

Chapter 8 | Media

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What is an informed society? And how does it affect ordinary Cambodians? This is best illustrated by a day in the life of a student in 2040. Virak is a third-year architecture student in Battambang city. It is Friday morning after a busy final exam day yesterday and Virak wakes up to finally catch up on the week's news via podcast which he voice-command to his room's smart speaker. Virak follows both local and national news from his favorite and most trusted outlets, a local one in Battambang and a national one based out of Phnom Penh. Though an architecture student, Virak is also an avid news consumer and loves following political, economic, and social issues. He learned early this morning that there is a planned protest by students from his university in front of the city hall against authorities' plan to allow developers to build a restaurant and stores inside the main park on the Sanker river. The students believe the building is unnecessary and will take up already limited space from the public park. Virak plans to stop by the protest site on his way to the university. After the protest, Virak decides to take the ride-hailing app instead of the bus to save time. During the shared ride, the app also updated him on the national news of the day, a common feature of apps that partner with news outlets. Turns out the news was relevant to Virak. It was about disagreements between Thailand and Cambodia on allowing long-time Cambodian workers of any skill level in Thailand access to Thai or dual

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citizenships. Virak's sister is a nurse and has been living and working in Bangkok for ten years. She has a family there and hopes to at least get permanent residency card. In fact, Virak plans to visit her for the weekend so he now will prepare additional documents in case Thai immigration asks about his sister. While buying his last-minute flight to Bangkok during class break, Virak learned some shocking news from his national news outlet's Facebook page that a five-storey three-year-old condo building in Phnom Penh has collapsed. As a future architect, he is angry that this had happened. Given that next week will be school break, Virak decided that after Thailand, he and two of his friends will travel to Phnom Penh next week to visit their friends and learn more about the building situation and how the public will demand authorities to find those to hold accountable. After school, Virak was still following the news about casualty numbers from his smart glasses while taking the bus to a little end-of-semester friend gathering. While packing for Thailand later that evening, Virak was again getting the latest updates via podcasts about both the latest situation in Bangkok and Phnom Penh. He plans to bring his smartphone with an e-SIM card to Bangkok. These phones are not as popular anymore but are easier to use as devices during travels because they have Internet roaming, making it easy for him to still get easy news access while in Bangkok tomorrow.

I. Media: The Ideal Scenario

The Cambodian news media¹⁰ industry in 2040 has undergone tremendous change. It has developed and grown to become a viable institution of free press that can support the goal of building an informed citizenry; in addition to supporting a more open, knowledge-based, and connected Cambodia. Despite

¹⁰ The term "media" in this chapter is used narrowly to refer to news and journalism media rather the broader definition of media content that also includes entertainment media and the movie industry. In addition, while the chapter tries to stay focused on our traditional concepts of 'sector' and 'industry', with the dominance of digital media and consequential increased participation and role in the sector of digital audience, social media influencers, and citizen journalists, the lines of the sector are more blurred today and likely more so in 2040 (UNESCO, 2019).

witnessing a period of dissatisfaction on approach to 2020, Cambodia's news media has regained its status as one of the most vibrant in mainland Southeast Asia and to a lesser extent the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2040 Cambodia's media sector consists of a high-level access to public information and a high degree of freedom of expression as guaranteed by Cambodia's Constitution, a more independent judicial system, and overall a more transparent and democratic Cambodian government. As a social institution, Cambodia's 'free press' of 2040 plays a crucial role in informing and engaging the public on important topics and policy discussions, providing checks on the political system and, arguably equally important and related, help the country better guarantee equitable economic growth and sustainable development to better realize its stated goal of becoming a knowledge-based economy and developed country by 2050 (Xinhua 2018).

Building on these fundamentals, this ideal well-functioning Cambodian news media industry in 2040 is able to boast a number of sizable leading independent news media organizations; a nationwide digitization, or digital-first, operation; a highly professionalized human resource network; high level public engagement and involvement in content production; and a strong industry association support system.

Development along five key factors will determine the path toward a meaningful and pluralistic Cambodian news media sector:

1. Cambodia's political system will have gradually evolved into one with more democratic and pluralistic institutions (Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A., 2010).
2. There will be comprehensive legal and institutional framework in place to guarantee the fundamental functions of a free press and news media sector.
3. Democratic countries continue to have a major influence on Cambodia's development direction. In the country's media sector, in particular, Western-owned, funded, or initiated independent media have remained hugely popular despite the rise of Chinese influence and local competitors.

