

Media and Information Literacy in Cambodia

Cambodian Center for Independent Media

MANY CAMBODIANS, especially the youth, would prefer social media (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) rather than the traditional media (television, radio, newspaper) as the source of information on everything. In the modern Cambodian society, they can get any kind of information through their smartphones.

The youth spend much time online and actively participate in sharing, commenting, posting, and reacting to certain trends because of the interesting contents, entertaining videos, beautiful pictures, and fun memes. However, while they are having fun, they also risk being subjected to online harassment, false information and digital security hacking.

In response to this situation, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) started a project to promote Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in Cambodia. The project aims to help people gain the most crucial skills in dealing with media problems. Basically, MIL enables people to access the media, analyze the contents, create the messages, reflect on existing information and their media habits, and take action with media. As technology continuously progresses, accessing media becomes easier and faster and new media-related questions constantly come up. This is the reason why MIL is continuously evolving and a life-long learning process.

Cambodian Center for Independent Media

The Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) was established in 2007 as a non-governmental organization (NGO). CCIM promotes independent media, press freedom, freedom of expression, access to information and democratic governance.

CCIM adopted the following vision, mission and values as an organization:

VISION

“Everybody well informed, everybody empowered”

CCIM envisions a Cambodian society where everybody is well-informed and empowered to strengthen democratic governance and respect for human rights.

CCIM believes that a well-informed Cambodian society will expect and indeed demand good governance and select leaders that will shape the society and economy in a way that will benefit the Cambodian people equitably. Independent news and information have a critical role to play in giving people the knowledge and confidence to make informed choices. CCIM is well positioned to play a key role in disseminating reliable, credible, balanced and trusted news and information via multi-media platforms. CCIM is also well-placed to promote democratic rights and responsibilities to a large national audience.

MISSION

In collaboration with the Cambodian citizens and civil society organizations, CCIM will fearlessly bring the information to the people that matters to them and protect the gains.

CCIM is first and foremost an organization that strives to bring about fundamental change in Cambodian society, a society without violence and impunity and with full human rights and freedom of expression. It has a strong reputation for dealing with tough issues and not walking away from controversy. Its audience will be attracted to reporting, which is far-reaching, in-depth and intensive and always asking the tough questions.

VALUES

Equal Voice – With an extensive and growing on-air and online media presence, CCIM is in a unique position to promote issues of concern to sections of Cambodian society without a voice, including the oppressed, the marginalized, the weak and minority groups. CCIM is highly committed to advocate for gender equality at all levels of Cambodian society and institutions. CCIM seeks to promote an inclusive society without discrimination on race, gender, disability, sexual preference or religion.

Active Non-Violence – CCIM openly supports the right of the Cambodian people to freely and peacefully express their opinion on issues affecting their lives, including the right to active non-violent protest and action. CCIM opposes and will expose impunity, particularly the use of violence and lethal force by government agents against those peacefully demanding rights and justice.

Accountability – CCIM strives to hold Cambodian public officials and decision-makers accountable for all policies, actions and financial control. Consistent with these principles, CCIM

as an organization also endeavors to be fully accountable and transparent to both its supporters and the wider community.

Non-partisan – CCIM is an organization without any political party affiliation. It firmly believes in the right of the people to make a democratic choice in selecting their political leaders and the policies that will be pursued.

Trust and Integrity – CCIM will provide news and in-depth information from reliable and multiple sources, which is accurate and fact-checked. Reporting by CCIM journalists will meet best-practice professional ethical standards.

CCIM began its operation by continuing the broadcasting of radio programs dubbed Voice of Democracy (VOD), which was started by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights in 2003 until 2007. In 2009, CCIM completely managed two radio stations in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap in collaboration with the respective broadcasting partners. Under the name of Radio Sarika FM, it broadcasted radio talk shows with call-in radio programs to hourly radio news reports. In the second half of 2016, CCIM opened another two radio frequencies broadcasting in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey provinces, and a new frequency in Phnom Penh, bringing to a total of five radio stations — approximately covering thirty districts with potential listeners of 11,038,611 individuals aged eighteen years and above (voting population per district based on National Election Committee census).

