

Media in Today's Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper will provide a general overview of the post-conflict media situation in the Kingdom of Cambodia. It will further discuss the Cambodian public's attitude towards media and professional media development. Cambodia's media capacity has grown significantly since the UN sponsored elections in 1993. At that time, freedom of expression and democracy were dangerously flouted and virtually repressed. Now, the country seems to be experiencing a comparatively better, more open and free press. This is contributing toward strengthening democracy and national development. That said, the Cambodian media needs to address certain issues before it can provide the benefits of an open and free press to the society to which it is mandated to serve. A major issue facing Cambodia is the serious lack of both human resources and training following the previous acts of genocide. Another vital matter needing urgent attention is the reestablishment of public trust in the national media. A step toward increasing public trust in the media, is through the promotion and implementation of professional media practice and media education qualifications. This issue is currently being addressed at a national level, with the establishment of a recognized university media degree programme, offered by the Royal Government of Cambodia.

Cambodia has experienced many political regimes and as a result tasted almost all the political ideologies the world has ever recorded such as the monarchy, republican, Leninist and Marxist socialism, Maoist socialism, and constitutional monarchy. The constant change in regime has not only led to the hindrance of Cambodia's development, but also to the destruction of many social structures including media.

Cambodia's media changed for the better following the arrival of UNTAC in early 1992. With guarantees of citizen's rights to freedom of expression and freedom of press in the 1993 Constitution, Cambodia seems to enjoy a more free and open press, unprecedented in its history. Numerous local and international privately owned media businesses, especially print and broadcast media, have been established keeping us better informed of what is happening in and outside the country. The media has started revealing scandals about the former government and identifying corrupt individuals. It is worth noting that corrupt government officials in Cambodia had always been afraid of no one, not even the courts, since the courts were corrupt too. But they were afraid of media, since their criminal activities might someday be

publicized. Such is the influence of media, many political parties had been trying to establish their own media agencies such as newspapers, radio and television stations. As a result, Cambodia now has 19 radio stations, 9 TV stations, 2 Cable TV stations, 190 Khmer language newspapers, 22 bulletins, 45 magazines, 38 foreign press agencies and 90 printing units. Today, only one TV and radio station is state-run. The rest belongs to or is dominated by the main political parties in the government. Over the years, many of these press organizations and agencies have not only helped encourage democracy in the country, but also tried to maintain the culture of democracy. Today, we can argue that Cambodian press enjoys greater freedom of expression compared to some other countries in the region.

It is true that Cambodia's attitude toward the media improved greatly when the UN peace-keeping operation arrived and introduced multi-party politics to Cambodia in 1992. Yet the gradual growth in the number of publication has not always led to quality and responsibility. It has not yet met the proper and professional standards of independence and non-bias. There are criticisms that some Cambodian newspapers are deeply politicized and most ignore professionalism.

This is because most of the local news in the press is blatantly politicized and does not present factual information in an unbiased and impartial way. Articles are written and published because writers are paid by politicians to do so or threatened, not because of the quality of the journalism or any professional orientation toward the news. In addition, the daily circulation of newspapers is still small. Only about 20 out of the 190 newspapers registered are on sale regularly and only concentrated in the capital. In Cambodia, most people live in the provinces and have no access to newspapers at all. Currently, approximately 60% of Cambodian population is illiterate. So, most people rely on radio broadcast. In addition, Cambodia's journalists work under poor conditions for poor wages, which has led to rampant bribery within the industry. This remains one of the biggest factors obstructing impartial reporting in Cambodia.

A free exchange of ideas and information is a wise policy for a democratic government to uphold because ordinary citizens can make good decisions about their nation and encourage positive change if they are well informed. Therefore, it is important that the media have critical responsibilities of keeping ahead of change and in gathering and disseminating the information reliably and responsibly to citizens.

To change this situation is a long-term proposition. We must begin by increasing awareness of the importance of the media, and increasing its professional standards. However, many local media practitioners who are attempting to play this very important role in society simply do not possess the professional skills required to do this.

To re-establish trust from the public, and raise the awareness of the importance of professionalism and qualifications, Cambodian media practitioners have made clear their desire for greater opportunities to engage in advanced professional and academic studies. Many of them wish to become recognized experts in the fields they work in. Through many training courses conducted at Cambodia's Communication Institute and at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, we can see that the standard of news and professionalism is noticeably improving compared to the past. However, the public's attitude toward the media has not yet reached the high level we need.

"The best way to change the image of journalism is to educate journalists, not to shut down newspapers," Samdech Hun Sen, Cambodia's Prime Minister said on the official opening ceremony of the Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Therefore, the newly-established Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) is playing a very important role in qualifying working and prospective media practitioners and in shaping and bettering the image of Cambodia's media. This is the first bachelor programme of media management ever offered in Cambodia in its history. The programme focuses on such areas as balanced writing for the media, understanding reasons for, and methods to combat corruption, the media and politics. Through media education, and effort of local media practitioners, I hope media in Cambodia will play a crucial role in helping shape and develop the society and catch up with the regional and the world media.