4. Strong education investment and reform with a focus on critical thinking skills and digital media literacy.¹¹
5. A national embrace of emerging technologies and the continued strong adaptation of Cambodian news producers and consumers to digital transformation of news and media.

In 2040 there is a stable liberal democratic state, with a strong media sector. This system guarantees an overall open freedom of expression and flow of information for citizens and the media sector. The cornerstone of this institution-building are the existence of a public-oriented media sector led by a number of strong domestic independent outlets, a new public broadcaster '*the Cambodian Public Broadcasting Service*', a diverse private media ecosystem, and return of prominent foreign broadcasters, alongside existing state-owned or self-censoring domestic media outlets. In this best-case scenario, the relative liberal political system of 2040 is a result of a gradual political evolution of the past two decades that was also accompanied by a slow reemergence of Cambodia's vibrant free press to provide some checks on the system and help ensure a more informed democracy.

Cementing this ideal political environment for a meaningful news media sector is the strong legal and institutional framework that is a necessary standard for any informed democratic system, as outlined in international human rights declarations and principles.¹² Cambodia's legal guarantees in 2040 includes its Constitutionally-enshrined provisions on freedom of expression (including press, publication and assembly), a strong and updated press law, and a robust access to information law. All these legal guarantees have been updated to adapt to

¹¹ For clarification and simplification, the author prefers to use "digital media literacy" rather than "digital and media literacy" or Unesco's definition of digital literacy which includes media literacy and defined as "the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy." (Unesco 2018)

¹² A summary of some of these principles is outlined in the charter of Pen International, retrievable here: <https://pen-international.org/who-we-are/the-pen-charter>

trends in digital media and a now mostly digitized global information ecosystem in 2040. In this era of sophisticated disinformation and citizen journalists, these strong and nuanced legal guarantees ensure both the digital freedom (Pen International) and necessary responsibilities of a professional Cambodian press. As can be inferred, the institutional guarantee behind this legal framework is a relatively independent judicial system. In addition, a robust press is also backed by strong press or journalists associations and unions.

Due to Cambodia's increased integration into regional and international politico-economic order, its media system in 2040 continues to benefit from investment by its development partners, particularly democratic countries in the West as well as its neighboring ASEAN partners, that can provide both practical and idealistic goals for the industry. Industry lessons from Southeast Asian partners have also helped accommodate the rise of Chinese-style media, ensuring their meaningful contribution to a diverse Cambodian news media sector. Western-led Cambodian media continues to be crucial in capacity-building and professionalization of Cambodian news media and a necessary alternative news source for Cambodian citizens.

Any discussion of the 2040 best case scenario for Cambodia's media sector cannot avoid the importance of the demand side, i.e. the news consumers. An effectively functioning and vibrant Cambodian news media sector in 2040 depends on a population that has strong civic engagement and demand for factual information and quality news content. The majority of the projected 20 million Cambodians in 2040 are digital news consumers, having either experienced digitization as digital immigrants or growing up as digital natives. For the media industry to fully benefit from this demographic dividend, this educated and digitally literate citizenry will ideally have benefited from two decades of the right educational investment, particularly in critical thinking skills and digital media literacy. Such education is necessary for this new generation to be critically informed and digital media literate enough to become the core consumer base that sustains demand for quality news production and drive a robust news media ecosystem. This engaging two-way communication between news producers and news consumers also contributes to both a more dynamic knowledge-based Cambodian digital economy and informed democracy in 2040.

Related to educational investment, Cambodia's mostly digital-first news sector in 2040 has also benefited from rapid digitization over the past twenty years but also the meaningful adoption of relevant new technologies. In addition to fully utilising the positive aspects of digital and social media as necessary platforms of social communications and information dissemination, both Cambodian news producers and news consumers have also adopted new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain to help innovate Cambodian concepts of newsrooms and journalism. In addition, social media, particularly Facebook, continues to play a major role as a fairly uncensored distribution platform for Cambodia's media sector and ordinary citizens to voice their concerns, while still relatively difficult for the Cambodian state to effectively censor. For this author's vision, the technological affordability that will bridge the urban-rural 'digital divide', in combination with increased media production skills nationwide, and a good press freedom climate in 2040 will allow for small and large outlets to sustain quality news production in both urban and rural Cambodia.

