

‘Development Journalism’: What’s in a name?

In the West, the term is likely associated with journalism in the field of development or, perhaps, with journalism in developing countries. Here, in Cambodia, I mean literally the development of journalism in a developing country. It might be a better idea to first develop journalism in a country like this before we recognize those already practicing it as journalists. Afterwards we can continue highlighting their (lack of) press freedom.

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Every year the French NGO, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), publishes a report that ranks nearly 170 countries according to a press freedom index. The Netherlands has already held or shared the No.1 spot for several years, which is nice to see as a Dutch journalist. An important reason why the Dutch system ranks so well is the fact that the government has a great trust in the quality of Dutch journalists and the media’s capacity to self-regulate.

In the Dutch case, self-regulation does not equate to an aversion toward covering issues which might change the government’s mind about press freedom, but rather a widespread and outstanding awareness of media ethics among the vast majority of journalists. A journalism council recognized by nearly all media is a sufficient means to almost entirely avoid the need to settle media-related conflicts in court.

A survey conducted by the University of Amsterdam in 2000 found that Dutch journalists, together with their colleagues in the United States, received the most formal education (compared with the UK, Germany and Australia). Obviously the political situation in a country has the greatest influence on its level of press freedom. The US, ranked at 53rd according to the RSF 2006 index, managed only 119th in their ‘extraterritorial areas’ and indicated that journalist education alone does not guarantee press freedom. That said, it is also clear that well-educated, mature and reliable journalists have a much better chance to deserve press freedom.

In this same RSF ranking, Cambodia landed in the 108th spot. Granted, that’s low. Historically, however, it is the first time this millennium that other countries in Southeast Asia ranked higher (Malaysia 92nd, Indonesia 103rd). The relative fall in the region was due to the fact more journalists were arrested and threatened in 2006 than in 2005, but nonetheless articles in the media about the RSF 2006 index showed that Cambodia is proud to enjoy greater freedom of the press than their neighbors in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. While comparing inside the region is one way to look at it, the reality of the situation in Cambodia is best described as anarchy. Everything seems to be possible until it is no longer possible, and nobody knows when and why something becomes unacceptable or illegal. Legislation – there is a press law in Cambodia – plays no role in delineating these boundaries. The Cambodian jurisdiction is for Cambodians just another word for asking for problems. Even the Prime Minister would not argue that corruption, manipulation, incompetence and conflicts of interest seriously hamper the legal system – a euphemism to be sure.

It is hardly surprising that the Cambodian media, many of which are directly or indirectly linked to political parties, (relatives of) politicians or other influential persons in the hierarchy, also shows a great capacity to self-regulate. But their form stands in shrill contrast to practically all the principles and ethics of journalism. Given the enormous differences in the media working environments, it is too easy for Westerners to harshly judge this practice of avoiding risks and problems. Moreover, does it make sense at all to judge people who might be employed in the media, but have little or no training or skills in journalism, based on our standards, principles and ethics of responsible journalism?

Since I moved to Cambodia in the fall of 2004, I've given several short and long-term training sessions to journalists in both print and electronic media. I have also organized ten media presentations on hot issues such as human rights, corruption and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. Most directly, I have also been an independent member of the examination committee at the German-funded Cambodia Communication Institute (CCI) mainly comprised of expatriate lecturers. The CCI is the closest thing to a journalism school in Cambodia, but based on the final theses of students still far from. I also monitored ten Cambodian newspapers on their coverage of corruption-related stories over a six month period. And in both 2006 and 2007 a month long newspapers and radio on their coverage of HIV/AIDS.

During this same period I delivered a week-long training session to 'journalists' in Laos and six more weeks of training to those in Myanmar. Both experiences left me with useful impressions and observations to help put the Cambodian situation into perspective.

In brief, the level of journalism in Laos was even more questionable than in Cambodia. In Myanmar, I found that the trainees brought great enthusiasm with them to the sessions and were fascinated to hear about the practice of journalism outside their country despite the fact that they realized it was completely useless to them under the current regime. The primary goal in both of these last two trainings was to improve media reporting about Avian Influenza (H5N1).

Back in Cambodia, where I could go on for hours illustrating the state of journalism, I have shortened my observations to a list of five major problems that I see:

1. The quality of education from primary school and beyond is up is extremely poor. The genocide during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975 – 1979) took particular aim at the educated class leaving Cambodia without many of it educated citizens. Today, a lack of qualified teachers, widespread poverty and corruption within the education system rob many Cambodian's of their opportunity to attain an education
2. As a corollary of this educational reality, most Cambodians show poor logical, analytical and critical thinking skills. This is expressed as widespread inability to identify causes and consequences, link issues and events, understand figures, statistics, etc..
3. On top of these two points, there also appears to be a general lack of interest in reading. Looking at newspaper readership alone, a survey published in the Phnom Penh Post (April 27-May 10, 2001) showed that "only 4% of voters read a newspaper everyday and 62% never read a newspaper." Literacy rates in Cambodia have, in recent years, reached about 75 percent so that is no longer a central explanation. It has been my experience that journalists hardly even read their own newspaper and, as I have often discovered, do not even read their own stories before submitting them, which begs the question; why would others read their stories? There are over twenty regularly published newspapers which have a maximum combined daily circulation of 200,000 copies and so their influence on public opinion is minimal in country of 14 million. This phenomenon is a plausible explanation for the fact that print media are allowed more freedom than electronic media like radio and TV
4. Journalists are paid extremely poorly. Local media that aren't receiving foreign assistance can only pay the lowest of salaries to their staff – about 20 to 40 US\$ a month or 3 US\$ per article to stringers/freelance journalists. This doesn't exactly work to deter reporters from accepting money from subjects in return for coverage (it is not uncommon for the organizer of a press-conference to pay journalists to attend) or worse, extortion of subjects by journalists themselves through threatening negative coverage. Often reporters are also required to bear the costs of phone calls, travel and lodging themselves and therefore naturally prefer to keep the costs of this essential part of reporting to a minimum

