relative score (2.50), 58.3% of respondents still

²⁵ Interview with a media leader from a member outlet of Burma News International (BNI)

²⁶ Analysis of an media expert on an interview

²⁷ Interview with a media leader who is a member of Burma News International (BNI)

²⁸ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

categorized this capacity as weak. These findings underscore an urgent need to enhance production capabilities across all thematic areas.

(3.2) Challenges in Mother-Tongue News Production

The primary obstacle to producing content in ethnic languages is the high cost associated with multilingual production (50%)²⁹. Other significant challenges include evolving language patterns among the youth, a lack of linguistic expertise, and technical difficulties. Looking toward 2026, live broadcasts in ethnic languages (50%)³⁰ are viewed as the most effective medium for education, supported by image-based presentations and audiovisual tools.

Ethnic media houses face severe human resource and technical constraints. A lack of standardized terminology for modern political, economic, and social concepts often hinders accurate reporting. Furthermore, declining literacy in mother tongues among the younger generation poses a long-term threat. Due to limited financial and human capital, many outlets are restricted to using ethnic languages only for radio and television broadcasts, while relying on Burmese or English for written text.³¹

(3.3) Strategic Priorities for Future Education³²

Regarding future educational priorities, federalism, democracy, and political awareness ranked highest, with an average score of 4.17, considered “very important” by 58.3% of respondents. Health and trauma care followed closely with a score of 4.08, while human rights and legal issues also played a significant role at 4.00. These findings underscore a critical need to intensify political, legal, and healthcare-related information dissemination in the coming years.

²⁹ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

³⁰ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

³¹ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

³² Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

(3.4) Defining the Distinctive Identity of Ethnic Media

In terms of inter-media cooperation, 41.7% of respondents believed that collaboration is essential to consolidating the sector's collective strength. However, 16.7% expressed caution, citing concerns over the potential loss of their unique ethnic identity. Regarding ethical challenges post-2026, 41.7% predicted that ensuring information accuracy would be the most difficult obstacle, followed by the security of sources and the maintenance of editorial neutrality.

The defining characteristic of ethnic media remains the manifestation of language and identity. Broadcasting in native languages serves not only to inform but also to incentivize the study of literature among younger generations, thereby preserving minority identities. Even amidst revolution and conflict, ethnic media can solidify their role by resisting the influence of extreme nationalism and consistently highlighting their traditional culture and history.³³

(3.5) Needs and Operational Limitations

The primary requirement for producing specialized ethnic content is financial resources (50%)³⁴, specifically for video and photo documentation. Other essential needs include a secure environment for information gathering and a pool of skilled news writers. While approximately 91.7% of respondents expressed a strong desire to amplify the voices of ethnic minorities, they face severe practical limitations due to insufficient resources and manpower.

Political instability and ongoing military conflicts present significant security risks for on-the-ground reporting. Promoting minority languages and cultures requires a deep investment of time, manpower, and trust-building; however, international and domestic financial support for these efforts remains scarce. Notably, funding cuts resulting from shifts in U.S. foreign policy have led to a reduction in personnel, halting many news production activities. Due to restricted access to sources, limited communication channels, and challenging geographical conditions, many outlets have been forced to shift from regular reporting on minority issues to occasional coverage.³⁵

³³ Responses in personal interviews from some ethnic media outlets and media experts

³⁴ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

³⁵ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

Overview Analysis

As Myanmar's political landscape becomes increasingly decentralized and new regional governance models emerge post-2026, ethnic media must firmly establish themselves as a robust "Fourth Pillar." Their role must evolve beyond wartime reporting to include bold oversight of regional administrations, specifically addressing corruption and judicial integrity. To achieve this, a clear boundary must be drawn between revolutionary organizations and media ethics. Ethnic media should aspire to be "Peace Media," actively avoiding the incitement of inter-ethnic conflict and hate speech. However, the sector faces a worrying annual decline in the number of female journalists and professional staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. Targeted training and budgetary support are urgently required to combat ongoing financial, security, and communication hurdles. Looking toward 2026, media outlets must strategically adapt by adopting context-specific policies, restructuring newsrooms for efficiency, and developing self-sustaining revenue models to reduce dependency on international aid. Collaboration with strategic partners will be essential for their long-term survival and independence.³⁶

³⁶ Responses on the questionnaire sent to members of Burma News International (BNI)

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following strategic recommendations are proposed to the respective stakeholders:

(a) International Organizations

- Sustained international assistance remains vital for the long-term survival of ethnic media; appropriate and consistent funding should be prioritized.
- Shift from short-term operational grants to long-term sustainability programs that strengthen the institutional capacity of media houses.
- Develop and support programs that foster a culture of freedom of expression and professional journalism within the territories of various armed groups.

(b) Revolutionary Forces

- Align media-related actions with federal and democratic principles by actively promoting and protecting freedom of the press and expression as part of the struggle for a federal democratic system.

(c) Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)

- Respect international standards regarding the protection of journalists, adhering to military ethics that ensure the security of media personnel and the right to information.
- Re-evaluate the perception that press freedom is secondary during an armed revolution. Recognizing that freedom of expression is a pillar of legitimacy, EAOs should encourage independent media to foster broader support for the movement.

(d) Interim Administrative Bodies

- Emphasize the creation of transparent media policies, management frameworks, and development strategies that respect press freedom. Establishing these “best practices” now is essential for a future federal administration.

(e) Media Development Organizations

- **Economic Strategic Support:** Beyond traditional capacity building, prioritize the development of economic strategies, modern management techniques, and sustainable financial investment models for ethnic media.
- **Long-term Viability:** Design and implement programs specifically focused on enhancing the diverse revenue-generating capabilities of ethnic media houses.

(f) Digital Freedom Organizations

- **Technological Resilience:** Provide specialized support for digital security, advocate for Myanmar-specific social media policies that protect news content, and facilitate access to alternative internet communication technologies in conflict zones.

(g) Ethnic Media Outlets

- **Commitment to Ethics:** Consistently produce content that adheres to journalistic ethics, promotes human rights, and supports the values of a federal democratic system.
- **Revenue Diversification:** Shift away from a single-source dependency by adopting a Diversified Revenue Model that combines multiple income streams for financial stability.
- **Dedicated Sustainability Management:** Establish a dedicated department or appoint a Sustainability Officer to lead business development and long-term financial planning, separate from the newsroom's editorial functions.