II. Scenario Space key factors for Media

The nature of Cambodian news media, like that of the press of any country, is shaped, first and foremost, by the country's political system. The country's domestic Khmer-language media sector has historically been tightly controlled and partisan, although there had been strong history of Khmer newspapers since the French colonial days, with names such as *Koh Santepheap* surviving today (Mehta 1997). The country's post-1990s nascent free press, partly led by foreign-owned English-language newspapers like the Cambodia Daily and Phnom Penh Post and followed by Khmer outlets like Beehive or VOD - is a fairly recent phenomenon in Cambodia's post-independence political history.

Given that the Cambodian political system was never immune from external geopolitical forces, particularly after the Paris Peace Accord, foreign-owned media have historically been a key factor in shaping the domestic free press. In this context, to ordinary Cambodians, alternative news sources have primarily come in the forms of foreign broadcasters, particularly US-funded Voice of America Khmer-language broadcast and later, US-funded Radio Free Asia. This is a rather unique feature of Cambodia's media landscape. In particular, radio broadcasters

-- unlike English newspapers aimed at expats, policy makers and tourists -- reach a mass audience in the Khmer language, particularly in rural areas. With a more liberal political system in Cambodia, by the early 2000s, both US-funded broadcasters were able to open newsrooms in Phnom Penh, hire local journalists, and distribute their radio content domestically via partner local radio stations across the country. Being on local FM further established their brand recognition and such household names made them seemingly local household news brands.¹³ These foreign broadcasters continue to play a role as an alternative independent news sources after the crackdown on opposing voices in 2017.

In this context, the Khmer press has been shaped by two related long-term key factors, the degree of openness of the Cambodian political system at any given time to allow Western democracies to help build and support local free press through aid or their owned media. As a result, the truly domestic Khmer-language independent press has remained relatively small (names like Beehive radio, Women's Media Center and Voice of Democracy) and rather dependent on Western support and/or editorial leadership. This is despite the fact that Cambodia's news media sector overall has grown steadily in quantity from the early 1990s and into the digital and social media age. Local independent media after the 1990s is sandwiched between the numerous and well-resourced pro-government private television and radio stations, on the one hand, and the more well-known foreign-owned English newspapers and mass media broadcasters. After Cambodia's arguably worst crackdown on media since the early 1990s (Chhor 2018), Voice of Democracy (VOD), a radio and digital news service run by the NGO Cambodian Center for Independent Media, remains the only significant domestic news outlet with the capacity to produce original news content and further innovate into digital space. As an NGO-run news outlet, it too is dependent on financial support from donors.

Furthermore, the prominent role that Khmer-language foreign broadcasters have established themselves in the Khmer press has both pros and cons. While

¹³ The author himself grew up to be avid listeners of both broadcasters in Phnom Penh's 1990s and 2000s, before joining VOA Khmer in 2010.

their presence significantly increases Cambodian citizen's access to critical and unbiased news from abroad, their sheer popularity makes it more difficult for domestic brands like VOD to establish themselves more prominently, even in the digital realm. As of August 2019, VOA Khmer and RFA Khmer own the second and third largest Facebook pages in Cambodia, with 7 million and 6 million fans respectively (Socialbakers 2019) while the local VOD Khmer trails with over 1 million fans. The eventual growth of Cambodia's domestic free press will partly depend on whether foreign brands will help support rather replace local news brands.

The continued survival inside the country of some independent news outlets on the eve of 2020 can be further seen as a product of emerging new key factors that will positively influence the evolution of Cambodia's press in the next two decades.

One new key factor as a result of Cambodia's more democratic political system from the 1990s is the opportunity to set in place long-term institution-building mechanisms for the news media sector, particularly strengthening of legal frameworks to guarantee protection and professionalism of the sector. Article 41 of Cambodia's 1993 Constitution (Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia) sets the overarching legal framework for freedom of expression for its citizens and media entities alike:

"Khmer citizens shall have freedom of expression, press, publication and assembly. No one shall exercise this right to infringe upon the rights of others, to affect the good traditions of the society, to violate public law and order and national security.

The regime of the media shall be determined by law."

As will be discussed further in the policy step section, it is necessary to build on this existing Constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of expression and the press to implement more specific legal guarantees through the country's increasingly specific and systematic rules-based policies that cater to economic, demographic and technological changes. For the news media sector, updated or new legal instruments are needed to accommodate the rise of digital media and news concepts of digital freedom, citizen journalism, digital literacy and fake

news, etc. This framework can ensure that Cambodian citizens in 2040 and beyond have access to a broad range of news and information sources and move the country away from the days of state-propaganda monopoly or the existence of a Khmer press that depends on the ebb and flow of political climate.

