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Cambodian Media: the development after 1993

Introduction



Cambodia's media sector is relatively young and inexperienced compared with that of more developed and the rich countries both in the region and the world. This is due mainly to the country's successive, rapid changes of political regimes since the 1950s. These changes have placed Cambodia under five different political leaderships: the Sangkumreash Nihjum regime led by the then Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Khmer Republic regime led by General Lon Nol, the Democratic Kampuchea government under the genocidal leader Pol Pot, the State of Cambodia regime of Prime Minister Hun Sen, and the current Cambodian democracy resulting from the elections sponsored by the UN in 1993. The characteristics, operation, and the development of our media sector have varied according to each political leadership. However, Cambodia's media sector improved remarkably after the first elections of 1993, shifting from total government control to becoming a free and democratic media as guaranteed by Cambodia's 1993 Constitution.

This paper aims to present three major points concerning the development of Cambodian media since the main, conflicting political parties united to form a democratic Cambodia in 1993. First, I am going to draw your attention to the major achievements or positive developments, so as to show how far the sector has marched, serving the needs of our socio-economic develop-

ment. Second, I will discuss the negative scenarios facing Cambodian media professionals in their attempts to bring about media transparency, effectiveness, and professionalism. The drawing on both aforementioned points, I will conclude by proposing what could be done to further improve the sector.

A New Change

Parallel to our process of democratisation, Cambodian media has been mushrooming with impetus from the private sector making possible rapid changes in the media sector- initially in quantity and gradually in quality. With guarantees of citizens' rights to freedom of expression and freedom of press in the 1993 democratic Constitution, Cambodia now seems to enjoy a more open press, which in fact is unprecedented in our history. Numerous local and international, privately-owned media businesses, especially print and broadcast media have been established to keep people better informed of what is happening both inside and outside the country. The media has started talking more openly about corruption and social concerns. As part of its development, Cambodia at present has 19 radio stations, 9 TV stations, 2 Cable TV stations, 190 Khmer language newspapers, 22 bulletins, 45 magazines, 38 foreign press agencies, and nearly 100 printing companies. Over the years, many of these press organizations and agencies have not only helped promote democracy in the country, but have also endeavoured to maintain a culture of democracy. We can therefore argue that today Cambodian press enjoys greater freedom of expression than ever before.

According to the latest report by Reporters Without Borders and the Worldwide Press Index (2004), Cambodia ranks 109th among some 167 countries when press freedom is surveyed. Its standing is good in the ASEAN region. It is better than the Philippines (111th), Indonesia (117th), Malaysia (122nd), Laos (153rd), Vietnam (161st), Burma (165th). Although Cambodia needs to continue to improve its media practices, this ranking shows that

young, democratic Cambodia fared better than Singapore (147th) and has nearly caught up with Thailand, even though both have more developed and stable economies and political environment, more educated populations, and longer experiences of democracy.

Apart from its effort to provide people with more freedom to access information and to do business in media, the current Cambodian government also supports the establishment of academic programs in journalism at the university level. As a result, a Bachelor degree program in media studies was established in 2001. This program is the first of its kind in Cambodia's history.

I think this is a positive achievement for a young media sector like Cambodia's. Therefore, I would like to talk a little about this school before I move to the next point about the difficulties and challenges.

The Department of Media and Communication of the Royal University of Phnom Penh is the only media training institution in Cambodia. Established to respond to the urgent need for qualified media professionals in the Kingdom, the Department was officially opened on January 14, 2002, by Samdech HUN SEN, the Cambodian Prime Minister. The core mission statements of the Department are to prepare students to be effective users and practitioners of the mass media and to foster a free, pluralistic and accountable media in Cambodia by forming journalists who are effective, creative, ethical, critical, users and practitioners of the mass media. This Department was set up with spiritual, material, and financial support from the government, people of Germany through the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). This invaluable support shows generous care and attention of the government and people of Germany to less-developed countries like Cambodia which have just emerged from civil war, and a genocidal regime, and which needs urgent assistance to reconstruct itself. Cambodians will never forget such priceless support.

The Department of Media and Communication is playing a very important role in qualifying prospective media practitioners and in improving the image of Cambodia's media. This is the first Bachelor's program of Media Management ever offered in Cambodian history. We select 25 students each year through stringent national exams. Our program uses English as the medium of instruction, starting with a foundation year of general knowledge, followed by a year focused on print media, and then two years devoted to electronic media production. We now have a total of 80 students in four-year program. Our first graduating class just completed their final exams last week. These students expected to receive their degrees this August. Even though we have not had any graduates yet, our students have already become well known among media institutions for the quality of their work, which was demonstrated during their internship programs. As a result, they are already sought after by media organizations in the Kingdom. So we do believe that through our media education program these young people will surely be able to meaningfully contribute to further strengthening the Cambodian media and journalism profession.

Despite all this development, problems remain.

Many practicing Cambodian media professionals who are attempting to play a very important role in society do not possess the professional skills required for their career. Media managers, who are supposed to give their staff proper training to do their jobs effectively, do not have a degree in media or other related specializations. Lacking these skills, many of them tend to make a great deal of mistakes. This can harm the populace and undermine the interests of the country. These people learn by doing and by observing. Although they are able to retain their jobs, the quality of their work has not yet met satisfactory standards. Blatant biases may be caused by the lack of education in professions and lack of critical thinking. The lacks of education, professional training, or creative thinking leads media practitioners to work

unprofessionally and to slow down the real development of the media professionalism. The hindrance of real development may be due to the fact that these people are unable to keep themselves posted on what is going on in the outside world and unable to adopt the changes of the external environment. Keeping updated with the external environment changes is truly vital for all media practitioners, especially for decision makers.

