## Burma Program and Media:

## Portfolio Review Outcomes Summary

## October 1, 2014

**Attendees**

Chris Stone, Maureen Aung-Thwin, Elizabeth Tydeman, Zaw Zaw, Jane McElhone, Binaifer Nowrojee, Ethan Zuckerman, Dan Sershen, Jeffrey Stein

**Summary**

The portfolio review confirmed that Burma Program’s work on media will continue to revolve around support for independent and ethnic media, focusing on organizational development for our grantees and preparing them for the digital revolution. Based on the review, the major themes discussed included: monitoring and content evaluation, our influence, and organizational development.

**Monitoring and Content Evaluation**

In terms of monitoring, we asked how we might do a better job of monitoring our media work. Ethan asked us to probe what we are monitoring for: is it for our own peace of mind, for the benefit of the field, to understand our impact, or for some other reason? The BP staff and Jane made note of our difficulty in monitoring the content of many of the groups we support, and questions were raised as to what we should be doing with respect to that issue. Specifically, it was asked whether the Burma Program has a litmus test for evaluating the content of its media grantees. A particular concern was raised about one past grantee, which had questionable reporting on the Rohingya issue. If there is such a test, Ethan asked whether the Burma Program should have set a reporting criterion for cutting off grantees or if doing so provokes ethical challenges that are better avoided? All felt this question was worth pursuing further.

**Influence**

We questioned our influence: how we influence other donors, and whether we might have had the ability to divert the group of donors that are currently in deep with the Ministry of Information (MOI). We also questioned whether our decision to not engage in the MOI process was a good one and determined that it was. While it is not a part of the sector that we need to be involved in, we should continue to engage with those donors as well as to maintain our leadership role with donors that support independent media (e.g. NED, SIDA, Omidyar, etc.).

**Organizational Development**

Before the transition in Burma, we focused on journalism standards. We have since moved to supporting organizational development but were too little too late—now our grantees are trying to get their houses in order while dealing with all the other challenges of the transition. We view organizational development for our media grantees (with an emphasis on financial sustainability/revenue models) as an ongoing focus for our work in this sector. This is something of a niche for us, as other donors do not seem to prioritize this work.

**Insights, Questions, and Moving Forward**

Surprising insights from the review included a consensus that we were right to support ethnic media—which we had previously supported in exile—for whom it would have been illegal to operate inside the country before the transition. We were also surprised by the interrelation of helping grantees with revenue models and preparing for Burma’s forthcoming digital explosion: the latter has implications for grantees’ business models as well as their content production. Ethan made that point that if Burma is open to Facebook, but not the rest of the Internet, online media will not be able to generate revenue from ads– this is one of several issues that we and our grantees will have to consider moving forward.

An important question was raised as to whether the willingness of grantees to use the term “Rohingya” is a litmus test for the program? Has our stance on the issue (and indeed the question of whether we should have a stance) been sufficiently discussed? Or, given how politically toxic the issue is, is there value in leaving some things unsaid?

We have yet to discuss the issue of diversification of funding and specifically the challenge posed by the 1/3 guideline for BP’s smaller media grantees. Will small, ethnic media grantees ever be able to develop any kind of working business model? We also need to clarify what Burma Program wants to get out of monitoring and how it will go about doing it.

Finally, in regards to strategy going forward, we hope to work with Ethan Zuckerman, the Information Program and the Program on Independent Journalism to ascertain what avenues there are for increased marketing opportunities as well as how we can build the marketing capacity of our grantees and research and promote revenue models using technology. We also plan to focus on assisting grantees in utilizing technology in innovative ways in order to increase distribution.