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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of new ICTs on activism in Cambodia and the effect this has had on human rights organisations, drawing upon experiences of CCHR, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights. It first examines the context of new ICTs and the status of freedom of expression in Cambodia. Subsequently, the impact of new ICTs in the country is assessed, in particular the impact on activism. The shifting role of human rights organisations in an era of digital media is then addressed and finally the future of online activism in Cambodia is considered. Essentially this paper contends that whilst there remains a crucial need for human rights organisations to engage in traditional forms of action, ICTs have shaped a new era of online activism, to which organisations must respond.

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ICTs – Human rights – Online activism – Freedom of expression – Access to information – Cambodia



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ESSAY

NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES' INFLUENCE ON ACTIVISM IN CAMBODIA

Sopheap Chak

1 Introduction

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly recognised as having a potentially positive influence on activism in the developing world. This is particularly true for Cambodia, where traditional forms of media are stringently censored and fundamental freedoms frequently denied. Growing internet penetration and the development of new ICTs have contributed to increased youth involvement in social, political and economic activism. Though ICTs are not yet available to all, they are essential, providing much needed access to information, resources and the wider international community.

In Cambodia, online activism as a form of engagement is imperative when considering the lack of civic education and widespread human rights abuses. Ruled by one of the world's longest serving leaders, the country suffers from widespread land grabs by powerful elites, the suppression of workers' rights and from excesses by security forces to quash unrest. Although Cambodia has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in Southeast Asia, disenfranchised citizens are increasingly utilising online activism to challenge these abuses. Despite concerns that censorship of the internet may become a reality, online activism will continue to play an important role in the country.

Although new ICTs have had a largely positive impact on online activism, there are also effects for human rights organisations such as the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organisation that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights throughout Cambodia; they have also impacted the methods and tactics other organisations have traditionally employed. As with individual activists,

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human rights organisations also enjoy the benefits of new ICTs and the speed and efficiency at which information can be shared. However, particularly in developing countries where ICTs are not available to all, organisations need to bear in mind the importance of traditional forms of action, as well as consider the risks involved in communicating online.

This paper seeks to explore the effect new ICTs have had on activism in Cambodia. The first section discusses the context of ICTs in the country and the second, the impact new ICTs have had on social, human rights and political activism. The third section examines the shifting role of human rights organisations in the context of digital activism, while the conclusion considers the future of online activism in Cambodia.

2 ICTs in Cambodia

2.1 Limited but fast growing access to ICTs

Social and political upheaval in Cambodia's turbulent history made early ICT endeavours impossible; the Khmer Rouge destroyed the country's vital infrastructure, including telecommunications. However, in recent years, the government has been proactive in allowing the private sector to provide mobile services. A 2004 report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific observed that Cambodia became the first country in the world to have more mobile than landline telephones (UNITED NATIONS, 2004, p. 60). Such efforts have had a considerable effect: according to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, mobile phone subscriptions exceeded 20 million in 2012, surpassing a population of about 15 million (RENZENBRINK, 2013).

Although Cambodia suffers from one of the lowest internet penetration rates in Southeast Asia, there has been a rapid proliferation of internet users in recent years, especially since the emergence of wireless broadband services in 2006. According to recent estimates, 18% of the population have access to, and use the internet, an increase of 17.5% from 2009 (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2013a, p. 1). Increased access to the internet results in greater access to social and new media, the apparatus for online activism. Cambodia has approximately 1,120,000 Facebook users, with 1,100 new users joining every day (SOCIAL MEDIA CAMBODIA, 2014). While factors such as Cambodians having multiple Facebook accounts and foreigners living in the country undoubtedly distort these figures, the statistics indicate that a growing proportion of Cambodians have access to social media, 50% of whom are between 18 and 24 years old (SOCIAL MEDIA CAMBODIA, 2014). While less popular than Facebook in Cambodia, Twitter has also contributed to growing online activism and was used during the 2013 general election and subsequent protests to quickly spread information.

Despite such encouraging statistics, there remains a notable digital divide between urban and rural areas. Adding to the costs involved in purchasing technical equipment, the lack of electricity and computer access means that access to new

ICTs is considerably concentrated in urban centres. Bearing in mind that 79.8% of Cambodia's population is rural (UN DATA, 2014), this is a considerable issue. Nonetheless, due to the affordability of mobile phones, inhabitants of Cambodia's most rural, poverty stricken areas are now increasingly using text-messaging technology. Furthermore, the growing popularity of smartphones and the gradual expansion of 3G coverage in the country enable many of those in remote areas to access the internet, without the cost of purchasing a computer.