As will be discussed further in the policy section, while human resource development in the media sector has grown over the past two decades, available university programs remain limited to a few. In addition, their program also struggles to keep up to date with the rapid changes in the industry brought about by digital technologies. A good example is from one of the few available programs at the Department of Media and Communications, Royal University of Phnom Penh. A July 2018 survey of its 144 graduates found that only 16 or 11% of graduates were working as actual journalists at the time. The largest group of 48 graduates or 33% said they were working in the “private sector” while the second largest group of 24 graduates or 16% were working for NGOs (DMC 2018). This ability for future journalists to create their own opportunities will be important as it is unclear whether there will be as much opportunity in the future as in the past two decades.

Before looking at more external and supply-side key factors, it is important to look at the demand side - critical educational investment for a Cambodian population of 2040 that prefers factual information and quality news content - that will be a key factor, if not the most important favorable factor, in supporting that year’s vision of an informed Cambodia. Cambodia’s population is projected to reach around 20 million people in 2040,¹⁴ of which the “post-Khmer Rouge baby-boomer generation”--those born after 1979 and should roughly be under 60 years of age in 2040, are projected to make up almost 90% of the population in 2040. A sizable segment of the elder subgroup of this large generation -- those between the ages of 30 and 60 in 2040 -- unlike their counterparts in more authoritarian states like Vietnam or China and more like their counterparts in Malaysia -- will have ‘tasted’ some form of relative democratic elections and free media’ especially in 2013 (Soeung 2013). Their worldview now and then will be

¹⁴ Outlined in the United Nations’ World Population Prospect 2019

shaped by those experiences. Their offspring – those under 30 in 2040 and who could informally be termed for this chapter as “post-Khmer Rouge 2.0 or 3.0” – will be equally if not even more significant as a demographic factor that will shape a 2040 vision. Those digital natives born after 2010, will grow up mainly with technology that is 5G and beyond.

There are two additional emerging key factors not yet fully understood that will impact the 2040 scenario outlined above. As with mobile and digital technologies above, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain too will likely have a profound impact on any sector and certainly the news media. We can foresee that by 2040 today’s digital and social media – in its format and distribution nature known today as “new media” – will likely have become old or “traditional media” and Cambodia’s digital natives rely completely on digital platforms as the main source of news. Also, while the adoption of emerging technologies over the next two decades like wearable devices, AI, and blockchain, will dramatically change the way Cambodian produce and consume news, the prominence of digital media itself will unlikely change and today’s already significantly digitized media ecosystem can fairly well inform us of the 2040 scenarios. As with the disruption caused by the Internet, concepts of newsroom and journalism have been transformed, not replaced.

III. Policy Initiatives to Achieve the Ideal Scenario

The ability to bring about the vision of a free Cambodian press rests on the outcomes across five key factors:

1. The political environment;
2. Legal and institutional safeguards;
3. Investment and influence from democratic and Western stakeholders;
4. Demographic change; and,
5. Technology and digitization.

A number of policy steps are required across these factors to realize the ideal media vision 2040. These are discussed in turn below.

Trust and institution-building

A vibrant free press and news media sector is, first and foremost, dependent on the political and social space it is allowed to operate in and grow. As Cambodia has moved from its post-Khmer Rouge and civil war reconstruction towards middle-income, the machinery of governance has struggled to incorporate a clear and progressive media and information strategy. A feature of this disconnect can be disruptive incidents of tension between independent media and government. Accordingly, there is a requirement for policies that will help reinforce the perception that a vibrant and independent news media sector is a necessary social and political institution of the country.

One mechanism that can be utilised to this end is legislation. Currently, the latest update of the government's Rectangular Strategy (Royal Government of Cambodia 2018) lacks specifics around access to information and platforms for media communication. Relevant policy makers, including the Ministry of Information and Ministry of Education, should incorporate the role of balanced and independent news as a key element in the country's political direction toward a well-functioning multiparty democracy.