In 2011, CCIM established its own online news website named VOD Hot News (www.vodhotnews.com) to engage in a new platform for its news and information as the country embraces quickly the online technology. Within three years, VOD Hot News grew significantly and attracted up to 10,000 visitors per day. Using Google Analytics, it has recorded a total of 502,000 visits and 1.3 million-page views in a six-month period in 2013.

In 2014, CCIM started a new online platform in delivering news and information – the TV news channel (www.vodtvnews.com). The VOD online TV news team goes out with the VOD reporters to gather news and cover events and broadcast them on its website.

It mobilizes citizen journalists to report on issues regarding gender violence, delivery of public services, and corruption.

Aside from its radio and online news reporting, CCIM actively collaborates with the civil society in Cambodia in advocating for internet law that respects human rights. It is a member of a government initiated working group drafting the access to information law in Cambodia.

CCIM has also held the following activities:

- Organized journalists on developing a common standard of ethics for Cambodian journalists and trained them on independent journalism;
- Trained more than two hundred citizen journalists on providing information to VOD reporters;
- Organized advocacy activities on press freedom, freedom of information and freedom of expression such as the holding of an exhibit of photos and posters calling for justice for journalists who became victims of abuses in the course of performing their duties, including a VOD reporter;
- Organized a network of provincial radio stations to promote independent media. Some of these provincial radio stations are now broadcasting VOD Radio talk shows and news programs.

In August 2017, the Cambodian government ordered Radio Free Asia (RFA), Voice of America (VOA), radio programs of political opposition parties, and the VOD radio programs to stop broadcasting. Almost all radio stations broadcasting these radio programs were also ordered closed. CCIM's radio broadcasting partners also terminated their partnership with CCIM, thus Radio Sarika FM broadcasts also discontinued.

Currently, CCIM continues to produce radio programs in collaboration with partner NGOs and aired on limited airtime on selected radio stations partnering with CCIM.

Media Literacy for Secondary Schools and Rural Youth

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MOEYS) of Cambodia approved the inclusion of Media Literacy in its official secondary school curriculum. The media literacy curriculum covered discussions about social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Line, Instagram, and Google+ starting in school year 2016-2017.¹

“Since media messages and new communication technologies are a constant part of the daily lives of Cambodian youth, it is important for them to become aware of the challenges and opportunities involved,” says Sok Tha, Director of the Department of Information Technology at the MOEYS.²

Young Cambodians need to become conscious of how the media shape popular culture and opinion and how they influence personal choices. They need to know how to navigate the internet and how to protect themselves in the cyber world, he added. MOEYS has recognized the growing importance of internet technology and web-based learning. That is why it is strengthening information and communication technology (ICT) in schools. Cambodian students can now develop their ICT and MIL skills, which will allow them to be at par with their peers in more developed countries.

CCIM saw the move of the MOEYS towards MIL education as a positive development towards the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. Consequently, CCIM started its own MIL project in 2014. The project was in collaboration with Germany's largest media development organization, DW Akademie. Over the next three and a half years, the two organizations initiated MIL training for one hundred Cambodian youth in Svay Rieng and Kampong Cham provinces. The training activities were held during their free time; thus fun, interactive and very practical trainings were much more emphasized.

Just like in other countries in the region, most young Cambodians use social media for fun. One of them is Kong Chanphynou, a twenty-two-year old student studying at CamEd Business School. "I have used a smartphone to access Facebook for years, but I never knew exactly what MIL was until I joined CCIM in late 2014," admitted Chanphynou, who is both a trainee and facilitator of the training in her local community. Information, Chanphynou explains, is important for society, but accessing high quality information is even more important. "We need analytical skills to identify which source of news is more reliable," said Chanphynou.

Va Sodachan, while very busy attending to her job in a store, participated in a CCIM training that she found useful for her, her family and friends. Similar to Chanphynou, Sodachan, who is a graduate in accounting at Svay Rieng University, had no idea what MIL was. According to Sodachan, the training provided her skills in writing, interviewing people and taking photos using a smartphone.

Training secondary school students on MIL requires solid commitment and flexibility. Mam Vibol, the project coordinator at CCIM, views the secondary school students as smart and quick in learning new things. But training them to become facilitators is difficult because they are too busy with their studies. It is also difficult to make them agree to meet at any specific

time. “Each training [for facilitators] lasts for four consecutive days and experience tells me that it is very hard to invite them to join,” said Vibol, adding, “there are many important things listed in the [training] lessons and it is impossible to shorten the training to less than four days.”



