

‘Any Questions or Remarks?’ Iterative Journalism Training in Cambodia

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Abstract

This article describes the experience of a foreign journalism instructor in Cambodia. One needs patience, cultural sensitivity, willingness to shift one's dominant learning paradigms, aptitude to adapt to the local culture and empathise with the local students' stance without straying from the core values and standards of good journalism.

Keywords

Cambodian journalism, cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural journalism, Cambodian media.

Cambodia has not fully recovered from the impact of the bloody Khmer Rouge tyranny (1975–79) and the Vietnamese occupation (1979–91). Only after 1992 when Cambodia came under the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) did the people finally able to see a modicum of peace and democracy with the country's first election in May 1993. However, it was only in 1998 that the remaining Khmer Rouge forces surrendered and the civil war came to an end.

Cambodia was hailed in the 1960s as the 'Switzerland of Southeast Asia' because of its relative prosperity and stability. However, today it lags behind Thailand and Vietnam in terms of economic progress. Cambodia is still one of the poorest countries in the world. The majority of its 13 million population live in rural areas, 58 per cent live on less than US\$2 a day. The adult literacy rate is 77.6 per cent, making radio and television the main source of information for the population where 70 per cent are under the age of 30 (all statistics are from Anon. 2010). This socio-political and economic situation has had a tremendous impact on the development of media and journalism education in Cambodia.

Background

Cambodia has never had a free press. The French newspapers during the colonial period (1863–1949) were known for their often vitriolic attacks on the administration, which had the legal means to crack down on newspapers they did not like. In 1924, they even added an article to Cambodia's penal code that forbade 'all injurious criticism of the actions of the French or Cambodian administration', a crime punishable with up to one year in jail and a fine (John 2002).

In 1936, *Nagara Vatta*, the first Khmer-language newspaper that was not under direct control of the French administration was published after much delay by the colonial administration. The paper avoided direct confrontation with the French, but focused its criticism on subjects such as the 'Vietnamese domination of the Cambodian civil service, the monopoly of commerce by the Chinese, and the relegation of Cambodians to badly paid jobs' (Mehta 1997).

After King Sihanouk led the country into independence with his Royal Crusade for Independence in 1953, he took an active interest in the press. He published a monthly magazine *Kambuja* with him as editor-in-chief. Others were published by his staff—a good number of them French journalists, who doubled as his speech writers and advisors (Osborne 1994, pp. 145–49; Osbourne 2004, pp. 136–50). These publications were widely distributed in Cambodia and abroad. In the late 1960s, Sihanouk even edited the short-lived film magazine *Cinema Kambuja*, and the satire and gossip magazine *Pseng-Pseng*, which was frequently described as 'pornographic' (François 2002). Radio and television—that started to broadcast two hours a day in the late 1960s—were also state controlled.

Under Sihanouk's rule, critical voices were violently suppressed. For example, lawyer Khieu Samphan, who was manhandled and photographed naked by Sihanouk's secret police in 1959 for the critical articles in his journal *L'Observateur* and who went on to become one of the most prominent leaders of the Khmer Rouge (Osbourne 2004, p. 149). Before the elections in 1955, Sihanouk had a number of independent newspapers closed and their editors imprisoned (Chandler 1999, p. 81).¹ In 1965, he expelled all foreign journalists for a couple of months for their critical reports of Cambodia.

Réalités cambodgiennes was considered the only independent weekly news magazine at that time. But it was known more for its sycophantic portrayal of Sihanouk than its analytical reporting. It featured Sihanouk on its cover at least once a month, reported on his industrialization projects as well as on his whims (the movies Sihanouk made, the film festivals he organized, his private houses and his leisure activities). One of the first things the new government of the 'Khmer Republic' (1970–75) under Lon Nol did after they disposed of Sihanouk in a coup d'état in March 1970 was to replace all the editors of *Réalités cambodgiennes* with their own men. Under Lon Nol, formal censorship was established in Cambodia, and the new regime kept tight control of the press, jailing or even killing several journalists (Mehta 1997, pp. 99–126).