The government's tolerance of independent news outlets like VOD, along with the formal recognition of the VOA news bureau in Phnom Penh (Cheang 2019), are positive steps to build from. In continuance of this progress, the government and relevant media stakeholders should follow the recommendation by the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media for the creation of an independent body overseeing the licensing and registration of media outlets and issuing credentials to journalists (CCIM 2018). This would be a major step in the right direction as regards enhancing trust between the media sector and the government, in addition to supplying the institutional groundwork for an independent and vibrant media space.

An enhanced legal framework

As discussed earlier, another fundamental policy step toward a freer 2040 media environment is the advanced establishment of legal guarantees and frameworks. Whilst currently Cambodia's Constitution guarantees overall freedom of expression (see Article 41 above), other laws either contradict the liberal spirit of the Constitution or form legal nuances that restrict the full exercise of such

freedom (Chak 2015). For instance, Article 13 of the 1995 press law (National Assembly 2015) states that the press “shall not publish or reproduce false information which humiliates or contempt national institution” and journalist who violate this vague provision can be fined from 2,000,000 riels (USD500) to 10,000,000 riels (USD2,500). In addition, in the Internet domain, Freedom house pointed out that a number of subsequent “prakas” in May 2018 can impact freedom online (Freedom House 2018), outlining that relevant ministries should “block or close” websites or social media sites that the government deems discriminatory or a threat to national security.

As a next policy step, where necessary and possible, provisions that are deemed restrictive should be clarified or revised. For example, where press freedom is already guaranteed and enshrined in existing laws (as discussed above) it should be fully implemented through existing institutions and media outlets. In addition, there should be active development of new institutions, such as an independent media licensing body and a donor-supported independent Cambodian Public Broadcasting Service.

A number of more recently approved and drafted laws also need revision to help become a supportive legal framework for a future free press. These include the Law on Associations and non-Governmental Organization, commonly referred to as “NGO Law”, needs to be revisited and updated. A more promising law still in drafting stage by the Ministry of Information with UNESCO, the draft Law on Access to Information¹⁵ would, in theory, place a burden on public institutions to provide the public with necessary information, especially when requested. The law would certainly benefit the news media sector directly. But given that traditional news consumers play a more important role in the two-way communication nature of digital journalism, the scope of the law would further help media professionals by potentially empowering their news consumers to become “citizen journalists” and contribute to news production. As a necessary policy step, work on the law should involve all relevant stakeholders, including

¹⁵ Current draft can be publicly retrieved at <http://a2i.info.gov.kh/khmer/a2i/A2i-draft-law-ENG.pdf>

citizens, civil society, journalists and media professionals, to reflect its best possible version for the vision 2040 (Taing 2019).

Within this comprehensive legal framework, there will require further carefully crafted regulations and amendments of these laws to accommodate the rapid advent of digital media technologies – and even newer technologies like AI and blockchain - that have and will create new forms of communications and news and information distribution models. Outside of traditional journalism there is already policy discussion on how to regulate ‘fake news’ or disinformation that can rapidly spread online (Livsier 2019), unregistered news websites, non-journalist digital influencers like video bloggers, and even citizen journalists.

While the continued development of a regulatory framework is necessary, it is vital to ensure that these regulations do not evolve, in practice, as a set of barriers that will ultimately undermine press freedom and the development of the media sector. Rather, their regulatory nature should be to uphold the professionalism of the sector. Part of securing political and legal safeguards for a future free media sector will depend on the institution-building, sector professionalization, and some degree of building trust and respect, particularly between the government and Cambodia’s independent media.

Firstly, one positive action already taken by government ministries and institutions in response to some degree of professional media development in Cambodia is the creation of spokespersons and communications specialists for state institutions. This has allowed the government to be more confident in dealing with independent media inquiries and provided more access to more sensitive public information for journalists. Secondly, such trust-building mechanisms can also be further achieved through associations that advocate for the interests of independent journalists and media sector. While there are currently at least 39 press associations (Hun 2019), they are generally considered as not independent or not representing independent journalists. As of writing, a group of Cambodian journalists are awaiting registration of a new association that they hope will better help independent and freelance journalists in the country. The government, the Ministry of Information, and all relevant stakeholders should allow and support such professional associations.

A final, more political, channel for engaging and building trust with independent media and is the now three-year old annual Prime Minister's dinner with journalists, organized by the Ministry of Information. The annual event started in January 2017. Still in early stages of developing into a useful space for collaboration and exchange, it has the potential for building trust and respect with independent media outlets.

