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MIKKEL OSTERGAARD/PANOS

# COUNTRY CASE STUDY: **CAMBODIA**

Support to media where  
media freedoms and rights  
are constrained



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## ▶ Executive summary

### Front cover

Girls learning computer skills and graphic design on a course at a vocational training centre in Battambang.

### Right

A weekend outside the Royal Palace, Phnom Penh.

Cambodia emerged just two decades ago from a long period of conflict that wreaked havoc on its population, infrastructure and development. Twenty years on from a UN-supported political transition to democratic government, Cambodia remains a fledgling democracy that is, in essence, run as a single party state. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with Prime Minister Hun Sen at the helm, has been in power since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, and Hun Sen himself is one of the world's longest serving heads of state.<sup>1</sup>

Hun Sen has presided over some substantial development gains during his tenure. Economic growth has been impressive, and has even held firm throughout the global financial crisis. There has been marked progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly in terms of poverty reduction and improvements in health and education. Nevertheless, Cambodia remains one of the least developed countries in Asia.<sup>2</sup> One-third of Cambodians live below the national poverty line<sup>3</sup>, the majority of Cambodians living in rural areas have no access to toilet facilities, and only one-fifth of rural households has electricity.<sup>4</sup>

The country faces a range of acute and largely unaddressed governance challenges. Corruption, for example, is rife, and not only within government; teachers take bribes to teach and medical practitioners ask for payment in return for treatment. Economic gains have been driven by the exploitation of natural resources and unfettered property development. Thousands of Cambodians have been uprooted in the process with no recourse to justice.

China has become the largest foreign donor to Cambodia and, increasingly, the CPP is shunning Western development assistance and the expectations of the international community in relation to governance and the protection of Cambodians' rights.

Pockets of protest and resistance exist within Cambodian society, but a range of social and political barriers prevent more widespread and inclusive debate on issues facing Cambodians and their country. The CPP exercises tight control over information flows within the country, and the majority of the Cambodian media has political affiliations. Profit (and therefore entertainment) and politics drive media content and audience engagement in Cambodia, not public service values.



Significant donor investment over the past 20 years has sought to redress the balance and overcome these challenges to improved governance in Cambodia. This investment has included a focus on media and communication as a primary mechanism to achieve change, with very little research on its actual impact.

This case study seeks to examine this investment in the context of evolving power structures and the media and communication landscape of Cambodia. It concludes that donors would be wise to continue to invest in impact research, maintain a strong focus on governance in their support, and pay greater attention to young audiences and the Internet as a growing source and focus of public dialogue.

■ ■ Cambodia remains one of the least developed countries in Asia. One-third of Cambodians live below the national poverty line. ■ ■





## Background and methodology

This report is one of a series of case studies examining support to, and development of, the media in countries where media freedoms and rights to information and communication are restricted – with a particular focus on people, politics and media. Five case studies focus on Bangladesh, Cambodia, South Sudan, Syria and Uganda. They consider the impact of both policy and practice, and are intended to feed into decision-making at both levels to enable delivery of more focused and effective media support.

Three central questions guided case study research:

- What is the state of media freedom and public dialogue in the country?
- Who is supporting the media (i.e. donors and international civil society organisations) and how?
- What has been the impact of this support?

Studies draw on substantial desk research and in-depth interviews conducted from late 2011 through early 2012. Semi-structured interviews with key media and development stakeholders gathered information on a variety of approaches to, and expectations of, media support. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and in-country where possible.

The Cambodia case study interviewed 20 organisational representatives and independent consultants, including those from local and international civil society organisations, donors and Cambodian media outlets, including the state broadcaster, Radio National of Kampuchea (RNK). Interviews were requested but not granted with other Ministry of Information officials. Many of the interviewees asked not to be named in this report: quotes are therefore attributed by name in some cases and are anonymous in others.



## ▶ The country context

Cambodia remains a fledgling democracy, having emerged only two decades ago from 40 years of conflict. From 1953, when Cambodia gained independence from France, through to the 1980s, and right up until the UN-supported transition and the democratic elections of 1993, Cambodia suffered persistent conflict and instability.

At times, regional conflict has compounded the violence and instability within Cambodia itself, including the repeated bombing of Cambodian territory by American forces during the Viet Nam War in the early 1970s.<sup>5</sup> During the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge that followed, from 1975 to 1979, an estimated two million Cambodians died as a result of political killings, overwork, starvation and disease.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, Cambodia and its people have moved beyond conflict, and are understandably keen to put this dark period of history behind them.

Economic growth over the past five years has been steady (rising by up to 10 per cent annually), and has been driven by expansion of the garment sector, construction, agriculture and tourism and, increasingly, mining. There has been measurable progress against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including

significant poverty reduction, more children completing primary education and decreases in maternal and child mortality and the spread of HIV and AIDS.<sup>7</sup>

Despite improvements on such MDG-related indicators, Cambodia remains one of the least developed countries in Asia.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to formal structures of governance and the extent to which ordinary people are able to influence and contribute to decision-making, progress has been markedly slower and these challenges remain particularly acute.

One third of Cambodians live below the poverty line on around \$0.62 cents per day.<sup>9</sup> An estimated 71 per cent of the population rely upon agriculture for their livelihoods. Infrastructure remains poor: 81 per cent of the population don't have electricity and 66 per cent don't have a toilet or latrine.<sup>10</sup> In stark contrast, most rural Cambodians have access to a mobile phone. Recent estimates put mobile phone penetration nationally at around 70 to 90 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

Among the most pressing challenges, analysts have highlighted widespread public tolerance for government injustice and corruption, alongside a lack of media freedom and genuine public dialogue; Cambodia's continued dependence on and misappropriation of foreign aid<sup>12</sup>; and persistent violation of rights without recourse to justice. The country also faces substantial barriers to governance reform, including a young population that is largely disengaged from politics, and low levels of participation in dialogue and debate that might drive change and expand inclusion in public life and governance.