Whatever freedom there was in Cambodia before 1975 was taken away by the Khmer Rouge, which named the country 'Democratic Kampuchea'. Phnom Penh and other cities were deserted in a matter of days. Almost the whole population of Cambodia were forced to work in the rice fields, irrigation projects and a few remaining factories. Organized religion was abolished. Private property, money and markets were eliminated. A genocide campaign led to annihilation of about 20 per cent of the country's population. Apart from business people, former police and government employees and ethnic minorities in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge targeted intellectuals, including journalists, to 'cleanse' the country of foreign and 'counterrevolutionary' influences.

While other Communist regimes established a party press to support their political goals, the Khmer Rouge had no need for journalistic mouthpieces: 'Not a single literary or news journal remained. Turgid party bulletins and documents were the only journals in limited circulation among party members' (Mehta 1997, p. 142).

When the Vietnamese 'liberated' Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge, they in turn imposed further sanctions on the country's media, and took ownership of The Voice of the Kampuchean People (VOKP) radio station and television—reestablished in 1983—and the official press agency Sarpordamean Kampuchea (SPK). As of late 1987, Cambodia still had no daily newspaper.

Only after the 1993 elections did the press in Cambodia flourish. Around 30 Khmer newspapers were published. Some still operate today such as *Rasmei Kampuchea*. Foreign-language publications also began in 1993 such as the English language *Cambodia Daily* and *Phnom Penh Post*; French-language paper *La Voix du Cambodge* (1992–2010).

The UNTAC released a Media Charter in 1994 that stressed the freedom of the press, and in 1995, the National Assembly passed a press law, which—even though vaguely worded—ensured the freedom of press, albeit with some significant provisions. It outlaws ‘obscene’ or ‘violent’ material and obliges the media to use ‘grammatically correct’ Khmer (Press Law 2011).

Most Khmer journalists and editors who worked on these papers as well as for radio and television had no formal training in journalism. Most had never had exposure to anything like a free press, and were guided by a handful of senior editors who had survived the Khmer Rouge regime of terror. These senior journalists had typically learned their trade on the job during Sihanouk’s government.

Many of the problems that plague the Cambodian media today stem from this period of relatively unregulated development of the Khmer media and often unprofessional journalistic practices: ‘envelope journalism’ (where money in discreet envelopes ensures either coverage in the media or the suppression of unwanted reporting), a lack of objectivity, poor journalistic standards, partisanship, a disdain for journalistic investigation, ignorance of ethical practice and often the arbitrary attitude of government institutions and the courts towards the media.

The shortcomings of the Cambodian media culture were evident in the anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh in January 2003 that left the Thai embassy in flames and dozens of Thai-owned businesses, restaurants and factories in rubble. The night of violence was caused by a report in Siem Reap-based newspaper *Rasmei Angkor* that printed a front-page article on comments supposedly made by Thai actress Suvanan Kongying on a Thai television show. The article quoted her as saying: ‘I hate Cambodians because Cambodians stole my Angkor Wat. If I am reincarnated, I would rather be a dog than a Cambodian.’ (Paddock 2003)

The editors admitted later that they reported the remark without having seen the telecast and cross checking the facts. Nevertheless, the story was reported in a number of Khmer newspapers the following days, with even the Prime Minister Hun Sen commenting on the issue. The Cambodian government had to apologize to Thailand later. Since then the incident has strained the relationship between Cambodia and Thailand.

State of the Media in Cambodia Today

In 2010, there were 226 registered Khmer-language newspapers in Cambodia, 150 magazines, 74 radio stations, nine local television broadcast channels and eight commercial broadcasters (Anon 2010, p. 5). These numbers, sourced from the Cambodian Ministry of Information, are, however, not independently audited. Its accuracy thus cannot be verified. In Cambodia, every newspaper and magazine has to register with the authorities. The Press Law from 1995 stipulates that ‘before distribution of the press, the employer or editor shall submit an application to the Ministry of Information in order to identify itself. The Ministry shall issue a receipt to the press after receiving the whole file’ (Anon 2010, p. 5).