In addition, inadequate qualified staff is one of the main factors causing problems to the administration, since the responsibilities and duties of personnel are not appropriately delegated. Some personnel have too many responsibilities whereas others have too few. Overlapping of the personnel's responsibilities leads to the hindrance of good program production and other working processes. As the old saying goes, "Too many cooks spoil the broth!" At the same time, some unskilled and unproductive staff members remain employed even though they do not contribute as much as expected to their organizations.

The traditional authoritarian leadership style used in Cambodian media is seen to be impractical for the improvement of the field. Cambodia was ruled by Socialist regimes for decades; thus its media was totally under the strict control of the government. Centralization and bureaucracy are still practiced in almost all media institutions, since a majority of media directors and managers were media practitioners in the Socialist regimes and are using the Socialist working system. Therefore, their experience has locked their mind into this system, which leads to inertia. As the result of this leadership style, Cambodian media is regarded as uncreative. According to Covington (1999), creativity cannot only sustain the existing media, but can also engender increased profitability and audience size. Since the Cambodian media staff is uncreative, some productions do not meet the public satisfaction criteria. For example, in the broadcasting sector program content is adopted from those of other countries, which sometimes do not work for Cambodian society.

Shortage of finance hinders the development of every Cambodian media sub sector. It is like the so-called “chicken and egg theory.” Because of a shortage of money, the sectors are unable to employ skilled professionals. As a result they produce poor quality work, which attracts neither audience nor advertisers, who are the financial sources of all the media work. For instance, most Cambodian radio stations broadcast news published in daily newspapers instead of producing the program themselves. These journalists do not only copy newspaper news but also do they not “speak” the language required in broadcast media to communicate effectively with their audience. Language for radio has to be shorter, sharper, and stronger than for newspaper journalism. Newspaper information is too difficult to understand on radio. Moreover, low-paid media practitioners may accept bribes.

Then there is problem of outdated equipment that everyone in the industry has to put up with, and which has limited the reach of the work to only the capital city and its surrounding areas.

Media law, which is believed to help regulates media operation, is not only improperly enforced, but is also thought to be a means used by the government to intimidate media practitioners and censor the media. Since media law was enacted in 1994, the law has still been controversial. Since the law was passed, several media practitioners have been jailed or threatened. Furthermore, absence of copyright law also negatively affects professionalism. Copyright law is still being processed and will be passed soon. Without copyright law, media practitioners, program producers and others may not be motivated to produce good programs.

Some media organizations are blatantly politicized and do not present factual information in an unbiased and impartial way. Critics of the sector have also noted the lopsidedness of the present broadcasting and printing content, which has been very heavy on entertainment. On Cambodian radios, important social issues such as education and agriculture take up less than 100 hours a week while the entertainment fare eats up about 800 hours per week. Critics say radio is especially guilty of ignoring

the needs of its audience and paying attention only to the commercial value of its offerings. They say even quality has been left by the wayside, as shows that have shoddy production are being aired. This may make the audience soon begin to tune out.

The fact that Cambodia's media sector, especially radio and television broadcasting, is still below expected standards is now posing a big challenge for the overall Cambodian development plan. Improvements are required before they can hope to truly fulfill their responsibilities to the public.

The Press Law

The government argues that the Cambodians have the courage to commit themselves to democratic pluralism and the respect for human rights as unmistakably enshrined in the constitution. It says Cambodia simply cannot afford to let inexperienced and irresponsible press to undermine or destroy through abusive language or unfounded allegations the institutions that are all depositories of these values. The current press law, the government claims, adequately guarantees fundamental freedom of expression. There is no censorship, and all sources of information are protected. The government also emphasizes that while this law provides no criminal charges for expression of opinion, it must be remembered that journalists are also citizens. As citizens, says the government, they will face criminal charges in defamatory cases, or when they commit other crimes.

But there are those who are not impressed with the government's arguments. They even say that the law is, to a large extent, vague, controversial, and illogical. It is also unconstitutional, say the law's critics, since it allows the government to accuse any media practitioner of whatever it sees fit. The law thus puts more pressure on the media to toe the government line, and many believe it has just become harder for journalists to publish or broadcast anything critical of the government or that touches on a controversial issue now that there seems to be a threat of criminal

charges hanging over their heads. Not surprisingly, journalists have demanded that all criminal penalties be deleted in the press law, arguing that no one should be jailed for the words that they write or say.

It is a debate that may take time to settle. One can only hope that the result would be more voices heard across Cambodia.

The way forward

All in all, it is expected Cambodia's media will play a crucial role in helping to shape and develop its' society, following this media education initiative and through the joint effort of local media practitioners. Moreover, it is anticipated that the media education program will place Cambodian media on par with regional and world media in the future.

- Promote understanding of the importance of the media and its role in a modern, vibrant and democratic Cambodia;
- Impunity must end; all serious cases of attacks against the media must be investigated in good faith and the perpetrators brought to justice in accordance to due process;
- Establish a professional code of conduct for the media, and possibly a statutory media council to regulate the media for example complaints against the media for untrue reporting, censorship or unequal access;
- Enact a freedom of information law to end the undemocratic culture of unnecessary secrecy and bureaucracy.