Facilitator guiding young trainees on how to use WavePad app to record or edit a sound from their smartphone (Svay Rieng, June 2015). © CCIM/V. Mam

Equally important, not all of students in the provinces have smartphones. Vibol sees this problem as a very important educational challenge because these students need to practice in the real world what they learn in the classroom. While smartphones have become more popular, many young students are using them with limited knowledge in terms of code of ethics and technical skills.

In short, MIL training is a long-term challenge. The introduction of MIL into the official secondary school curriculum is a remarkable development, and definitely contributes to the promotion of freedom of expression and access to online information. This achievement, however, does not mean that the mission of CCIM is complete. Indeed, fulfilling this mission has just



Young female facilitator guiding trainees on how to create a YouTube account for Vlog, to help them share and express their personal experiences and opinions (Svay Rieng, October 2015). © CCIM/V. Mam



Youth club leaders in Svay Rieng province playing a topic game and guessing what a picture on the flip chart was (Svay Rieng, September 2016). © CCIM/V. Mam

begun. There are more challenges to deal with and CCIM is committed to working on them.

Media 101 Club³

In 2018, CCIM started another project, again in collaboration with DW Akademie. This time, the target group consists of university students at two Phnom Penh universities, Pannasastra University of Cambodia (PUC) and University of Puthisastra (UP). Together, they established weekly MIL training sessions in the “Media 101 Club.”⁴

These MIL clubs are a platform for students to learn, share and discuss their media habits, explore creating media products like photos and videos, and improve their media and information literacy.

Needs Assessment

Before setting up the Media 101 Club, the MIL team at CCIM in collaboration with DW Akademie assessed the needs regarding the use of the media of thirty-eight students from PUC and UP in Phnom Penh.

The assessment revealed great interest among students in knowing more about the media, especially on how to use social media responsibly, how to protect their privacy online and how to create their own media pieces.

It also showed that the students viewed Facebook as a great opportunity to engage with their peers and to access information. But they refrained from posting or sharing any political content or content related to critical social issues.

Training Curriculum

The results of the needs assessment exercise became the basis for developing a training curriculum for the Media 101 Club.

The training curriculum includes eight units divided into twenty-eight sessions, as listed below:

Unit 1: Media & Media in Cambodia

Unit 2: Assessing Media Information

Unit 3: Creating Pictures

Unit 4: The Power of Pictures

Unit 5: Social Media Basics

Unit 6: Privacy, Security, Safety

Unit 7: Verification – Care What You Share

Unit 8: Video Storytelling.

Each session provides trainers and trainees with clear instructions and objectives of the training. The whole training program lasts for fourteen weeks.

Learning/teaching Process

DW Akademie has trained staff from CCIM to become MIL trainers, who now offer weekly media trainings to students at the two universities in Phnom Penh.⁵

The training program does not use lecture as teaching method; it employs the active participatory approach, which allows students to have fun while learning. Students enjoy the various topic games with professional trainers, brainstorming, debates, developing media products, etc. In addition, they get a chance to think critically, reflect and discuss media-related topics, and create media products like photos or videos on specific topics with their smartphones. These topics connect to the students' lives, so that they become more confident in using media to share their stories and contribute to the public discussion.

The topics enable the students to analyze and describe the Cambodian media landscape, distinguish between different types of content, compare media characteristics, and examine how and why media is used. They also learn about using search engines more effectively, find out quality criteria for journalism, distinguish between the description and interpretation of a picture, learn composition rules for photography, explore photo editing apps, and produce their own videos.

Since social media plays a key role in the life of Cambodian students, it is also at the center of the curriculum of the Media 101 Clubs. Students identify the characteristics and impact of social media, distinguish between disinformation (so-called “fake news”), misinformation and malinformation. They explore the side-effects of social media like hate speech, cyberbullying, and learn how to protect their privacy and security.