Few Cambodian newspapers are published regularly or have salaried staff. Many newspapers are run by political parties or individual politicians, so coverage is often slanted towards their sponsors. Even the staff of *Rasmei Kampuchea*, with a reported circulation of 30,000 copies, are paid such meager wages

that editors have second jobs.² The actual number of Khmer-language newspapers published on a regular basis is more likely to be less than 20. Many of them boost their sales by foregrounding sensational stories about violence, accidents and other mayhem. Then, there are *Phnom Penh Post* and the *Cambodia Daily* that cover Cambodian issues for its predominantly expatriate market. A relatively new development are lifestyle magazines that cater to the urban middle class that has emerged in the last couple of years.

The growth of the Internet is one of the more encouraging developments. Cambodian bloggers, who call themselves ‘Cloggers’, have contributed to the emergence of a public sphere, as small as their potential readership might be. (Just over 300,000 people in Cambodia have Internet access, which is 2.2 per cent of the total population).³ Discourse in cyberspace is relatively unrestricted. A ban of the website KI Media, run by Cambodians living abroad and which is highly critical of Hun Sen and his government, was short lived.

That does not mean, however, that there is real freedom of expression. Cambodia is ranked 128 of 178 countries in the Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders. Of the ASEAN countries, only Indonesia has a better position (117), while Thailand, Laos and Vietnam are ranked at 153, 165 and 168, respectively. While there is no systematic censorship in Cambodia, the authorities often come down hard on journalists unannounced and the courts typically mete out harsh sentences.

Heng Chakra, publisher of the opposition newspaper, *Khmer Machas Srok*, was jailed in June 2009 for one year for running a series of articles that accused the deputy prime minister Sok An of corruption. Heng was pardoned by King Norodom Sihamoni after six months in jail. Heng was tried under the criminal code instead of the 1995 press law in order to be able to impose a more severe sentence. (The press law provides for fines but not jail sentences). This follows a pattern, where media cases are typically tried under the criminal code, which has been amended in December 2010. This new law has important ramifications for the freedom of the press.

Article 495 is based on a vague definition of incitement as sharing or exposing the public to speech, writings, drawings or audiovisual telecommunication that could ‘directly result in a crime being committed’ or in ‘serious social unrest’. Defamation and ‘affecting the dignity’ of others is also punishable under this article. One of the most bizarre recent cases in this regard involved a guard at the UN World Food Programme, who was charged with criminal incitement for printing an article from a website that was critical of the government and showing it to workmates. He was sentenced to half a year in jail.

Cambodian journalists have also been killed for their critical reporting. *Khmer* reporter Khim Sambo was gunned down with his 21-year-old son in Phnom Penh on 11 July 2008, two weeks before the general election. Since 1994, at least 10 journalists have been killed in Cambodia. However, none of these cases have ever been solved. None of the killers have been brought to justice.⁴

Journalism Education in Cambodia

UNESCO currently supports the Cambodian media through workshops on reporting of issues deemed crucial for the development of Cambodian society: human rights, land mines, the environment and Cambodia’s cultural heritage. Funding for these activities come from the UN and various government aid agencies.⁵ The outcomes are the establishment of the Cambodian Communication Institute (CCI) and the Department of Media and Communication (DMC) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

Judith Clarke (2000) writes UNESCO's training reached the masses. A report dated October 1994 listed in the previous year 37 courses involving 590 attendees from *Agence Khmère de Presse* (AKP, the new name of SPK), six broadcast stations, 22 local newspapers, five foreign news organizations, 12 government ministries and other bodies and 21 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ... The courses were all short and specific in nature, though UNESCO's overall recommendation was that media education should become part of the school curriculum and that a degree course should eventually be taught at the university (Clarke 2000, p. 85).

Other initiatives included a journalism course at RUPP in 1992, initially training working journalists in French. After two years, it was incorporated into the French course in the Languages Department and made an elective for third and fourth year students of French.