2.2 Locked down traditional media

New ICTs are crucial for Cambodia when considering the government's tight grip on traditional forms of media. Rigorous censorship is commonplace, despite guarantees of the right to freedom of expression in Cambodian and international law. Article 41 of the Constitution of Cambodia specifically states that all citizens shall be entitled to freedom of expression, and, in 1992, Cambodia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Laws regulating the media in Cambodia are vague, unevenly enforced and stifle the right to freedom of expression (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2014a, p. 4). Television, radio broadcasters and newspapers require a license from the Ministry of Information, effectively providing the government with total jurisdiction over these media. In 2012, The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) report confirmed that all eleven TV stations and more than 100 radio stations are either owned by the government itself or by those affiliated with the ruling party (THE COMMITTEE FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS IN CAMBODIA, 2012, p. 30). Only four independent radio stations were identified.¹ Similarly, Freedom House found the same conclusions regarding Khmer language newspapers, determining the status of Cambodia's press as 'not free' (FREEDOM HOUSE, 2013a). Such stringent censorship makes new ICTs the only media accessible to dissenting opinions and free from executive influence.

2.3 New media: a space to protect from censorship

Unlike traditional media, new media in Cambodia enjoys moderate freedom, especially in relation to other countries in the region such as Thailand and Myanmar, notorious for internet censorship. However, despite this relative freedom and Freedom House deeming the internet as 'partly free' (FREEDOM HOUSE, 2013b), the Government has made sporadic attempts to control internet usage. For instance, in November 2012, the Government issued a circular demanding the closure of all internet cafes within 500 meters of educational facilities – effectively all existing internet cafes. The proposed ban was eventually reversed in December 2012 due to popular outcry.

It is also reported that the Government has routinely requested that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) block certain websites, in particular those critical of the government, such as the Khmerization blog, which is inaccessible on certain ISPs. Additionally, in two cases members of the public have been threatened with

defamation charges due to criticising police on Facebook.² More recently, Duong Zorida, actress and TV presenter, was convicted on charges of defamation over a dispute on Facebook with another salon owner. This case underscores, underscoring the courts' willingness to criminalise online content (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2014b, p. 3). The perceived possibility of arrest could lead some bloggers and social media users to self-censor due to fear of reprisal (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2013c, p. 3).

Of additional concern is the impending Cyber Crimes Law, the first of its kind in Cambodia, announced in May 2012 and likely to be passed in the first half of 2014. According to the government, the law is being drafted solely to protect internet users from hacking and the destruction of online data, in accordance with European Union guidelines. However, civil society requests to review the draft to ensure it does not encroach on the right to freedom of expression have been denied (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2014b, p. 1) and there are concerns that the law will be used as yet another tool for government censorship, especially as Deputy Prime Minister Sok An said the law was being drafted in order to put a halt to the spreading of "false information" online.

3 Impact of ICTs in Cambodia

New ICTs offer a wide range of opportunities to advocate for democracy and human rights. Digital communication has the potential to improve transparency and accountability, as individuals are able to access information more easily and quickly; share information about human rights violations and methods of resistance; express their concerns; and access a wider international audience (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2012, p. 14).

3.1 Accessing and sharing diverse and independent information

The most obvious way in which new ICTs have the potential to influence activism is through the ability to share and access information instantaneously. The internet affords users access to a wealth of knowledge and resources. All major newspapers and radio programs in Cambodia have comprehensive websites where broadcasts, articles and videos can be accessed. They are also often connected to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, through which they further disseminate news. This also holds true for independent newspapers such as *The Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*, effectively allowing internet users greater access to unbiased information.

In addition, advances in mobile phones and other devices with video and photography capabilities have allowed online activists to document and record human rights violations and share them online. Once this information is out, it has the potential to go viral and it is impossible to prevent this occurrence (KHOURY, 2011, p. 80-83). This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in Cambodia and violations are frequently posted on the internet. Surya P. Subedi, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in

Cambodia, has remarked: “access to online videos of incidents of shooting and forced evictions has increased [...] as the use of social media and the ability to record such incidents and promptly display them on the internet has developed” (UNITED NATIONS, 2012, p. 49).

A noteworthy example is Venerable Luon Sovath, a Cambodian Buddhist monk who has successfully documented human rights violations throughout the country using his mobile phone. Despite being regularly threatened and even detained, Sovath, also known as the ‘multimedia monk,’ has become a prominent presence at major land protests and evictions. In 2009, as local authorities forcibly evicted villagers from their homes in Siem Reap province, Sovath captured video evidence on his mobile phone of police shooting at defenceless villagers and submitted the footage to a local human rights NGO (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2013b, p. 24). Such captured evidence is hard to deny and as such, increases accountability.