The Cambodian People's Party (CPP, formerly the KPRP), with Prime Minister Hun Sen at the helm, has maintained a tight grip on power for several decades, making him one of the world's longest serving heads of state. Though the CPP was out-performed by the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) in the 1993 elections, CPP political manoeuvring and internal factionalism within FUNCINPEC enabled Hun Sen to negotiate a ruling coalition between the two parties. Since then, the CPP has consolidated its dominance of Cambodian politics, while the influence of FUNCINPEC has dwindled.

Cambodia is perceived by its own people as highly corrupt, and by international measures as one of the most corrupt countries in both its region and the world. Over the past decade, Cambodia has hovered around a corruption rating of 2.0 (on a scale where 0 indicates highly corrupt and 10 indicates very clean), as measured by Cambodians as part of Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI).<sup>13</sup> Corruption is often identified by Cambodians as one of their most serious concerns, with 2010 research showing that 82 per cent of people see corruption as a problem.<sup>14</sup> An anti-corruption law was introduced in 2010, after more than 15 years in development, and is seen as a priority by the international donor community. There have, however, been few arrests and corruption remains



▶ Cambodia demographics	
Size/location	About 181,000 square kilometres, bordering the Gulf of Thailand, between Thailand, Viet Nam and Laos.
Population	14,139,000 (2010). Around 60% of Cambodians are under the age of 25, with a median age of 22.9 years.
Poverty	Around 35% of the country's population lives below the national poverty line.
Ethnic groups	Khmers make up 90% of the population. Ethnic minorities include Vietnamese (5%), Chinese (1%), and other (4%).
Religions	Buddhist 96.4%, Muslim 2.1%, other and unspecified, 1.5%.
Languages	Khmer (official language), with 95% of the population fluent in that language. Other languages include French and English.
Literacy	Total population: 73.6% Male: 84.7% Female: 64.1%
Urbanisation	Most Cambodians live outside the capital, Phnom Penh (almost 80%) where poverty levels are highest and education and literacy rates lag behind those in urban areas.
Resources	Cambodia is rich in timber and minerals; exploration for potential crude oil and natural gas reserves is currently underway. Major trade partners include China, Thailand, the USA and Hong Kong. Forestry and development are significant sources of revenue; over the past 15 years, the Government has leased 45% of the country's land to private investors.

Sources: Cambodian Census 2008, United Nations Statistics Division, CIA World Factbook and World Bank Cambodia profile.





Left  
Filming the drama series,  
*Loy9 Dream*.

endemic from national through to commune level. Its pervasiveness is illustrated clearly by the extent to which people accept or tolerate corrupt practices, particularly when they are seen to improve efficiency or provide personal benefit.<sup>15</sup>

One of many efforts to increase transparency, devolve power and tackle corruption has included an ambitious programme of decentralisation developed over the past two decades with substantial support from the international community. Given the country's history of highly centralised and autocratic rule, incremental rather than fundamental reform is to be expected, and has been documented through both expert observation and research. A recent study of local governance processes in Cambodia points out that the reform process is still at an early stage. Specifically, it notes that "respective roles for the three tiers of Government are not yet clearly defined, various accountability relations remain unclear, and citizen voice and participation in decision-making remains a foreign concept a decade after it was introduced".<sup>16</sup>

An additional and significant challenge – closely related to challenges of decentralisation and pervasive corruption – is the lack of popular participation and inclusion in governance.

Decades of conflict have had a heavy impact on both Cambodia's demographics and its social capital. Cambodia had one of the youngest and least educated populations in the world when democratic government was established in the 1990s. Today, 65 per cent of the population is aged 29 or under, and only 6 per cent of its people are over the age of 60.<sup>17</sup> Education levels are improving and, while there is a clear sense of optimism and pride in this generation's

outlook, levels of interest in politics and governance are relatively low. A recent study found that 69 per cent of young people are either not interested in politics or hold no opinions about it. Youth have only a limited understanding of democratic concepts and deference to authority is the norm.<sup>18</sup>

While some pockets of government appear more permissive than others, there is little political will across the board to support a more open and inclusive political culture in Cambodia. Coupled with this, any incentives to support such a shift on the part of government are weakening. Diplomatic pressure from traditional western donors has, in the past, had a real influence on Cambodian policy, but the emergence of China as one of the largest donors to Cambodia (along with Japan, and the increasingly visible South Korea) has tipped the balance.

There are few constructive public fora within which these issues can be acknowledged and challenged. Media freedom is relatively constrained, and public demand for inclusion in decision-making and the accountability of government is fairly limited. A small number of donors see the media and more free and frank communication as potential drivers of openness and accountability, and have invested in a range of voice and accountability mechanisms over the past two decades. These include investments through the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), through local and international civil society, and through the media itself, which continues to undergo a transition that, in many ways, mirrors that of the country's political development.

🗨️ Citizen voice and participation in decision-making remains a foreign concept a decade after it was introduced. 🗨️





COLIN SPURWAY/BBC MEDIA ACTION

## ▶ The media context

Above  
Farmer watching  
kick-boxing, Ah Ray Ksat  
Commune.

What news there is follows the Government line and is usually adapted from the news issued by the Ministry of Information.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, many of Cambodia's journalists were killed or fled the country.<sup>19</sup> The Vietnamese-led Government that followed the fall of the Khmer Rouge allowed only Communist Bloc propaganda. By the time the 1991 Paris Peace accords brought the promise of democratic processes to Cambodia, there had been no independent media for almost a quarter of a century. There was very limited institutional memory on which to build a functioning media when, under the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), media freedom was promoted and supported as a central component of transitional arrangements. Support to the media was provided during the UNTAC-sponsored elections in 1993 through the formation of radio UNTAC.

There was tentative media growth following the Peace Accords, as exiled resistance members returned to Cambodia. This soon gathered pace, swelling the number of registered news organisations from around 20 at the time of the 1993 elections, to 50 one year later and 200 by the elections of 1998.<sup>20</sup> Today, there are more than 10 television stations (a mix of state and privately-owned broadcasters) and over 80 radio stations reach most of the country's overwhelmingly rural population.