Another program that trains Cambodian Journalists is the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation (IMMF) based in Bangkok. These programs were partly sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) of Germany, marking the first time that the foundation was involved in providing foreign training to Cambodian journalists.

The DMC, where I teach, was founded in January 2001, a collaborative outcome between KAS and RUPP. KAS had approached two other German institutions for support of the newly founded department: *der Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* (German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD) and the *Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst* (German Development Service, DED). DED has since been integrated into the *Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit* (Society for international Cooperation, GIZ).

Since then, DAAD, the largest German support organization in the field of international academic co-operation, provides one long-term consultant from Germany. The first DAAD consultant started work at the DMC in May 2002. The DED brought in two lecturers from Germany to teach media ethics in the framework of their Sectoral Department for the Promotion of Democracy, Civil Society and Local Governance.

Since 2009, DED is sending only one German lecturer to DMC. KAS is shouldering the bulk of the running costs of the department, including staff salaries, as the regular wages of RUPP are insufficient to retain qualified lecturers. DAAD has so far sent three long-term consultants, the current (and also the last) being me. Apart from two foreign lecturers, there are six local full-time lecturers, two teaching assistants and a number of part-time lecturers.

DMC opened on April 30, 2001 by Prakas No. 296. (A *prakas* is a Cambodian edict or decree.) In January 2002, Prime Minister Hun Sen presided over the official opening ceremony of the department.

The four-year Bachelor of Arts in Media Management at DMC is Cambodia's only degree course in journalism. The language of instruction is English. A total of 91 students have been awarded a degree since 2005. Five of them have since received their Masters from universities abroad. At this time of writing (2011), more than 100 students are enrolled at DMC; ten are enrolled in MA programs; two DMC graduates are working on their PhDs abroad.

DMC students also complete two internships in Cambodia or abroad. In 2011, DMC students interned at *The Statesman* in India, the *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *The Star* in Malaysia and at *Newsbreak* in the Philippines, as well as with local media and NGOs. DMC partners with German universities in Hamburg and Mittweida, as well as with the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, Ohio University in the US, the American University in Paris and Hong Kong Baptist University, where DMC graduates have continued their studies. Deutsche Welle sends instructors once a year to teach a bloc seminar on online journalism.

DMC graduates usually find work within a few months after graduation. A good number of graduates have successfully applied for international scholarships such as Fulbright, DAAD or Erasmus. Thanks to the support of its international partners, DMC is currently offering its program free of charge, and therefore a good number of students are from the provinces or from poorer families. Around 300 apply to DMC every year, of which 25 are accepted into the program. To make the program self-sufficient in the long run, DMC is currently preparing two fee-based new programs. Two teaching assistants are employed to eventually take over the classes currently taught by foreign professors.

Teaching and Learning Experiences

English, A Foreign Language

I came to DMC in September 2009. I was the first foreign teacher. Even though our students go through intensive English classes in their first year, their command of the language is limited. And here I was, expected to teach them print journalism in English, which is the core subject in year 2. (In year 3, the students focus on radio and video production. Year 4 is dedicated to their thesis, which is either a short video production or a research thesis).

I soon noticed that the students often did not understand what I was trying to tell them. It took some time to figure that out since they kept nodding friendly at me, no matter how little they understood. I learned to speak slower, used simple vocabulary and repeated the important points. Most importantly, I encouraged the students to ask questions each time I made an important point. 'Any questions or remarks?' became my mantra that I kept repeating every 10 or 15 minutes in each class.

After a couple of weeks, I started to feel a better rapport. I also introduced a student report presentation on every key subject in class in order to have 'their' version of these issues. I must have made some progress as the same problem did not arise when I started to teach the new batch the following year.

However, while the verbal communication in class improved, the written language remains an issue. All the weekly assignments in the 'Introduction to Writing' are in English, which is a challenge both for the students and for the teacher. Marking the stories for language, structure, nuances and contents written by 30 students every week can take up to two days. The print publications that I did with the students also required rigorous editing and re-writing.

