



CAMBODIA



Cambodia, The construction of a sustainable democracy is highly dependent on the support of an independent and free media. With current political influences affecting local media, Cambodia still has a long way to go.

For the 2003 elections, political parties used all the mass media resources – radio, TV and print – to mobilise support. The wider influence over private as well as state-owned radio and TV stations ensured victory for the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

The founding of five new TV stations in the 1990s and an additional one in 2003, as well as 13 radio stations, has led to a tremendous growth in media consumption. Today approximately 80 per cent of urban and nearly 50 per cent of rural households have a TV set and a radio.



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Due to decreased radio consumption, radio is giving way to TV (which is watched two to three hours a day) as a source of information. Cable TV (providing Cambodians with more than 60 TV channels) as well as satellite TV are available in the country, but far from being a commonly used medium.

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However, this figure may be inflated. No survey has yet addressed the extent of Cambodian literacy and the percentage of the population that can actually comprehend more complicated texts such as newspaper articles.

One of the characteristics of Cambodia's radio stations is, in many cases, their affiliation to a TV station. Philosophies and alignments are shared between the TV and the radio station. Out of 13 radio stations, only five operate independently. Even though the radio listening audience is on the retreat, it is still an important source of information. While 54 per cent of the Cambodian population watches television, 44 per cent listen to radio.

Only six per cent of the Khmers use newspapers and other publications to get information about national and international issues. Nevertheless, the print market with 183 national and 22

international newspapers, 38 magazines, and 20 bulletins is quite competitive. The low number of Cambodian print media consumers can be attributed to the country's low literacy rate. This has subsequently led to the boom in other forms of media.

Only around 70 per cent of the total population aged 15 and older can read and write. However, this figure may be inflated. No survey has yet addressed the extent of Cambodian literacy and the percentage of the population that can actually comprehend more complicated texts such as newspaper articles. The illiteracy rate is predicted to increase in the near future because children do not attend school or increasingly drop out early, especially in the rural areas.

Looking back on Cambodia's history, the media has often been used to disseminate propaganda and attack political enemies. To reduce political influence in the information sector, political parties are now prohibited from running newspapers, TV, and radio stations. Despite this decree, the TV channel CTV 9 was founded to support FUNCINPEC's election campaign in 1993 and 1998, and Bayon TV is owned by Prime Minister Hun Sen. Similar alignments can be witnessed with radio stations and newspapers. They are often not owned by politicians, but individuals or companies taking clear political positions. Thus, while there is no official censorship in Cambodia, partisan influence leads to biased news coverage.

Cambodia's media is undergoing a transition beyond politics to information and consumerism. Creating demands for

new consumer goods, the media is a stage for advertising clients as well as a supporter for the reconstruction of Cambodia's economy. Some TV and radio stations are now fully financed by advertising revenues.

Although slowly, the internet as a new medium is beginning to penetrate Cambodia. The development started in 1994 when the NGO-platform Open Forum of Cambodia established the first internet provider in co-operation with the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications.

The internet is increasingly used by opposition parties, like the Sam Rainsy Party, to offset lack of access to state and traditional media. The party promotes itself heavily on its website .

Until 1997, this was the only internet access in the country, with 700 people using the service of . Today it still only counts 500 users – mostly NGOs and international organizations – since worldwide web access is not possible as the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication denies the necessary licence. Instead, the Ministry itself entered the internet market and owns two internet providers: Camintel (), founded in 1995 and 49 per cent co-owned by the Indonesian company Indosat, and Camnet (), supported by the International Development Research

Centre of Canada. Both offer a wide range of Internet services.

Two private providers have joined the market as well. The 1997 founded company Telstra bigpond was taken over in 2002 by a local investor, and changed from to . Under the cell phone operator Mobitel offers its internet services. However, the internet is still far from being a mass medium.

It is estimated that 3,000 private households are equipped with internet access. The number of internet cafés, especially in the capital Phnom Penh, is increasing tremendously. More than 100 internet places were counted in 2003. The price in Phnom Penh has settled at fifty US cents per hour, while in the coastal city Sihanoukville the user gets charged three US dollars an hour – unaffordable for most of the locals. In 2003 the American aid organization Asia Foundation, in co-operation with the NGO Open Forum Cambodia, established internet stations nationwide. The address of the Khmer language website is www.cambodiatic.org.

The internet is increasingly used by opposition parties, like the Sam Rainsy Party, to offset lack of access to state and traditional media. The party promotes itself heavily on its website . So far there is no cyber law in Cambodia, which makes the world wide web the least controlled source of information. Is it only a question of time until the internet in Cambodia becomes subject to political restrictions?