3.2 Mobilising and organising the opposition

A major way in which new ICTs have had an effect on activism in Cambodia is that they have been used as an effective organising tool. As previously noted, the majority of Cambodians – even those living in rural areas – possess mobile phones; as such, Short Message Service (SMS) has become a widespread method of communication in Cambodia and is becoming an indispensable advocacy tool.

Effective organisation through social media was evidenced during the run-up to the 2013 general election. The Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), despite having limited resources, was able to amass vast crowds to advocate for political change through social media. According to CNRP parliamentarian Mu Sochua, “85 to 90 percent of [CNRP] youth in the city areas were able to mobilise everyday, and they were all organising on Facebook” (WILLEMYNS, 2013). In spite of allegations of election irregularities, the opposition made significant gains in the National Assembly, winning 55 seats out of 123, most likely due to their organising strategy.

3.3 Bringing forth new forms of activism

Cambodia has a burgeoning blogging community, known as ‘cloggers’, who employ blogging to exercise freedoms that are denied within conventional media. Emphasising the pervasiveness of blogging in Cambodia was the 2012 BlogFest Asia, which was hosted in Siem Reap (BLOGFEST ASIA, 2012). Furthermore, due to the late development of Khmer Unicode (computer font for Khmer language), most blogs in Cambodia continue to be written in English, affording greater accessibility to the international community.

Common forms of online protests are campaign blogging and online petitions, which have become a popular advocacy tool. In Cambodia, the renowned ‘Save Boeung Kak’ blog provides updates on developments at Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh, which has seen numerous land rights violations. Additionally

the blog urges visitors to sign a petition demanding compensation for the victims of the eviction, as well as a halt to continuous land right violations in Cambodia (SAVE BOEUNG KAK, 2014).

In Cambodia computer networks and the anonymity of the internet has led to another, more contentious form of activism directed at the government, known as 'hacktivism'. These attacks have been led by Anonymous Cambodia, a branch of the notorious international network. On 15th September 2013, Anonymous Cambodia 'declared war' on the ruling party in response to violent post-election clashes. They have since launched numerous Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS) attacks against several government websites. While hacktivism as an effective or even legal form of activism has been widely debated in the literature, it leads us to consider how technology transforms 'ordinary' transnational activism (WONG; BROWN, 2013, p. 1016).

Although digital media in Cambodia is still largely used for entertainment purposes, in recent years ICTs have had a growing impact on online activism. In this context, many commentators have questioned whether Cambodia will see its own 'spring'. Writing for Al Jazeera, CCHR former President Ou Virak argues that:

All the necessary ingredients [for a 'spring'] are present. First, it has one of the youngest populations in the world [...] Second, very rapid urbanization has taken place over the past decade [...] with economic growth, widespread availability of cheap smartphones, internet coverage and more than a million Facebook users, Cambodian citizens are increasingly eager to express themselves.

(VIRAK, 2014)

Although he concludes Cambodia is not quite ready for a 'spring', the fact that the 'necessary' factors for such an event are present points to the huge potential impact of new ICTs and new media for the country in the future, as access to such technologies continues to increase.

4 The role of human rights organisations in the new media era

As shown above, new ICTs have enabled young Cambodians to access and share information on human rights violations and advocate for change online. As individuals can now access information and organise autonomously through social networks, the role of human rights organisations in this shifting context must be critically re-examined.

4.1 *New opportunities for human rights advocacy*

ICTs and the internet in particular have enabled NGOs to disseminate information and highlight human rights violations at an accelerated rate and to a wider audience. CCHR for instance, posts all its publications on the CCHR and Sithi websites and via social media to its 126,000 fans on Facebook and 3,869 followers on Twitter.³ Sharing information via social media also allows organisations to reach

an international audience. Among CCHR's followers on Facebook, 63% are from Cambodia, 13.4% from Indonesia, 7.3% from Vietnam and 2.8% from Laos.⁴ In addition to using social media, CCHR's Human Rights Defenders Project created a smart phone application which serves as a source of legal information providing legal factsheets, case analyses, step-by-step guides and answers to FAQs on the most pressing legal threats to civil society. Sharing information online not only ensures it will reach a wider audience, but allows to reducing spending within an organisation: rather than being printed it can be shared online. Additionally, blogs and social media allow a greater online audience to actively engage with human rights organisations, as social media users can easily share petitions and comments on posts. It also allows followers to have an interactive experience with organisations who are able to respond to comments.