5. Needless to say, basic journalism skills such as collecting information, recognizing, understanding and checking facts, identifying what is relevant, formulating good questions and follow-up questions, verifying sources, statements and submitting them to others etc... are largely absent among Cambodian journalism. And, really, given the situation, it can't even be expected of them.

To illustrate some of the many consequences that these five characteristics of Cambodian journalism have on the quality of reporting, a handful results from my media monitoring survey on coverage of corruption-related stories may be insightful. Corruption is a sensitive topic, to say the least, but it is also one of the most prominent-cited causes for other problems in this country.

To begin, corruption-related articles tend to rely heavily on anonymous sources – 47% of the 262 analyzed stories cited such sources. Sixty-one percent of the remaining sources were unverifiable in nature. Very few stories are balanced in their reporting, since printed statements/accusations are not often submitted (only 18% of the time) to the subject of the statement/accusation for response. The printed responses to the few statements which are actually submitted are rarely fair in terms of length.

The approach newspaper/journalist takes toward a topic was only neutral/objective in 10% of the stories. In 44% of the stories the approach is even worse than subjective – 31.3% contain accusations leveled by the authors themselves or based on an anonymous source without confirmation and without response from the accused. In 12.4% of the stories, it is the journalist who judges. All the while, only 3% of the stories are distinctly recognizable as opinion and another 3% as editorial.

My conclusion based on all these results is that in fact people read into these newspapers what they already believe, for instance that officials, police and (wealthy) businessmen are corrupt and can do whatever they want. But is what people think true? Journalists are supposed to find that out to assist people in deciding what is true and what is not. To provide facts on which people can test their opinions. Instead these newspapers feed and confirm public opinions that are counter-productive to any effort to change the prevailing attitudes towards corruption.

Off-the-record, I once added that these results give the government plenty of reason to question the researched newspapers and, in some cases, even ban them. Should the Cambodian government ever do this, the international community of journalists would be furious: "Serious violation of press freedom in Cambodia!" While the reality is that, in my top ranked country, the kind of journalism practiced by these Cambodian newspapers would be totally unacceptable.

Without intending to downplay the importance of (and attention paid to) press freedoms, I believe it would be much more constructive for international journalism organizations to make serious education and skills training their highest priority. Only by ensuring that the people plying the trade of journalism are well prepared to do their jobs can we truly consider them to be journalists and colleagues. Press-releases and reports from international media watchdogs are quick to defend the freedoms of the press in countries where the practice of journalism is anything but professional.

With 'serious education' I don't mean a week to a couple of months of trainings like what I've conducted myself. If you take the western level of education and the quality of western journalism as a guideline, then the Cambodian situation, as pictured above, leaves little doubt that the development circuit of training sessions, seminars and workshops rarely deliver qualified, responsible journalists. I've had practicing journalists in my trainings who had already taken six previous foreign-supported workshops in writing/producing news stories and still couldn't write a single proper story.

It goes to show that the first 4 flaws in the Cambodian context mentioned above cannot be corrected by focusing on the fifth one alone. A three to four year-long real journalism school implemented in the existing education system comes much closer to the so popular term in this part of the world; sustainable development.

Journalism is a so-called 'free' profession, but does that mean everybody who claims to be one should be accepted as such? Why defend the specific rights and freedoms intended to protect journalists when the people who practice it aren't journalists and often act in a way that damages the image of the profession? Of course, intimidation, threats and arrests made with the purpose of silencing mature dissent need to be condemned, but this can be done based on universal human rights. Why is there a need to play the 'freedom of the press' card each time?

The development of the profession and of press freedoms in Cambodia probably would even stand to benefit if the government actually started to properly implement the existing press law and assess the competence of the media. Certainly, some would not pass the test, but it is shortsighted to immediately condemn them for it. Of course it would be desirable if this media competency examination could be conducted by an independent institution and with a fair and realistic appeal process.

I am addressing this issue specifically to the international umbrella organizations that work to protect and defend responsible journalism and press freedom. The trainings I conducted were financed by organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP and USAID. With the exception of an eight-month long training (one day a week) carried out by the US-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI, with USAID funding), none of these trainings had the general education of journalists as their primary goal. These organizations have other interests in mind such as a need for a better dissemination of quality information around avian flu or HIV/AIDS and, however justified and sometimes useful this might be, a cynic might say they're simply attempting to use local media as an extension of their own communication channels.

RSF, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Press Freedom Now!, Freevoice, Internews, Interpress Service, surely they all will be able to point to developing countries where they have conducted or supported decent and successful education programs for journalists. But I find it hard to believe that, in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, I just happened to have experienced the rare exceptions on that RSF Press Freedom Index where journalism which shouldn't bare the name is the norm. And even if they are the exception to the rule, they are on the RSF Index and you have to question the credibility of it as a result.

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