

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Loo, Eric: Cambodian journalism 'flying blind' 2006, 65-69.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/239>

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Cambodian journalism ‘flying blind’

Eric Loo

With freedom comes great responsibility, says a famous movie script. Not so with the Cambodian press. The many publications owned by as many factions are unrestrained in slandering their adversaries. Everyone’s fair media prey – except for the King. Unbridled reporting with no clear ethical guidelines often sees public decency being violated, which has caused near zero public faith in the media.

There’s the bustling central marketplace, tour buses, overloaded vans and two-stroke tuks tuks weaving through the city streets. Phnom Penh looks like it’s making up for lost time since 1979 when the Vietnamese liberated the royal kingdom from four years of slaughter by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge genocidal regime. Today, the ‘Hill on Penh’ is another expanding city sprawl of chaotic traffic and choking air, internet cafes, sleazy nightclubs, fine dining – and on the kerbside, the urban poor and homeless.

The Cambodian press looks as brusque and uncontrolled as the cityscape is in disarray. Norbert Klein, editor of *The Mirror*, an English weekly of translated stories from the Khmer-language papers, says that Cambodian journalism, though chaotic, is ‘among the freest in Asia’ – but also one of the most unregulated in a post-communist country that’s reinventing itself.

With freedom comes great responsibility, says a famous movie script. Not so with the Cambodian press. Graphic journalism sees shock value dominates the front pages of the Khmer papers with pejorative expressions, loaded headlines, and photographs of gore, nudity, violence, and bloodied corpses used somewhat routinely in the daily grind for news that sells.

The many Khmer publications owned by as many factions are likewise unrestrained in slandering their opponents. All are fair media prey – except for the King. Impartial reporting is a non-concept. Partisan politics are explicitly transferred to the text. Taking sides in the news and ideological positioning has created an altered descriptor – media ‘mag-dog’ – grafted into the Cambodian press antics. We’ve seen that happened in the Philippines after ‘people power’ ousted Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, and in Indonesia after the fall of Suharto in 1998.

Reach Sambath, media educator at Royal University of Phnom Penh and press officer for the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal represents what Cambodian journalism could become. A former AFP journalist, Reach received an award in 2000 by US-based Human Rights Watch for his life

story before and after the Khmer Rouge. (Reach's family was killed by Pol Pot's soldiers in 1981 when he was 13. He and his brother survived.)

Cambodian journalists from 1993-95, says Reach, were like 'birds freed for the first time, flying in the dark, knocking into trees and wall. (But) over the past few years, things have changed. They have been doing much better. They have quoted people for their stories ... use facts and leave their opinions aside. One big problem for them is that they are lazy to read what the others write, and they do not use background to explain to their readers.'

Theoretically, media in post-conflict societies caught up in the novelty of 'press freedom' often grope in the dark, with its reporting guided more by journalists' primeval reactions than any canon of reflective ethical practice. Cambodian journalists, most not formally trained, had their first taste of press freedom in 1991 when the United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) assumed part control of the country to prepare for open elections and subsequent democratic rule in 1993.

Part of UNTAC's mandate was to forge a structure for a free press to grow, which evidently was left to sprout a life of its own. Without a strong foundation of ethical media practice, the structure has so far remained shaky, and the development of professional journalism, experimental. Educators like Reach, are faced with the task of training future journalists in an ersatz free press culture, which has seen many compelled to take on part-time jobs to supplement their 'official' monthly salary of about US\$40-50. Official salary figures of journalists and civil servants, however, vary according to where one sources the figures.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation in its 2005 report on media and democracy in Cambodia noted that journalists' salary relatively 'is not very low because most civil servants – including soldiers, police officers, teachers and even judges – earn less than US\$30 per month'. It adds:

'But for journalists working for local newspapers these wages are often not enough for daily life and hence they depend on earnings from other sources, i.e. taking gifts, asking for 'gas money' or for 'coffee'. Journalists also often take direct payments for covering news events; usually this comes in envelopes containing some 5,000–20,000 riels (US\$1.25–5).'

Kay Kimsong, business editor at Cambodia Daily, notes that 'there are so many fake journalists' who use their media pass from the Ministry of Information to gain favour or to bribe their sources, which mirrors the 'hacks for hire' practice in the Philippines.²

Kay notes three types of journalists in Cambodia: 'First, are the independent journalists working for foreign media like The Cambodia Daily, Phnom Penh Post, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia and French Cambodge Soir. These journalists are well paid [US\$250-700 a month] and have taken training courses abroad or in local university.'