Attracting Students

To attract students to join Media 101 Club, booths are set up at both universities at the start of every semester. They show the training methodology and interactive and participatory approaches, such as topic games,

brainstorming, group discussion and presentation, debates, media products. These booths always attract a lot of attention. They show that students are very keen to learn about various topics such as Photography, Video, and Verification of Information on Social Media.



Media 101 Club alumni [Batch 1] at University of Puthisastra running a booth to announce and recruit new students for Batch 2 (Phnom Penh, December 2019). © CCIM/S. Hout

Media 101 Clubs in Action

The Media 101 Clubs at both universities are unique in terms of their systematic training curriculum and training methods. There is even special training for all prospective trainers of Media 101 club. It covers the training methodology, the participatory approach, and introduces the trainers to MIL and media-related topics.

Training activities are held on weekends. Since 2019, four batches of PUC students and one batch of UP students have completed the Media 101 Club curriculum. All in all, sixty-five students (thirty-nine females) have so far participated in the training program. The Club recruits twenty students per batch of training in one term, which lasts for three to four months.

Currently, the Club is running the trainings at PUC South Campus on Sunday afternoon with twenty students, including monks, who come from different course majors.



Members of the Media 101 Club [Batch 1] at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia successfully completed a three-month media and information literacy training (Phnom Penh, April 2019). © CCIM/Media 101 Club



The second batch of the students in the Media 101 Club at University of Puthisastra in a club orientation (Phnom Penh, January 2020). © CCIM/V. Mam



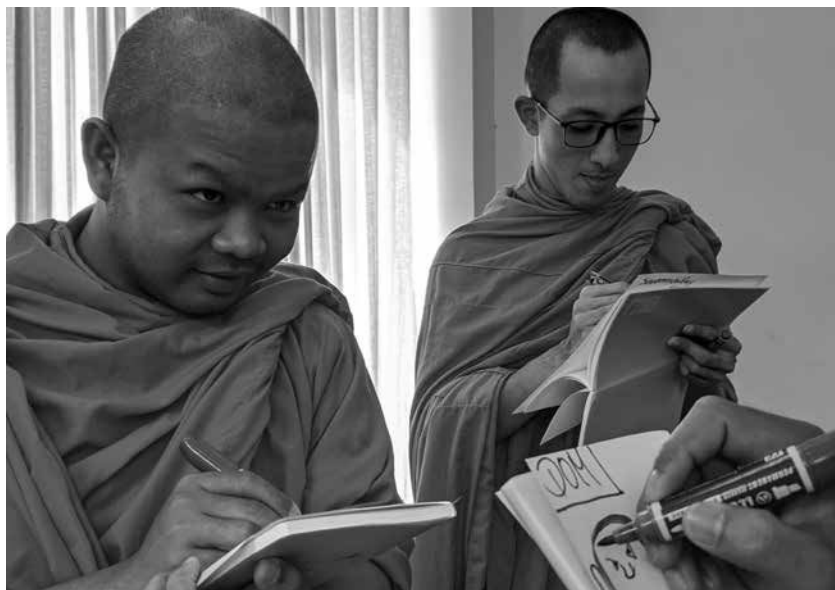
Students [Batch 2] at University of Puthisastra participating in the photography session and applying composition rules (Phnom Penh, February 2020). © CCIM/V. Mam



Students [Batch 2] at University of Puthisastra practicing how to edit pictures from their smartphone (Phnom Penh, February 2020). © CCIM/V. Mam



University of Puthisastra students [Batch 2] in the Media 101 Club playing a topic game called “Drawing Portraits” (Phnom Penh, January 2020). © CCIM/V. Mam



Students [Batch 4] at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia playing a topic game called “Drawing Portraits” (Phnom Penh, February 2020). © CCIM/V. Mam



Female students at Harpswell Foundation participating in a training on “Verification of Information on Social Media” (Phnom Penh, December 2019). © CCIM/V. Mam

Other Activities

On 10 May 2019, CCIM organized the MIL forum for the youth at PUC. This forum aimed to promote MIL among the youth in Cambodia, especially the students in the universities, both public and private, for them to be able to access true information and identify fake news, disinformation and hate speech in the online and social media.