Television reaches more people than any other media, with around 60 per cent of Cambodians watching TV on a weekly basis.<sup>21</sup> A 2010 survey of young Cambodians found that three quarters of young people watch TV on a monthly basis, with higher levels of viewership in urban areas (92 per cent) but still significant viewership in rural areas (74 per cent). Monthly TV viewing rates were found to increase alongside a person's education level, from 69 per cent of those with only primary or no formal education, to 92 per cent of those with high school or university education.<sup>22</sup> These patterns are backed up by earlier research, including a 2008 survey that found that 81 per cent of all respondents (15-29) had watched television in the past month, with access to TV relatively equal by gender.<sup>23</sup>

All main television stations are known or believed to be linked to the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).<sup>24</sup> What news there is follows the Government line and is usually adapted from the news issued by the Ministry of Information. The TV stations are sustained largely by advertising and product promotion, with entire programmes sponsored by companies. As a result, station agendas and schedules are driven by profit, rather than by public interest and there is little investment in production and local content. Instead, a substantial amount of content is imported from China and South Korea and dubbed into Khmer. Soap



operas, action movies and music entertainment shows are now the staple of local TV. Karaoke video compact discs (VCDs) and films are also popular in areas where media access is severely limited, and are often shown in small coffee shops.

Radio is largely controlled by the State through the granting, denial or withdrawing of licences. A few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are, however, trying to use radio to offer different political viewpoints, even though a crowded radio market means that the resulting dialogue is limited and, very largely, local. Research by BBC Media Action has estimated that 65 per cent of the population had listened to the radio in the previous month.<sup>25</sup> More recent research among young people found lower listenership levels among that group, at just 58 per cent, indicating, perhaps, a wider downward trend.<sup>26</sup>

A large number of radio stations – around 80 – compete for limited audiences, and none have more than a 20 per cent market-share.<sup>27</sup> While most young listeners tune into radio for music, almost half listen to news, and around one-fifth of listeners report listening to programmes on health and education, as well as discussion or debate programmes.<sup>28</sup>

International broadcasters are also present in Cambodia and have Khmer language services. Voice of America, Radio Free Asia and ABC Australia broadcast limited schedules on short-wave, medium-wave and on partner FM stations. Radio France International and China Radio International have their own FM transmitters. During the 2012 commune council elections, however, international broadcasters were banned by the Government from broadcasting on partner FM stations.

Only 8 per cent of the population gets its information from a newspaper and only 3 per cent from a magazine.<sup>29</sup> This is a result, in part, of the country's relatively low literacy rates – particularly outside the capital Phnom Penh – but it is also linked to the lack of a reading culture in Cambodia.<sup>30</sup> The Khmer language press is politically affiliated and even the largest newspapers have circulations of only around 40,000 readers. The readership of English language newspapers is believed to stand at a similar level.<sup>31</sup>

Internet access statistics vary considerably. Estimates from the World Bank, based on its own data and data from the International Telecommunications Union, put access at just 0.5 per cent of the population in 2009, jumping to 1.3 per cent in 2010.<sup>32</sup> Several recent population surveys have found higher levels of usage: two nationally representative surveys undertaken by BBC Media Action in 2010 found that 4 per cent of respondents in all age groups had ever used the Internet, and 6 per cent of all young people.<sup>33</sup> The number of Facebook users exceeds 500,000, half of whom are aged under 25,<sup>34</sup> and the country already has around 30 Internet Service Providers (ISPs).<sup>35</sup> Most young people access the Internet through mobile phones and Internet cafes, rather than through computers at home.<sup>36</sup> In short, access is expanding, though not particularly rapidly.

## An emerging digital democracy for Cambodians?

While Internet access in Cambodia is on the rise, improvement in access has been incremental, at best, when compared with the explosive growth seen in other developing countries. Internet penetration in Myanmar, for example, has outpaced that in Cambodia. Less than 10% of Cambodians use the Internet at all, with estimates ranging between 0.5% and 6%.

Cambodia's blogosphere comprises a relatively small but dedicated group of 'cloggers' (Cambodian bloggers). Most blogging is in English, with Khmer script being notoriously problematic in technical terms. Sopheap Chak, a young former human rights advocate, is a particularly prominent clogger who aims to contribute to and facilitate discussion on a range of governance and development problems facing Cambodia.

While citizen journalism appears to be on the rise, and clogging has gained a profile and reputation, the use of the Internet for discussion and debate is relatively limited. 2010 research undertaken by BBC Media Action found that, of those using the Internet (up to 6% of youth), the vast majority use it for entertainment, email and professional purposes. Few young people report having used Facebook for any purpose other than socialising.

Language and cost are significant barriers to Internet access. Those with limited English language skills are less likely to use it, and the cost varies substantially across provinces as well as between urban and rural areas. Women and girls, in particular, are less able to access the Internet (with 3.4% of young women accessing Internet compared with 8.4% of young men).

There are clear opportunities in relation to increased access and use of the Internet and mobile and social networks to engage actively on substantive issues – particularly among the roughly one-third of young people who report an interest in politics – and a sense that, at least in principle, Cambodians should question decisions and actions taken by the Government and other power-holders.

Sources: International Telecommunications Union, BBC Media Action nationwide research conducted in 2010.

Below  
Clothing kiosk,  
covered  
market,  
Ponnea Leu  
District.



COLIN SPURWAY/BBC MEDIA ACTION

Cambodia has no broadcast law or media regulatory mechanism, leaving the media open to political manipulation.

In contrast to the steady but comparatively low growth of Internet access, mobile telephony is almost universal.

Substantial post-UNTAC investment in mobile communications made Cambodia the first country in the world where the number of mobile subscriptions overtook fixed line telephone connections.<sup>37</sup> Today, there are nine mobile phone providers.<sup>38</sup> Second-hand handsets are relatively inexpensive and aggressive competition among the mobile companies keeps call prices relatively low. Most Cambodians reportedly own at least two SIM cards, and mobile packages increasingly include

mobile Internet, providing an affordable alternative to home computers and Internet services.