With the advent of online activism, there is now a space for human rights organisations to provide capacity building to online activists. CCHR has adapted to address this need with the Sithi Hub, a physical space providing a platform for young innovators and human rights advocates to converge, where they can share ideas and exchange information about applying ICTs to human rights. CCHR also empowers Sithi Hub members through on-going training and capacity-building activities related to new ICTs and tools for human rights documentation and information sharing. For instance, in December 2013, the Sithi Hub members received training on strategies for using Facebook for human rights. Young activists can also download ICT resources to build upon their capacity, such as the *Social Media Best Practices Booklet for Activists* (SITHI HUB, 2013).

4.2 ICTs shortcomings

The speed at which information is now disseminated via SMS and online means that statements and press releases issued by human rights organisations are no longer breaking news. However the speed with which information is shared generates a risk of inaccuracy. For instance, in February 2014, during a bail hearing for 21 workers and human rights defenders who were arrested the previous month during garment workers' protests, one individual tweeted that all 21 were to be released prior to the judges rendering their judgment, when in fact none were awarded bail. This inaccurate information was re-tweeted several times as people trusted the person tweeting the information. It is important to note information shared online can often be unreliable, and there is still a need for more in-depth, detailed, verified reporting and analysis by human rights organisations.

Moreover, while Facebook and other forms of digital media are effective in disseminating information, they cannot substitute movement building and strategic planning (VIRAK, 2014). Activism ought to be taken as a whole; there should be no differentiation between traditional and digital activism, which must enhance each other (KHOURY, 2011, p. 84), rather than making each other redundant. As such, CCHR employs both traditional and new forms of action, to ensure the greatest impact possible. For instance, CCHR still uses radio broadcasting as an effective way of raising awareness on human rights issues affecting people throughout

the country; it has been estimated that the seven radio stations CCHR users have a combined potential audience of up to 85% of the Cambodian population (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2012, p. 7).

It is also vital that organisations consider who benefits from its actions. CCHR's traditional forms of action, centred on the production of detailed reports and analysis, are necessary and useful for practitioners, academics and other NGOs, but are not so useful in engaging the general public. On the other hand, CCHR's more recent forms of action such as sharing videos, leaflets and factsheets via social media not only ensures engagement, but also that vital information will be disseminated to a much wider audience.

Furthermore, human rights organisations have to consider the consequences and risks involved with the use of ICTs and to ponder how they can assist activists in increasing their online security. Digital means of communication cannot be relied upon to ensure that sensitive information linked to human rights violations and potential perpetrators remains private and secured, especially when used by activists who may have been targeted for surveillance by the authorities. Although activists in Cambodia consider their physical security, their digital security is often overlooked. As such there is a need for organisations to provide awareness and training on how to secure sensitive digital communications and data storage.

Finally, along with an increasing use of the internet and social media comes the potential rapid propagation of threats and offensive or racist discourse, thanks to the anonymity offered by internet. For instance, CCHR President Ou Virak received death threats after CCHR issued an open letter online which condemned the derogatory remarks made in a speech by CNRP leader Sam Rainsy towards women and the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. The anonymity of the internet and social media enabled staunch racists to relay their xenophobic views with alarming speed in reaction to the letter and led to a personal smear campaign against Virak.

5 Conclusion

The advancement of new ICTs in Cambodia has had a mobilising effect amongst a largely youth population in an environment blighted by widespread human rights abuses. The internet has enabled Cambodians to actively advocate for change online through various forms, including blogging, online petitions and hacktivism. New media has empowered citizens to access information, express themselves, and participate in public debate more than ever (UNITED NATIONS IN CAMBODIA, 2011). The effect of ICTs on online activism has the potential to break traditional barriers and reach new frontiers for freedom of expression (CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2013b, p. 22).

The future of online activism in Cambodia faces several challenges, the greatest being the looming Cyber Crimes Law, which has the potential to severely infringe upon citizens' right to freedom of expression and provide the government a legal basis to crack down on online activists. Moreover, for online activism to move forward, it is of great importance that the digital divide between urban and

rural areas is bridged. This is particularly true when considering that many of the most serious human rights violations, especially those related to land, occur in remote rural areas.

Although it is difficult to measure tangible impacts of ICTs on human rights, it may be said that, judging by the proliferation of Facebook users in Cambodia, it is undeniable that ICTs and social media play an intrinsic role in the lives of many young Cambodians. As such, the human rights community cannot ignore the huge potential of ICTs as an advocacy tool; if organisations wish to move forward they must ensure they adopt strategies that support and build capacity of online activists.

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NOTES

1. Beehive Radio, Radio Free Asia, Radio Voice of America and Radio France International.

2. The teacher Phel Phearun, after criticising police, was summoned and threatened with defamation in February 2013. Cheth Sovichea was arrested in

November 2013 for a post that was critical of the police. He was also threatened with defamation charges.

3. As of 28 February 2014.

4. As of the end of 2013.