Foreign media investment

Also over the next two decades, specific steps need to be taken to strengthen the supply side of media production. This is where democratic and Western stakeholders have been working on and could continue to be most helpful. First of all, relevant stakeholders need to find more ways to more extensively and strategically invest in human resources, capacity building and professionalism of the Cambodian news media industry, not only in Phnom Penh but also in provincial urban areas and small towns. This approach includes creating or expanding journalism training programs, for current journalists, media and communications professionals, news media organizations, as well as citizen journalists across the country. In addition, relevant stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information, and development partners should create more academic degree programs in journalism, media and communications, not only in Phnom Penh but also in provincial universities. Since opening the country's first degree program in journalism and communications in 2001, the Department of Media and Communications at the Royal University of Phnom Penh remains one of the very few journalism schools in the country.¹⁶

Secondly, existing and future training and academic programs should include more relevant skills in digital media, innovation, and media entrepreneurship to allow journalists and media professionals to create new types of sustainable media business models and take advantage of the digital revolution that has disrupted the industry for decades now and for decades to come. It would partly enable journalists to create opportunities for themselves. As a case study, a July

¹⁶ A generally known fact by the author but also confirmed by current acting head of DMC/RUPP

2018 survey of 144 Department of Media and Communications graduates found that only 16 or 11% of graduates were working as actual journalists at the time. The largest group of 48 graduates or 33% said they were working in the “private sector” while the second largest group of 24 graduates or 16% were working for NGOs. This ability for future journalists to create their own opportunities will be important as it is unclear whether there will be as much opportunity in the future as in the past two decades.¹⁷

As of September 2019, only two sizable Khmer-language independent media outlets VOD and VOA are still operational inside the country and able to provide job opportunities for those hoping to practice Western-style journalism. However, in a future scenario of gradual political liberalization, a number of independent media outlets like the Cambodia Daily, Radio Free Asia, could reopen their journalism operations inside the country or more domestic credible news outlet could emerge.

Semi-independent or semi-professional state or private sector news outlets, digital publications, as well as new sustainable news media startups, could further provide an overall environment of more available jobs for journalism graduates. Government documents show that as of July 2019, there were 550 print newspapers, 148 online newspapers, 211 radio stations, 21 TV networks, 113 TV cable channels and 39 press associations (Hun 2019). Finding ways to raise the professional standards of these existing news media operations by engaging them away from overlay state-controlled or self-censored content production, will not only help gradually increase the overall quality of news content but also increase job opportunities for Cambodian journalists and media professionals who seek non-censored work environments. These professionals and professional news operations will hopefully form the core of the Cambodian free press in 2040.

¹⁷ The DMC survey was conducted after a large number of journalism jobs in Cambodia disappeared following the worst government crackdown on independent media in 2017 and with the closure of the Cambodia Daily, Radio Free Asia’s Cambodia operation, and the licence suspensions or closure nationwide of a dozen or so radio stations, many of which carry RFA/VOA programming. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/cambodian-journalist-sees-media-situation-deteriorating/4905439.html>

Another major policy step to building this vibrant free press in 2040 is to find ways to create and grow domestic independent Khmer-language news media outlets to slowly reduce dependency and eventually replace the dominant free press role that foreign-owned English-language papers and foreign-funded Khmer-language broadcasters have played so far. For the majority local language news media consumers of the past few decades, the Khmer-language broadcasts of VOA, RFA, and to a lesser extent Radio France International (RFI), ABC Australia have been their primary news alternative to state-controlled public or private news. While this dependency greatly enhanced Cambodian citizens' access to uncensored critical news, the prominence of these established foreign broadcasters made it much harder for domestic outlets like VOD to compete. In investing in domestic news outlets, stakeholders could look into establishing a future Cambodian Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) or simply investing in existing outlets like NGO-run VOD or transform state media like TVK/AKP into a Cambodian PBS.