### Media freedom and regulation

Cambodia's current leadership rules over a country with weak infrastructure, high levels of poverty and weak political opposition: "we have all the factors ideal for absolute power," said Naly Pilorge, Director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (LICADHO), a local human rights organisation.<sup>39</sup> Building on a tradition of control of information flows and intimidation of open discussion within the media (and more broadly the public sphere), the Government has little incentive to tolerate or support media freedom. Indeed, "the Government sees the press as the enemy," noted one interviewee who declined to be named. Around 10 journalists have been killed in Cambodia since 1992<sup>40</sup> and defamation law suits against journalists are increasingly on the rise.

The Cambodian media is regulated by the Ministry of Information, which has close ties to the CPP Government. The Minister is believed to be relatively open-minded and willing to allow a number of media freedoms, but his

power is limited. A large number of journalism associations have been established since 1993, but thanks to their large number (which divides loyalties and funding opportunities) and their relative inexperience, none are yet able to represent the media community or ensure international standards of media behaviour.

Cambodia's 1993 Constitution guarantees a series of freedoms associated with a functional democracy, including freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The Press Law is based on a media charter drafted in the early 1990s by UNTAC and took effect in 1995.<sup>41</sup> While apparently offering significant freedoms, it limits those freedoms with clauses that allow for the suspension of a newspaper if it harms national security or political stability or if it humiliates politicians.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has increasingly invoked these clauses to limit media freedoms and there is widespread concern that the new penal code introduced in 2010 "contains a number of excessive restrictions on freedom of expression".<sup>42</sup> For example, Beehive Radio, run by former opposition politician Mam Sonando, and seen as one of only two true opposition radio stations now broadcasting in Cambodia, had its licence revoked in 1998 after it broadcast allegations of election irregularities. Sonando was forced to flee the country and, since his return in 1999, has been jailed twice on charges of 'incitement' and 'disinformation'. At the time of publication of this report Sonando was being held in custody, accused of participating in a secessionist movement in the north-eastern province of Kratie.

Cambodia has no broadcast law or media regulatory mechanism, leaving the media open to political manipulation. This has led to the creation of a strongly pro-CPP broadcast media. Programmes and stations deemed unsupportive of the Government are occasionally taken off the air or their editors are told to alter content if they wish to continue broadcasting. In 2010, an opposition political programme broadcast by Radio FM 90 (which is affiliated with the FUNCINPEC Party) was banned in eight provinces, with no reason given for this.

Local elections held in mid-2012 provide a snapshot of the Government's influence and, at times, overt control. In its report on the conduct of elections, the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) found that less airtime was being allocated to opposition parties than in previous elections, as well as overt support for the CPP (and criticism of the opposition) on private television stations.<sup>43</sup> An election day ban on the broadcast of US-produced content was, in effect, a ban on independent broadcasters, given that a number of these re-broadcast programmes were produced by Voice of America and Radio Free Asia. According to the Cambodian news blog K-I-Media, Ministry of Information official San Putheary confirmed that "we banned all stations that handle VOA and RFA programmes." K-I-Media also reported that the National Election Committee had been unaware of the ban.<sup>44</sup>

Below Independent Cambodian news site K-I-Media.







MARK HENLEY/PANOS

## ▶ The media and public dialogue

The extent of public dialogue and discussion on government policy and implementation in Cambodia is shaped not only by the media’s capacity to supply and support such a conversation, but also – and significantly – by the extent of popular demand for such dialogue.

In general, the level of public awareness about democratic processes and the role that citizens might play in them is low. 2010 research among young Cambodians found only limited understanding of concepts such as democracy and human rights. While ‘human rights’ was a universally familiar term, one quarter of respondents did not understand what those human rights actually were. ‘Democracy’ was also a familiar term but less so, with three-quarters having heard of it but few able to define it.<sup>45</sup>

A number of commentators have tried to explain this public disengagement from politics and, to some extent, from public life, by pointing to the significant cultural influence of Buddhism. As the dominant religion in Cambodia, Buddhism is tied very closely to a sense of cultural and national identity: the country’s motto translates as ‘Nation, Religion, King’. Much more than simply a dominant religion, Buddhism is often regarded as a “social doctrine encompassing all aspects of life”<sup>46</sup> Outside

the family, the Buddhist pagoda is, in many communities, the main social institution.<sup>47</sup> While many villages lack other associations such as clubs and cultural groups, almost all Cambodians are active members of the Wat (temple).<sup>48</sup>

Theravada Buddhism’s focus on the individual and collective pursuit of moral behaviour and enlightenment appears, in some respects, to contain central elements that are highly complementary to those of liberal democracy. In practice, however, “historically Buddhism has [often] provided legitimisation for political power, especially authoritarian political power in the form of absolute monarchy”.<sup>49</sup> King Sihanouk, a highly politicised figure who led the struggle for Cambodia’s independence and who held a variety of political roles, including that of President,<sup>50</sup> after his abdication in 1955, has been said to have benefited from the legitimacy conferred by the Buddhist world view of Cambodians.

Sihanouk’s second abdication in 2004 was a turning point, and the current King, Norodom Sihamoni, has little authority in the public domain. But, while “Buddhism now plays an ambiguous role in the legitimisation of political power in Cambodia”, according to writer Martin Stuart Fox,<sup>51</sup> its traditions and social influence can still be expected

### Above

A monk passes a half-painted statue of Buddha in the workshop of one of Prayuvong’s Buddha factories.



Journalists are relatively susceptible to self-censorship and bribery; the expectation of financial reward to either write or not write a story is widespread.