Fifty-one students and visitors attended, twenty-six of them were women. The forum focused on the topic “Disinformation (fake news) and verification.”⁶

As time passed by, the Media 101 Clubs at both PUC and UP became even more popular. In addition to on-campus activities, the MIL team also contributed to off-campus activities. In September 2019, CCIM’s MIL team was invited to provide one-day training on security, privacy, and verification of information on social media to the Ambassador’s Youth Council in Cambodia (AYC), a youth program organized by the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia. Moreover, in October 2019, CCIM’s MIL team organized a forum on MIL at the PUC Battambang campus with the participation of more than

forty university students. In an effort to promote gender equality and equal opportunity in learning, CCIM's MIL team provided one-day training on digital security and privacy to female university students at the Harpswell Foundation in Phnom Penh in December 2019.

As expected, students were eager to learn and shared what they had experienced in using media.

The Media 101 Clubs have played critical roles not only in developing analytical and critical thinking skills, but also motivating young students to utilize their high potentials and take challenges to generate impact in society. In October 2019, three former MIL club members – Cheam Sethi, Ly Vanika, and Chhouk Chanthida - teamed up to join a short video contest co-organized by the German Embassy and the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung in Cambodia. As a result, the video “Free Your Mind” won the 4th place in the competition.

Furthermore, Chhorn Porseng, a former Media 101 Club member at PUC, joined a short film competition on Gender Equality for Next Generation, a project organized by the CCIM with the support of the European Union (EU). As a result, the short film “Women in Journalism” produced by Chhorn won 2nd place in the competition held in June 2020.

In addition to film competitions, some club members have developed their interests in becoming professional journalists. Chhorn Sopheap and Yin Oddom (a Buddhist monk), who are former club members in Batch 2 and Batch 4 respectively, took part in Diploma Course on Media, a training program specially co-designed by CCIM and Sweden-based FOJO to train highly-motivated Cambodian students to work as professional journalists.

In addition to taking challenges at national level, some club members were provided opportunity to travel and exchange knowledge and experience in MIL skills at the regional level. In late October 2019, a group of club members were invited to join a regional conference on MIL at Rangoon, where they had opportunity to meet, discuss and share their personal experience in MIL with MIL experts, media professionals, academic researchers and students coming from Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar.

This shows the positive change in media knowledge of Cambodian youth.

Final Thoughts

It is evidently clear that MIL project has play a crucial role in youth-oriented development. Youths are smart, creative and energetic. The participatory approaches have made the learning environment become even more friendly and highly-motivating. The Media 101 Clubs adhere to the philosophy that “There is neither right, nor wrong idea. There are ideas”. Students are encouraged to express their opinion to give and learn from feedback. The MIL skills students learned in the clubs will benefit not only their academic life at the university, but also their future careers.

Even though MIL plays a critical role in developing critical thinking skills for the students, the fact is that the scope of MIL project is relatively small. Currently, MIL project works only at two universities, while many university students in Phnom Penh and the provinces still do not have access to a proper and systematic MIL training program. Taking this challenge into consideration, CCIM and DW Akademie will continue to look for more funding and more partners to expand the MIL training program to more university students in Phnom Penh and the provinces.

Endnotes

1 Based on report of Sek Sophal, “Media Literacy: Now in School Curriculum,” 11 December 2016, <https://ccimcambodia.org/?p=345>.

2 DW Akademie, “Media Literacy enters Cambodian classrooms,” www.dw.com/en/media-literacy-enters-cambodian-classroom/a-35986176.

3 This section draws parts of the discussion from Media and Information Literacy Network (MILEN), “Setting up a MIL training course [Cambodia],” 2 March 2020, https://milnexpertnetwork.wordpress.com/2020/03/02/setting-up-a-miltraining-course-cambodiafbclid=IwAR1yeEWrWUnH1_q0q3xsAw3rLhSVYcZHEvbREyr8amBJrnSLxqLgc0qG0To.

4 *Huot Salinit*, “Media 101: Media and Information Literacy Club of Students in Cambodia,” CCIM, 25 October 2019, <https://ccimcambodia.org/?p=1647>.

5 DW Akademie in Cambodia, www.dw.com/en/dw-akademie-in-cambodia/a-18496210.

6 Forum on Disinformation and Verification at PUC, 10 May 2019, <https://ccimcambodia.org/?p=1524>.