To do so, one step that can be implemented immediately is improved partnerships or alignment of existing related initiatives or projects that focus on different components of media development. For instance, in August 2019, UNDP launched the Cambodia Media Lab as part of its Media Alternatives Project (UNDP Cambodia 2019) that focuses on supporting media entrepreneurship in Cambodia. While this project focuses on solutions to important challenges such as finding a sustainable business model for digital media and women empowerment, it does not focus on the larger question of freedom of the press that these successful models would operate under. In fact, a Cambodia media landscaping report commissioned by UNDP released at the launch, calls for the broadening of the definition of media and civic space from just "independent" media to accommodate new digital media products and services (Soon, A & Patel, R.). While such redefinition better embraces the cultural richness brought about by the Internet, it could potentially undermine the values of quality journalism that are the foundation of an informed democracy. Another UN entity with that mandate, Unesco, is currently focusing more on those issues of freedom of expression, press, and access to information. Some of its new initiative appear to focus directly (rightly so) with freelance independent journalists,

possibly also due to the lack of sizable independent media institutions to work with directly after the 2017 closures of the Cambodia Daily, Radio Free Asia office, and later ownership change at the Phnom Penh Post. However, as of September 2019, there appears to be a number of viable independent or professional news outlets that Unesco could collaborate with directly on press freedom issues with, including VOA/CCIM, VOA, RFI, and Southeast Asia Globe.

Expert interviews conducted for this research also agree that professional training in editorial processes, especially in ethical issues of digital journalism, is key to building a visionary professional social institution. This is because from a content production perspective, new and sophisticated production equipment and technology – like smartphones, drones, or artificial intelligence – will likely continue to allow journalists, bloggers, media producers, and citizens, to affordably produce and distribute high-level production quality digital content with ease but they cannot guaranteed an editorially strong news story. In addition, the news media industry was one of the earliest sectors that was disrupted by the digital revolution, and like any other industry today, more mundane jobs within the industry will be replaced by new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) [China has already showcased an AI broadcaster (Kuo 2018)]. Therefore, reporters and editors need to be trained further to focus on innovative and sophisticated content production that will be difficult to replace by machines. Overall, one Cambodian expert interviewed believed that the social science and creative nature of the journalism profession will make it one of the hardest professions to be replaced by AI and by 2040, journalism and media-related jobs could potentially be a more desirable and abundant profession than even today (Ky 2019).

Investing in the future: quality news media consumers

Cambodia's population is projected to reach 20 million in 2040, which almost around 90% are born after the Khmer Rouge, of which a majority will be digital natives. To fully transform this more educated and less traumatized post-war generation into an engaged and informed public, and, thus, a robust critical media consumer, some major education reforms must take place.

Firstly, there should be a shift in national education towards the prioritisation of syllabuses promoting critical thinking. Observers and education experts are frustrated with today's education system's lack of critical thinking and the abundance of digital content with no educational values that take up time for potential learning.¹⁸ Some also suggest that Cambodia's higher educational reform efforts have produced a "hybrid governmentality", where policy discourses are associated with modern democratic values while in practice they are rooted in Cambodia's traditional socio-cultural hierarchical order (Sen, 2017).

Secondly, relevant education policymakers, particularly the ministry of education, need to push for the systematic inclusion of digital media literacy training in national curriculum by partnering with media outlets, technology platforms, and relevant public or private sector partners. The ministry is in early stage of working with Facebook on a policy to integrate digital literacy into the national education framework.¹⁹

Broadly speaking, Cambodia's vision to shift to a complete digital, knowledge-based economy based on innovation as part of its "Industry 4.0" policy would require its labor force to possess more sophisticated technical capacity as well as analytical skills. Although Cambodia's innovation capacity has slowly improved, it still lags behind its Southeast Asian neighbors. While the country is following its neighbor in investing more in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education, there is also growing discussion in the West that the next stage of innovation jobs may require a more well-rounded education with additional soft skills, humanities and arts in 'STEAM' education (American University 2018), subjects that arguably thrive best under academic freedom and free societies that allow for critical debate. The most recent Cambodia Youth Development Index (CYDI) suggests that in general, the quality of education and high drop-out rates between primary and higher education remain a major concern for the country's education system (Ministry of Education 2018). In this regard, the Ministry of Education, with relevant development partners should view

¹⁸ Various interviews and anecdotes from discussion with observers and experts.

¹⁹ I personally discussed this with the Facebook policy representative in Cambodia.

investment in critical thinking in education as potentially creating innovation competitive advantage to accelerate towards a 2040 knowledge-based economy in addition to its benefits for an informed citizenry. To produce this generation of 'smart' news consumer in 2040, stakeholders need to create policies that provide adequate digital and media literacy education to the next generation as they grow up in a digital world of information overload and more sophisticated information manipulation.

The author prefers to use "digital media literacy" for clarification and simplification to refer to the distinct skills of new digital literacy and traditional media literacy capacities that are now considered essential in the age of digital democracy (Hobbs 2010). Increasingly, digital literacy is used to also include media literacy, as is the case of the definition in Unesco's A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator, which defines digital literacy as "the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy" (Unesco 2018).