**Below**  
Recording the sexual health radio phone-in programme *Hip Hop Girls* in Phnom Penh.



COLIN SPURWAY/BBC MEDIA ACTION

to underpin public attitudes towards politics, public life and any challenge to authority. Buddhism remains the sole institution that cuts across deep political divisions in Cambodia. A number of scholars and analysts have contended that hierarchy and patronage within Cambodian society are tolerated – and possibly underpinned – by Buddhist concepts of karma and a desire for stability.<sup>52</sup> As the King’s influence over public affairs has all but disappeared over the past eight years, that of the Government has gone from strength to strength – particularly in relation to media and communication. Prime Minister Hun Sen presides over what is, in essence, a one-party state, and is actively reducing the space for democratic discussion through the media, which is viewed by the CPP as more of a propaganda

tool than a forum for debate. The Cambodian Television Network (CTN), the country’s most popular TV station, has close political links with the CPP through its owner, Kith Meng. According to CTN General Manager Glen Felgate, Meng is: “a business man. He is well connected because he’s helped the Government do a lot of things. The Government uses us to get its message out, as do other influential people.”<sup>53</sup>

Legal amendments and the passage of new laws are closing avenues for public discussion of issues and political alternatives to the CPP, and making criticism of the Government an increasingly risky venture. The media, which lacks, for the most part, the capacity to stand up to a powerful political force that would prefer to muzzle it, is being muffled still further by threats of economic sanction (via the withdrawal of advertising if seen as anti-government) and the intimidation and persecution of individual reporting staff.

Journalists are relatively susceptible to self-censorship and bribery; the expectation of financial reward to either write or not write a story is widespread. In its 2007 survey, LICADHO found that 25 per cent of reporters said they knew someone who had taken money in return for favourable coverage, and a further 34 per cent knew someone who had done so in return for not writing a story. This has a knock-on effect in terms of the calibre of students and trainees drawn to the profession. Journalism, associated with bribery and bias, is not a respected career choice in Cambodia and does not attract strong candidates. “Our students study journalism because they are poor and have few other options,” said a senior staff member of the Royal University of Phnom Penh’s Department of Media and Communications.<sup>54</sup>

### Questioning the system

Against this cultural backdrop, and taking into account the country’s political development, it is clear that there are real obstacles to genuine public service media. What does exist is a niche but established tradition of resistance media on the one hand and, on the other, a latent sense of optimism and potential among young people that change is both possible and perhaps desirable.<sup>55</sup>

Many of those who established media outlets during the UNTAC-led transition honed their skills with resistance radio stations, often working outside the country and building up enduring international networks of support. A small number of these groups and individuals, now operating from within the country, continue to openly question the system, protected by foreign passports and/or networks of support.

Beehive Radio’s Mam Sonando, for example, holds a French passport and his overseas support base, particularly among the Cambodian diaspora, is strong. Despite the Government’s repeated attempts to silence his station, “they can’t pull me down,” he said.<sup>56</sup> Sonando, who makes



no secret of his political ambitions to improve the quality of democracy in Cambodia, has been arrested and detained on numerous occasions.

Another high profile campaigner, Doctor Kek Galabru, played a role in negotiating the Paris Peace Accords and founded LICADHO. Doctor Galabru comes from a family that has, historically, had political influence and is still “a big name in Cambodia. [She] is untouchable,” according to Laura Thornton, Country Director for the National Democratic Institute (NDI).<sup>57</sup> LICADHO’s current Director, Galabru’s daughter, holds dual French and Cambodian citizenship and believes that it is her outspokenness, rather than a willingness to address issues quietly behind closed doors, that protects her: “because we are so public we’re harder to shut down,” she said.<sup>58</sup>

Despite their high profile, the reality is that pro-democracy and reform media platforms reach relatively small audiences. In addition to a number of smaller Cambodian radio stations, members of the public wishing to access unbiased news tune into foreign radio stations<sup>59</sup> or English language newspapers produced in Cambodia. These play a niche but important role in facilitating public debate in Cambodia and are among the best sources of information on the issues around which these debates flow. The Government is relatively permissive when it comes to English language newspaper and foreign broadcaster content. While this may be because of their established editorial independence, there may also be a perception that these outlets do not pose any serious risk of mobilising opposition and public action, given their limited audiences.

Despite a shrinking of space, there are some signs that the Cambodian people, particularly young people, want to be more engaged and that parts of the media, given adequate resources and capacity, would like to support them. “Our biggest readership is Khmer students...who have no institutional memory that makes them afraid of Hun Sen or the CPP...Young people are getting smarter all the time,” said a foreign newspaper editor.<sup>60</sup>

Labour activism is rising, according to the Arbitration Council, and anti-corruption protests are increasing both in number and in size. “No-one’s going to fight the system” yet, but as corruption continues to worsen and public anger rises in response “people (will) become very vocal,” said NDI’s Laura Thornton.<sup>61</sup>

Citizen journalism has emerged, with people posting videos from their mobile handsets on YouTube. The most-viewed videos – those that actually ‘go viral’ – usually include robberies or traffic accidents and, on one occasion, a wealthy man in an SUV running over a policeman’s motorbike and driving off. A number of high-profile incidents have led to media coverage and the prosecution of perpetrators,<sup>62</sup> but most of the time such crimes are committed with impunity. And the extent to which there is a possible rise in citizen journalism needs to be put into context. The SUV video has been viewed 58,000 times



COLIN SPURWAY/BBC MEDIA ACTION

on YouTube, suggesting that ‘going viral’ in Cambodia doesn’t carry the same meaning as elsewhere.

Such protest does, however, indicate resistance and refusal in some cases to accept corruption and the violation of Cambodians’ rights. Individuals and communities have – and do – face substantial risks in taking part in protests. In January 2012, for example, 13 women were sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for protesting against their eviction from the land where their homes once stood. In June, the prominent environmentalist Chut Wutty was shot dead under suspicious circumstances and amid conflicting accounts of what actually happened. The inquest will be presided over by a committee that has been criticised as being loaded with politicians.<sup>63</sup> Across the board, protest and demand for accountability rarely, if ever, lead to any real debate, dialogue or negotiation, and are too often shut down without recourse to either formal justice or public discussion.