'Second, are the pro-CPP (Cambodian Peoples Party) journalists reporting for local media. Some of them report good things or activities of the CPP officials, to make sources happy, then claim bribes from the official. These journalists sometimes criticized Funcinpec officials.

'Third, are the pro-Funcinpec journalists who work for local newspapers backed by the party. These journalists also take bribe at events, seminars, workshops ... their articles criticize CPP officials or government activity.'

The fractionalized media structure has created a paradox. Government press conferences and events are open to all journalists, but not all have equal access to information held by different government sources.

Kay's observation echoes KAF's assessment, which notes that 'normally, only the reporters who are pro-government or close to the ruling parties can easily get access to information, whereas those who are working for opposition parties are usually excluded. Press conferences are normally broadcast by state-owned stations. Therefore, the independent channels rarely or almost never report on government press conferences.'

This paradox leaves most newspapers hostage to political patronage, and, consequently, distorts the economics of the newspaper business. Klein estimates that 99% of local advertising revenue goes to just ten newspapers – out of some 30 publishing regularly in Phnom Penh and 266 existing press licenses as of 2005.⁴ Rasmei Kampuchea, the main Khmer daily, alone takes up nearly a quarter of the advertising revenue.

Founded in 1993 by a Thai newspaper group in a joint venture with Theng Bun Ma, a Hung Sen ally, Rasmei Kampuchea is seen as the 'good' paper in Phnom Penh, which, says editor Pen Semitthy, has consistently worked to 'professionalise' its practice.

Pen is credited for establishing the Khmer broadsheet as a 'model of reliable journalism' in Cambodia. Educated in Moscow in the 1980s, Pen claims authority as a strident 'objective critic' of both the government and the opposition, moving it away from its previous tag as a pro-CPP paper.

Pen says that the lack of a code of ethics and professional benchmarks is hampering the

progress of Cambodian journalism – thus the series of defamation charges against journalists last year.⁵ For the first time, as president of the Club of Cambodian Journalists, Pen says he has been able to gather different journalist organizations ⁶ and editors to talk about ‘solidarity’ among journalists in raising the standards of journalism, and to defend their rights.

Recalibrating journalist’s moral compass

One wonders if four years of atrocities by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge have destroyed whatever common moral values and institutional integrity there were in Cambodian society. A generation of intellectuals and their families were killed by the Khmer Rouge, the memories graphically kept alive at the genocide museum (formerly Khmer Rouge S-21 prison) in Tuol Seng. The result: about 70% of the generally young population above 15 today can’t read or write. The emigration of Cambodia’s elites and professionals over the last decade has also, according to observers, ‘altered the country’s institutional legacy’.⁷

Hun Sen’s government has shut down newspapers in the mid-90s for what were deemed to be journalists’ disrespectful, deliberate insults of government leaders. A well-known case was in 1999 when several newspapers conjectured that Prime Minister Hun Sen’s wife caused the death of the country’s most popular actress, reputed to be Hun Sen’s mistress. In 2002, there were 9 cases of lawsuits, suspensions and arrests; 13 cases in 2003; and 19 in 2004.⁸ The standard response now is an admonishment from the Ministry of Information. A public apology from the media will suffice to continue business.

My talks with local journalists paint a somewhat optimistic, albeit guarded, anticipation following the Prime Minister Hun Sen’s announcement on April 21 that defamation by the media will no longer result in imprisonment of journalists. Radio stations, such as The Women Media Centre’s FM102, and Beehive Radio Station’s FM 105 have also been allowed to operate despite their critical on-air commentaries of public officials. The US-funded Radio Free Asia and Voice of America was pulled by the Cambodian government in 2002, but went back on air in 2003 through leased airtime with Beehive Radio.⁹

The major shift in the government’s relationship with the media can, perhaps, be understood in two ways: first, the government’s attempt to show its commitment to full democratization, particularly to the country’s Western donor nations in the Consultative Group, which met in Phnom Penh 2-3 March 2006. Second, in the context of the high literacy rate in Cambodia, the government does not see the media much of a threat. The Club of Cambodian Journalists estimate that on average about 12,000 to 15,000 readers regularly buy and read a newspaper in Phnom Penh.¹⁰

The KAF report also notes:

'The media have rather little influence on the formation of political opinion. The media is not considered very relevant by the government, and therefore, the authorities usually ignore most media reports, even those which are critical of the government's performance. Given this fact, people do not like to express their opinion in the media because they think politicians pay little attention to them. The ordinary citizens think that politics are the job and game of politicians. In the same context, the politicians do not want to use their political platform to consult their people. They would rather go with their own choice. Together, the attitudes and behaviour of both citizens and rulers show that the political culture still poses a big obstacle to democratic consolidation.'¹¹

Hun Sen's April announcement came with the caution that journalists 'draft their articles well' to avoid lawsuits. As it now stands, Article 63 of the UNTAC Law of 1992 on criminal defamation and libel in Cambodia provides for preventive detention of journalists and a sentence of a year in prison or a fine of 10 million riels (US\$2,652). Amendment of Article 63 will just do away with the prison sentence.¹²

Meanwhile, the road towards ethical professional journalism – that is by Western standards – remain blocked by low salaries, culture of political patronage and impunity, the government's ambivalent relationship with the media, and low literacy rate, which to an extent makes journalists feel little concern for accountability in what they write.

Reach recognizes that Cambodian journalists urgently need long-term professional training and accreditation 'like doctors, nurses and lawyers'. However, he cautions against the 'old style of using helicopter or parachute training' where the 'trainers come for a few days, did not even finish the jet lag yet. Then he or she goes to conduct the training and then eating cakes and dinners and fly back to their home country'.

Which reminds me of a conversation with the assistant group editor of The Nation in Bangkok, Kavi Chongkittavorn. Indeed, he said, Cambodian journalists, being 'among the freest in Asia' have more in common with their counterparts in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia than those from the 'West'. Their media realities, history and culture are so far from Cambodia's that the training provided by Western trainers, while informative, is sometimes irrelevant.

Notes

1. KAF Democracy Report 2005: Media and Democracy, Konrad Adenauer Foundation (http://www.kas.de/upload/Publikationen/KAF-dem-rep2005_3-4.pdf (Accessed 11/05/06). p.93

2. Loo, Eric (2005), 'Filipino journalists speak out and pay the price,' Media Development, WACC, United Kingdom, 4/2005, pp. 54-57.

3. Ibid. p. 98

4. Available 2005 figures of the media in Cambodia provided by the Ministry of Information are as follows: newspapers (266); bulletins (27); media associations (13); magazines 58; international media organizations (35); agency and foreign television representatives (11). No definitions of local or foreign media available.

5. In August 2005, the Cambodian Supreme Court upheld a guilty verdict against Cambodian Daily business editor Kay Kimsong, charging him for writing a 'defamatory' article in 2001 about Foreign Affairs Minister Hor Namhong's relations with Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. Kay's article quoted words by a Senate member said during an official debate. The Cambodian Daily reported that Kimsong 'declined strong requests from a Supreme Court official who asked for a bribe in return for discarding the suit'. The Foreign Affairs Minister dropped the case in April following Hun Sen's announcement that defamation would be decriminalized. In October, Prime Minister Hun Sen filed defamation charges against a journalist and seven human rights activists who criticised him for signing the special border treaty on Oct 10 with Vietnam. The charges were dropped on 24 January 2006 year after the defendants submitted written apologies to Hun Sen.

6. For example, the Cambodian Association for the Protection of Journalists (CAPJ) and the League of Cambodian Journalists (LCJ) - both associate members of the International Federation of Journalists.

7. Cambodian Corruption Assessment, Prepared for USAID/Cambodia by Michael M. Calavan, Sergio Diaz Briquets, Jerald O'Brien, May-June 2004, p. 3. (http://www.usaid.gov/kh/democracy_and_governance/documents/Cambodian_Corruption_Assessment.pdf)

8. Club of Cambodian Journalists: Annual report of 2004, Final Census Results. Phnom Penh 2005.

9. A list of radio stations in Cambodia available at: <http://www.asiawaves.net/cambodia-radio.htm>

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. p. 97

12. In a joint statement on 28 April 2006, the Alliance for Freedom of Expression in Cambodia, and Article 19 called on Hun Sen's government to judge defamation cases under the civil code instead. The statement said: 'as set out in the ARTICLE 19 publication, Defining Defamation: Principles on Freedom of Expression and Protection of Reputation, defamation laws should aim to protect the reputations of individuals. They should not protect other interests, for example the 'reputation' of the government or the State. In particular, it is inappropriate to use defamation laws to maintain public order or national security, as was intended by the authors of the UNTAC law.' <http://www.article19.org/publications/global-issues/defamation.html> (Accessed 10 May, 2006)

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