In the context of digital media consumption, only such education allows a user to "[be] able to determine the authority or time of the information retrieved online" from news websites, unlike getting information from books or journals that would have already been verified by reputable organizations (Unesco & Karpati 2011).

IV. Media Under the Baseline Scenario: Business as Usual in 2040

Given that Cambodia's news media and freedom of expression is tied to the country's political realities – and assuming that those realities will not experience any major changes within the next twenty years – the baseline without any major intervention is a return to the status quo of co-existence between some quality journalism in a state-controlled media ecosystem of propaganda and state-aligned media. Even so, with a future Cambodian political system generally

expected to be less authoritarian and with a 2040 population almost born entirely after the Khmer Rouge, we should reasonably also expect the baseline for Cambodian news media to be likely better than the pre-2017 crackdown status quo.

This status quo as a result of some changes in the political system should see the restoration of a fair degree of freedom of expression enjoyed by ordinary citizens, free political activities of opposition politicians and freedom of NGOs to operate. In terms of the news media, this should overall translate into higher level of access to official and public information and more press freedom than today.

This status quo should also generally reflect a 2040 legal and institutional framework if there are no changes. The broad Constitutional guarantee for freedom of expression and press would remain the same. However, a new access to information law and some updates to existing laws are expected in any case that should in theory support a more open information climate. However, with continued weak domestic media institutions while expected increase in legal bureaucratic process to regulate specific new concepts like fake news or citizen journalists, it is possible that any increase access to information or freedom of expression is evened out by the required bureaucratic or legal processes. Hypothetically, for instance, while a freelance journalist or citizen journalist has more freedom to start a news blog, he or she may be less motivated to do so because of newly required and complicated registration process.

Likewise, without much intervention in the next twenty years, the Cambodian media industry will likely organically evolve into a pre-2017 crackdown state of quantity and quality news outlets (in Khmer and English), mainly concentrated in urban areas. In terms of the independent media part of the industry, we could potentially see emergence of new domestic mass media-level news outlets that have strong innovation and independence characteristics, given a more favorable political environment. However, in that scenario, it would still be hard for these new local outlets to completely replace the established prominences of foreign-owned critical media like RFA or VOA.

As such, an unchanged current level of Western and democratic countries' engagement would likely also lead to a status quo that resembles the pre-2017 crackdown media environment. Quality journalism operations could be larger in size but will likely be led or co-led by Western initiatives or owned-media like US broadcasters discussed earlier. These independent operations would co-exist with Cambodian state-owned or state-aligned media, that may or may not get support from Chinese media that also co-exist to serve the Chinese and Mandarin-speaking community.

On the demand side, while overall the average Cambodian of 2040 will likely be more educated than the average Cambodian in 2019, if the current Cambodian education system with its lack of critical thinking emphasis remains unchanged, the digital native population of 2040 will unlikely be significantly more news-savvy or more media literate, if not less or the same, than the generation of today.

As discussed above, digital and social media, also known as 'new media' today, remains the most promising democratic platform of social expression and by 2040, will have likely become 'traditional media' itself. On the technical side, the last two decades of Cambodia's leapfrogging into the mobile, digital, and social media revolution suggests that the country will not have any major problems adapting to new technologies of the next two decades. However, if any lessons can be drawn from the rise of social media in the last decade on democracy and social change, it is that social and digital media are only as impactful and meaningful as the existing off-line institutions, cultures, and structures on which its content is based on.

In the Cambodian context, if there is not much action taken in the next two decades, social media, particularly Western-platforms like Facebook, in one scenario will continue to be the most important news and social communication channel, however, its potential could also be strongly hindered by government imposed online censorship, self-censorship, and cyber-attacks. The key factors in this baseline then will largely be the nature of Cambodia's political transition into a yet unknown post-Hun Sen form of government. Without any intervention, furthermore, the Chinese factor on Cambodian media ecosystem could

potentially be very significant and within a period of twenty years, it is not implausible that Chinese platforms like WeChat could partly or entirely replace the popularity of Facebook and Western social media platforms in Cambodia, if it has the political and logistical advantages to do so. As can be seen from the growing popularity of Telegram, partly due to the Cambodian government's mandated use of it for official and internal communications purposes, it is clear that no digital platform can maintain its prominence forever without proactive engagement and innovation.

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