As a remedy, I sit with the students to discuss their pieces individually after class. Apart from issues with the language, another issue that sets Cambodia apart from other countries is the lack of exposure to quality journalism.

Different Cultural Backgrounds

Consequences of cultural differences between students and teacher can show up at the most unexpected opportunities. In my second year at DMC, I decided to put together a list of examples for different type of leads. Here is an example of an anecdotal lead I first showed the class:

I am sitting with Michael Hart at Garcia's, a pizza place near the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where we are having a perfectly normal conversation about digital libraries and are preparing to tuck into our

dinners. Hart is an e-text visionary and cofounder of Project Gutenberg, whose aim is to put copies of the world's greatest books on the Net for free. Hart is also a world-class eccentric with the social skills of a cranky 2-year-old. As I look up from my glistening pepperoni, Hart, who is 50, does the damndest thing I've seen done to a pizza. Tearing open two dozen sugar packets, he sprinkles them methodically over his deep-dish pie until it is layered with white crystals. Then he digs in.

'This may seem weird to you,' he confides between mouthfuls, 'but it's the only way I can get enough fuel to keep working. This right here is 2,000 calories, and it should keep me going for a while.'⁶

I had first read the article on Michael Hart, the inventor of e-books, in 1997, and I still remember this lead over a decade later, so I thought that it was a rather powerful way of how to begin an article. My students were, however, completely unimpressed with the example. I read it out in class and commented on how hilarious and at the same time revealing about the odd personality of Michael Hart this introduction was. None of the students even smiled.

It turned out that none of them found anything unusual in putting sugar on a pizza, considered to be an expensive foreign food in Cambodia. 'But surely you would not put sugar in your noodle soup,' I said in a misguided attempt to come up with an example that was less alien to them. But nobody found anything odd about sugar in the soup either. A long discussion ensued about which condiments one would not add to which dish, but the students found it hard to think of any combination that was taboo. Eventually they agreed that they would probably not put salt in their coffee. I removed the pizza example from my handout the following year and replaced it with a less culture-specific example.

Lack of Exposure

Growing up in a middle-class environment in Germany, one acquires a basic understanding of journalism—for instance how hard news are structured and how an interview is conducted—without even being aware of it. Most middle-class parents in Germany would also encourage a level of literacy, for instance by reading bedtime stories to their children or giving books as birthday presents.

In Cambodia, this is different. The media environment lacks the stimuli for an aspiring journalist. The Khmer-language press is of relatively low standard, poorly researched and often polemical vis-à-vis political opponents. Television news often consists of gushing reports on government actions and detailed accounts of their daily activities. Critical journalism is mostly in the domain of the English-language press and wire, radio and Internet services such as the Khmer-language service of the Voice of America or the BBC. Many Cambodians turn to these sources to find more comprehensive information on Cambodia.

However, this is only a relatively small elite, and most young people grow up without much exposure to quality or critical journalism. (Even English-language papers such as the Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post refrain from publishing editorials that might offend the government). To explain to students, who grew up under such conditions, how to conduct an interview or how to write a commentary that is critical yet fair is a challenge.

To deal with this situation, I ask the students to read at least one good newspaper everyday. For most students, that is the Cambodia Daily, which costs only 1800 Riel (30 US cents) at the newsstand or the Phnom Penh Post in our library. Some opt for online international publications. Many students

listen to the BBC or VOA in the morning before coming to class, and if they miss the broadcast, they often catch up on the news websites. Stories of particular interest to the students often circulate very quickly in their blogs.

I also provide one or two examples from the papers I read for every journalistic genre we discuss: hard news, interviews and editorials. I try to use up-to-date examples every school year, but I have a collection of good pieces in case I do not come across a suitable example during the semester. It is surprisingly difficult to find a commentary that follows the Hook–Thesis–Body–Conclusion structure that I keep expounding to my students.

