

## Holiday Wishes

Clockwork has done its duty, and it's again the time of year when thanks-giving, gift-giving, resolution-making, and the general slowing down for a moment of stock-taking coincide.

Because of the magazine's scheduling, it's October as I write this, so I'm taking stock early. And as I do I find myself especially grateful for something that's been in the news and is dear to all of us: technology. I don't mean iPhones, GPSs, or new scanners. I mean Technology, writ large with a capital "T," and how it has improved lives, and right now, hopefully, is saving many.

The technology I'm talking about is not found under a tree, but in the hands of some very brave people in Myanmar, formerly Burma. At tremendous personal risk, they have been reporting, with tools most of us take for granted, on the military's crackdown on anti-government protests.

They're being called citizen journalists and cyber dissidents and are facing down one of the world's most repressive and closed regimes, where the only media is state run and even government webpages were reported down after stepped-up censorship. Armed with cell phones and digital cameras and hunkered down before the too-few Internet links, technology-savvy citizens smuggled text messages, still photos, and videos, including images of the death of Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, to a watching world via email, Web proxy sites, and blogs.

One blog in particular, "ko htike's prosaic collection," has been a major conduit of information. London-based Ko Htike has been posting graphic descriptions and images, sent to him by dozens of sources within Myanmar, which are being snatched up by the global media.

Another channel for the smuggled digital content is the Democratic Voice of Burma, an opposition-run shortwave radio and television service based in Norway. Founded in 1992 by exiled Burmese students, it has broadcast nearly real-time images and information about the events. The Thailand-based online magazine *The Irrawaddy*, which is published by an independent news organization that covers Myanmar and Southeast Asia and was also founded by exiles, has played a huge role, too, in publicizing the unfolding events as documented by camera-wielding witnesses.

Belatedly realizing the power of the images streaming out of

the country, the government responded with a total blackout of information. Internet cafes were closed, Internet and cell phone service providers shut down, and cameras confiscated on the streets. There were reports of foreigners being expelled and their electronic equipment seized, and a mysteriously timed computer virus compromised the website of the *The Irrawaddy*.

As of this writing, information out of the country has slowed to a trickle, but trickle it does. And the story is still smuggled out through cell phones or any other means technology has made available. Ko Htike vows to continue, as do The Democratic Voice of Burma and *The Irrawaddy*. They'll continue to publish on the Internet the content the cyber-dissidents manage to get through to them.

Referring to the Internet, as reported in the *New York Times*, Frank A. Moretti, executive director of the Center for New Media Teaching and Learning at Columbia University, said, "For those of us who study the history of communication technology, this is of equal importance to the telegraph, which was the first medium that separated communications and transportation."

The history of Myanmar itself reflects the human consequences of technology. In a previous uprising there, in 1988 before cell phones captured images to be streamed across the globe, the brutal government suppression left an estimated 3,000 dead. Today, the government admits to a handful of casualties, while some dissident groups put the number as high as 200. It's assumed there's a greater reluctance to harm monks, who have led the protests, because they are especially revered in Myanmar, but few doubt that the digital eyes of the world are staying the government's hand. For now.

My wish for the coming year is that the technical expertise of these cyber dissidents, and others like them, will continue as a force for good in the world.

And I wish you and yours a safe and happy Holiday Season.



*Popular Communications* invites your comments, questions, criticisms, compliments, article submissions—in a word, your thoughts. Write to me at [editor@popular-communications.com](mailto:editor@popular-communications.com).