**Above**  
An NGO worker is interviewed by BBC Media Action.



## ▶ Donor responses and media support

Initial donor support in Cambodia focused heavily on development and, specifically, on training and capacity building to fill the vacuum left by the genocide of the 1970s. Donors offered myriad short courses to a new generation of journalists hoping to take the place of those lost during the Khmer Rouge era and to support the newspapers and radio stations that emerged under UNTAC. Meanwhile, UNTAC itself led the field by establishing Radio UNTAC, the first autonomous radio service set up by the UN in a peacekeeping zone. Radio UNTAC invested around \$3 million in establishment and training costs; a modest amount in the context of the overall peacekeeping mission but significant by media support standards. Radio UNTAC operated for around one year, focusing largely on the electoral process, and closed shortly after the 1993 elections – a move seen as an ‘historic mistake’ by some.<sup>64</sup>

Over the course of a few short years, “millions of dollars [were] spent by the international community to train journalists and encourage free expression”, according to Monroe Price.<sup>65</sup> The Asia Foundation, Indochina Media Memorial Fund, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Internews, AusAID, the Governments of Canada and Sweden (CIDA and Sida), Freedom Forum, Japan Relief for Cambodia, and many others provided or funded short courses. Many were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to support more long-term capacity building activities and the lack of a clearer long-term media development strategy. According to Jamie Hyo-Jin Lee, UNESCO’s Communications and Information Focal Point in Phnom Penh, “efforts [were] really scattered”. Because “it was nothing but training” with little follow up, “there just weren’t the outlets for [students and trainees] to practise good journalism”, added a foreign news editor in Phnom Penh who asked not to be named.<sup>66</sup>

Nearly two decades after the 1993 elections, Cambodia remains heavily reliant on official development assistance (ODA), which accounted for 9.4 per cent of GDP in 2010. ODA has increased at an average annual increase of 11.6 per cent, slightly higher than the international average for developing countries of 10.9 per cent. Japan has, for some time, been the most substantial donor to Cambodia, although China has increased its assistance steadily in recent years, and its assistance is expected to exceed that of Japan in 2011/12. Other substantial donors include the Asian Development Bank, the United States, the Global Fund and Australia.<sup>67</sup>

This shifting balance has been accompanied by some friction and manoeuvring between the Government of Cambodia and more traditional donors. Last year the World Bank suspended all new loans to Cambodia amid concerns about a property development scheme.<sup>68</sup> In response, the Government postponed the next donor meeting until 2014. While NGOs have been critical of international donors for failing to leverage substantial development assistance to insist on improved government

accountability,<sup>69</sup> the reality is that any potential leverage these donors have is now diminishing.

At the same time, support to governance initiatives across the board is declining. “There is donor fatigue with Cambodia... [and] a sense that no more progress is going to be made [in relation to governance],” said a donor representative who asked not to be named. In relation to the governance programmes that often offer media assistance, “You’re seeing a massive exodus of funds,” said Laura Thornton of NDI. “There’s no political will to make any change and donors are wising up. They are becoming more careful about the use of resources.”<sup>70</sup> Where tentative interest remains, said another donor staff member, western “donors don’t have a strategic approach to supporting the media...nobody has the courage, it’s too sensitive”.<sup>71</sup>

China, meanwhile, has a long history of supporting media in Cambodia. The country’s second radio station after Radio National Kampuchea (RNK), in Stung Meanchey, was reportedly funded by the Chinese Government back in 1960.<sup>72</sup> The emergence of China Radio International (CRI) on FM in Phnom Penh a few years ago, broadcasting in Mandarin and Khmer, is yet another sign of Cambodia’s importance to China. There was also the visit by China’s president, Hu Jintao, on the eve of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit; which commentators say was to silence discussion on the territorial dispute in the South China Sea.<sup>73</sup>

Support to media development and voice and accountability initiatives are now limited to a relatively small sub-set of donors that include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), AusAID and, more recently, Sida.

### A shifting focus for donors

Donors such as UNDP and the EU are moving away from an exclusive focus on support to electoral processes to support longer term programmes that focus more broadly on governance and ‘deepening democracy’ in the case of UNDP, and voice and human rights in the case of the EU. For UNDP, this represents a shift away from a previous emphasis on support for media training and initiatives in the Ministry of Information; working with TV-K and RNK. For example, UNDP has supported the TV-K programmes *Equity Weekly* and the mainly election-focused *Equity News*. UNDP’s current work incorporates a two-track approach that works with formal governance structures (through the *Equity* programmes) as well as targeting youth directly through more popular programming in partnership with BBC Media Action.

Australia’s aid programme to Cambodia (currently totalling \$95.7 million per year) focuses on agriculture, health, infrastructure and justice. For a number of years now, this support has also included a reasonably substantial component of media support. “Australia is part of this region. We’re not going to go away,” said Jennifer Lean, First Secretary for Development Cooperation,

China has a long history of supporting media in Cambodia.





VOBHELA/AP/GETTY IMAGES

AusAID Cambodia.<sup>74</sup> Despite having faced significant challenges in working with RNK as part of the Demand for Good Governance Project, AusAID plans to continue supporting media. In 2011, the agency hired Internets to design a regional development strategy and the agency works in close partnership with ABC International Development (ABC ID), part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Sida has focused its work in Cambodia on democratisation and decentralisation, human rights, civil society development and education for some time. Support to media and advancing media freedom sits within Sida's human rights work, with support channelled through UNDP and UNICEF and provided directly to civil society organisations. Worried by the shrinking space for

public dialogue, Sweden plans to launch dedicated media development programmes in Cambodia in 2012, according to Anette Dahlstrom, the Embassy's First Secretary. In mid-2012, Sida hosted a two day workshop in Phnom Penh looking at press freedom and freedom of expression.

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), a German political foundation, has been a particularly active media supporter in Cambodia since starting work there in 1994. Its objectives centre on strengthening democracy, the rule of law and human rights, with media development as one of seven focal areas within the organisation's strategy. KAS works mainly with media associations and training institutions in partnership with the Club of Cambodian Journalists and the Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

**Above**  
Filming inside the infamous Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, also known as S-21, where thousands of Cambodians died during the brutal 1975-79 regime.



## Current media support initiatives

Following a flurry of post-transition investment in media, donor support to media today comprises a relatively small number of substantial multi-year projects in addition to smaller funding commitments channelled directly to Cambodian media organisations and NGOs. No coordination mechanism exists – either within the donor or NGO community – but a broad categorisation of support is possible.

First, a substantial amount of media support has focused on building the capacity of media (including outlets and associations) and educational institutions. A second and distinct approach aims to engage large audiences through other mass media. Third, significant amounts of funding have sought to build voice and accountability objectives into programmes that focus on other thematic areas, such as health and education. And further support is provided directly to Cambodian civil society organisations and media organisations to support overall operations and specific projects that tend to be shorter-term.

Under the Demand for Good Governance Programme funded by the World Bank, ABC ID worked with RNK for a number of years to produce talkback programmes addressing a variety of public issues and build the capacity of RNK to produce high quality programming that responds to audience needs. The strategy of ABC ID has since shifted to work more closely with local radio in three provinces, including direct engagement with the Provincial Department of Information. This project aims to build the capacity of local media professionals; to strengthen local demand for accountability; and strengthen links between emerging broadcasters, media research and the Provincial Department of Information.

The approach adopted by BBC Media Action focuses on assessing and meeting the needs of specific target audiences. Much of the BBC’s earlier work focused on

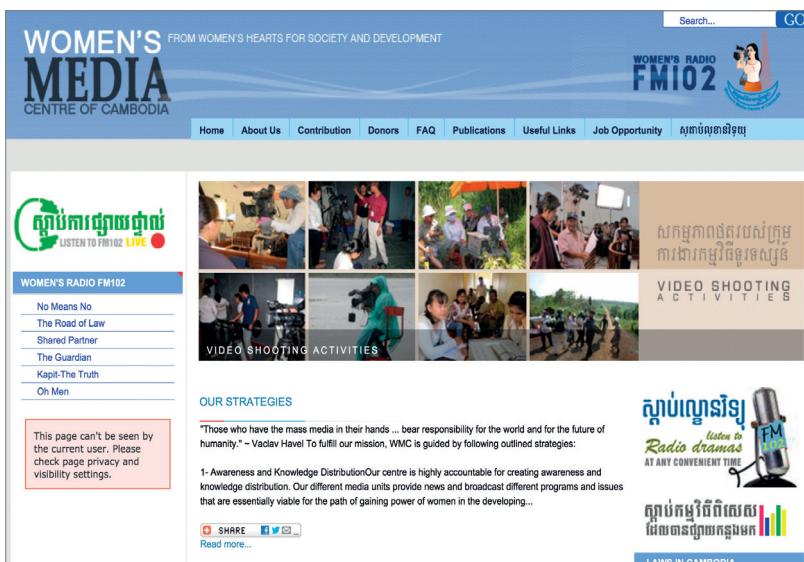
the area of health, which had a significant impact on voice and accountability in this area. Health work funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) from 2003 to 2006 introduced live phone-ins on the national radio station in Cambodia for the first time ever. A range of media organisations have since built on this initiative, often with a more explicit focus on governance issues. BBC Media Action is now working with UNDP funding to implement a multi-year programme that aims to increase awareness of the issues facing young people and give them opportunities to become more engaged in their communities and in public life.

UNDP is also working directly with TV-K to produce *Equity Weekly*. “(We) have to be very careful with the scripts. Sometimes the Deputy Editor of TV-K will come and talk to UNDP if he has some concerns”, said one member of the programme’s staff who asked not to be named. Those involved in making the programme see its sustainability as limited and tied to UNDP’s involvement. “Without donor funding, TV-K will find it difficult” to continue to produce the show, said one TV-K producer who asked not to be named.<sup>75</sup>

A range of projects have aimed to build and strengthen media associations, such as UNESCO’s work with the Press Council of Cambodia and the support from KAS for the development of a journalism degree at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Others, such as the Women’s Media Centre and Voice of Democracy, have sponsored Cambodian radio programming that focuses on governance.

Often working with limited budgets, projects led by local organisations (and even larger scale, international initiatives) have only been able to measure success on the basis of anecdotal evidence, feedback from listeners and other stakeholders, and on quantitative indicators, such as the number of programmes produced. Gauging the broader impact on audiences and governance outcomes is far more difficult and costly, though the fragmentation of the radio landscape and the small reach of most stations suggests that this impact may be limited.

Below  
The home page of the Women’s Media Centre (WMC) of Cambodia.





COLIN SPURWAY/BBC MEDIA ACTION

## ▶ Research on the impact of the media

Until recently, research that aims to understand the information and communication realities of Cambodians and assess the impact of donor-funded media support has been relatively limited. As mentioned, any assessment of the impact of projects on voice and accountability work has relied largely on anecdotal evidence and programme monitoring. The TV-K programme *Equity Weekly*, for example, has not been able to quantify audience levels and engagement, and relies instead on individual testimony to demonstrate some level of impact, according to a producer who asked to remain anonymous.

Over the past two to three years, however, a number of major research initiatives have provided quite detailed insight into not only Cambodians' media use, but also their attitudes towards governance and public dialogue, political norms and levels of engagement with democratic processes and concepts.

As part of a global research effort, the Media Map Project has recently completed a very detailed analysis of media support over the past 20 years in Cambodia. Funded by the Gates Foundation and the Brookings Institute, and implemented by Internews, the project mapped donor

support to Cambodian media from 1990-2010. Based on around 40 in-depth interviews, the study aims to provide an overview of the impact of donor support and highlight gaps in the research, providing a comprehensive and useful overview of evolving donor strategies, as well as international and local perceptions of the impact of media support. The study is due for publication in mid-2012.

Research is embedded in both design and delivery of BBC Media Action's projects and, as a result, the organisation has carried out substantial population research over the past eight years. While the 2008 Cambodia Sentinel Study was undertaken as part of an HIV and AIDS project, a core component involved research on people's exposure to, attitudes towards and consumption of media. More recent research, undertaken in 2010 and 2011, has focused more explicitly on youth and civic engagement and the way in which young people under the age of 25 make use of the media. Work on a nationally representative survey has been complemented by in-depth qualitative work, providing a comprehensive picture of how young people interact with media, how they communicate and what drives and constrains their participation in public life,

**Above**  
Filming BBC Media Action's *Loy9* drama pilot shoot on location in Kandal Province.



particularly in relation to governance issues.

BBC Media Action has undertaken large-scale qualitative surveys for some time, not only to inform programme design, but also to assess the impact of programme components. Quantitative research in 2010 among young people was commissioned by UNDP as a baseline for BBC Media Action's civic engagement programme, against which the progress of the project will be measured over three years.

ABC ID projects will undertake qualitative research in 2012 in three provinces: Battambang, Kompong Cham and Kampot. Engaging with rural audiences, media professionals and decision-makers, the research aims to gain a detailed understanding of governance issues and challenges within each province and perceptions of the current state of Cambodia's media.

Support to research efforts is increasing, even within the context of reduced support to governance interventions.

**Below**  
A Cambodian woman reads a copy of *The Phnom Penh Post* at a news stand in Phnom Penh.



TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Research will inform the design of ABC ID's Cambodia Communication Assistance Project, act as a baseline for the project and build local research capacity through partnership with local researchers.

The Cambodian human rights organisation LICADHO has undertaken two surveys of media freedom over the past five years, publishing 'Reading Between the Lines: How Politics, Money & Fear Control Cambodia's Media' in 2008 and 'Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Cambodia's Media' in 2009. Both initiatives were supported by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the British Embassy; now the only potential mechanism for UK governance and media support since DFID closed its assistance programme to Cambodia in 2011. While limited in scope, these surveys have aimed to map media ownership and the political affiliation of all major media outlets in Cambodia, including rural and international radio broadcasters.

Working with Freedom House, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) commissioned qualitative and quantitative research in four provinces in late 2011/early 2012. Research, comprising a survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups with members of the public culminated in the policy briefing 'Access of information: Advancing research and actions'.

While all of this research has focused primarily on the information and communication needs of Cambodians in relation to governance, a number of other organisations conduct complementary research that focuses specifically on people's perceptions of, and engagement in, governance.

For example, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has sponsored annual national surveys of Cambodian public opinion since 2004, measuring attitudes toward democracy and identifying what citizens deem to be Cambodia's most pressing issues. Over the years this polling has detected growing optimism (on whether Cambodia is headed in the right direction) focused largely on the development of the country's economy and infrastructure. At the other end of the scale, the high cost of living, corruption and poverty have featured consistently at the top of people's lists of pressing challenges to the country. Research efforts such as those undertaken by IRI provide a useful source of data for comparison, generating a more complete picture of people's understanding of, and engagement with, governance issues that can feed into the strategies and programme development of both donors and media support organisations.

Taken as a whole, there seems to be increasing acknowledgement of, and support for, research in this area in Cambodia, albeit within the context of limited support overall to media and governance interventions. This is a promising development, with the potential for a wide range of donors, media support organisations and other NGOs to benefit from an increased understanding of both the drivers and barriers to constructive and inclusive public dialogue.





BBC MEDIA ACTION

## ► Where do we go from here?

This case study has provided an overview of media and communications, and donor support to these areas, within the current context of Cambodia. It has provided a snapshot of support, with a particular focus on Cambodians' information and communications needs, and does not seek to provide a set of explicit recommendations. However, there are a number of themes that could be considered by organisations involved in funding and delivering programmes in this area.

### Investing in research

A substantial amount of early donor support was invested in institutional support and training of journalists – with limited evidence of impact. Only over the past several years has there been any concerted effort to invest in research, which now appears to be paying dividends. These recent forays into research on the impact of the media on governance provide an increasingly sound basis on which to develop TV and radio programming that promotes voice and accountability. However, while levels of development assistance to Cambodia remain steady, support to media and communication is perceived to be falling.

The need for rigorous research and evidence of impact has never been greater, to inform decisions on where to invest limited funding for governance and media initiatives. This issue has been at the forefront of discussions for some time but, given the decreasing funding for this kind of work, the need is now more pressing than ever before.

### Keeping governance on the agenda

Cambodia faces a raft of pervasive governance challenges alongside only limited incentives to address these. In line with the shifting donor landscape within Cambodia, western donors are making inevitable trade-offs between governance needs and the many needs in other sectors.

But while governance remains the most difficult area in which to engage, there are significant and unmet needs in terms of people's access to unbiased information and discussion on issues that affect their lives and the development of Cambodia as a whole. Though inherently difficult, governance should remain a priority for donors and NGOs working in Cambodia.

Attempts to work within the formal structures of the Government of Cambodia, and within organisations where the Government's influence is embedded, have had only limited impact. But important gains in terms of citizen voice and empowerment have been made through interventions in other sectors, and through governance interventions that emphasise community involvement and engagement rather than explicit corruption or accountability objectives.

### Taking public dialogue on-line

The Internet, despite its limited reach, is one of the few public fora where discussion and debate can and does take place in Cambodia. With near-universal mobile phone access – and the potential for the Internet to become more accessible through mobile devices – there are clear opportunities to engage Cambodians, and particularly young people, in more substantive and open public conversations.

There is a clear sense of optimism among young Cambodians, yet many Cambodians have only a limited awareness of democratic rights. They are constrained by relatively low levels of empowerment and lack avenues to participate safely in public life and, ultimately, in the decisions that affect their lives. The optimism of young people could pave the way to build public appetite and demand for a more inclusive and critical national conversation that may, in turn, contribute to more accountable and inclusive governance in the long-term.

*Above*  
 Filming BBC Media Action's *Taste of Life* health drama on location near Phnom Penh.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>6</sup> Estimates vary and depend on assumptions such as population figures at the time (also based on estimates). There is consensus among academics (Ben Kiernan, Patrick Heuveline, Yale University's Cambodia Genocide Program and others) that the death toll stands between one and two million, with some estimates putting the toll at up to three million.
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- <sup>53</sup> Interview, Phnom Penh, October 2011
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- <sup>55</sup> Cambodia: Adjustment or Instability? Interagency Conflict Assessment', US Government, 2009: <http://global.wisc.edu/peace/readings/supplemental-ricigliano-cambodia.pdf> and BBC Media Action nationwide research among youth conducted in 2010
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