Nevertheless, I present a simple model of how to write every type of text that we cover in our class. I point out to the students that they do not need to follow this model once they are more accomplished writers, but that these blueprints will ensure that they end up with a readable story.

Interestingly, the concept of the teaser in feature writing conflicts peculiarly with Khmer traditions of writing. Cambodian students are taught in school that an essay should always start with a general introduction before turning to the specific subject matter. Even when they write features, my students often start with a very general ‘prologue’ before coming to the point. Here is an example from a student feature about land-grabbing in Cambodia:

The capital of Phnom Penh is the largest city in Cambodia and it is the place where businesses, both small and big, are rapidly growing for the last few years; the city is developing as a whole. While the city is in a rapid urbanization and city beautification is in need, inner-city slum communities are a main barrier in this process. Many of those slum communities have been demolished and had their land taken under the name of slum upgrading.

It often takes a lot of explanation to get them to start their text with an anecdotal or narrative teaser. The fact that the students’ grasp of English is limited also means that I need to pick examples that use simple clear language. Ornate, florid language, metaphors, idiomatic expressions and an intricate choice of words are less effective in teaching in a culture where even students of English literature read ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in a simplified version.

It also helps to pick features and editorials that interest the students, or at least not completely alien to them. An editorial on Israeli–Palestine peace negotiations, even though structured in a fashion that was right out of our textbook, was of little interest. An Op-ed on the company policies of Apple, however, was not only a good example of how to structure an opinion piece but also an interesting read to them.

It was also important to find a readable textbook. I chose ‘Reporting and Writing News: A Basic Handbook’, published by the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation. As the text was developed for students in the region, many examples are taken from newspapers from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

Another good source for readings that is very comprehensive is the website TheNewsManual.net. It is based on a journalism textbook developed for an UNESCO program in Papua New Guinea and is now available in its entirety on the Internet (<http://www.thenewsmanual.net>). This site also contains some useful exercises that I make use of.

Students are encouraged to read as much as possible, not just journalism. As our library lacks good literature and textbooks, I applied for a book donation from the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Society, DFG) and we received 150 books on journalism and the media in 2010.

To expose students to newspaper design, I collected the front pages from international newspapers such as the International Herald Tribune and the Guardian to tabloids such as the Sun and the German Bild-Zeitung. Students compare and discuss the different designs, point out the choice of pictures and other graphic elements. They also compare the front page of the Phnom Penh Post and the Index page of the website of the paper on a given day. While we do have classes on design and news photography in our program, I find it important to address this subject from a mainly journalistic point of view.

I frequently bring back stacks of international magazines from trips abroad, for example news magazines and glossy 'coffee table' publications from Newsweek and Der Spiegel to Monocle, Wallpaper or Wired. I go through these magazines with the students, point out good photographs, interesting design and original story angles. These magazines are placed in the library for students' reference. Cambodian students are frequently fascinated by the fact that there are whole magazines on topics such as food design or bicycling.

Despite the Internet, YouTube, documentaries on widely available pirated DVDs etc, Cambodian students still live in an environment that is culturally quite homogenous and local. While they are quite knowledgeable about certain aspects of the Internet and sources of information (many of them have their own blogs or websites) and curious about the culture of other countries, they know little about international media culture. For instance, none of them have heard of American documentary film maker Michael Moore or are aware of documentary film making styles, such as Direct Cinema or *cinéma vérité*.

Therefore, I included an overview about some of the historic schools of documentary film making in the subject 'Media and Society'. In an optional colloquium-type class, 'Friday Film Lunch', I show the students during lunch time documentaries and Cambodian movies that are also not well known but which I think would interest them. Films that did particularly well with the students were 'Burma VJ', 'Capitalism: A Love Story', 'Our Daily Bread', 'Enemies of the People' and 'Inside Job'. Between 20 and 40 students typically come for the Friday Film Lunch.

When reviewing films, I try to pick films that are relevant to Cambodia, such as the works by French-Cambodian film maker Rithy Pan or 'The Killing Fields' that are now widely known among young Cambodians.

I also found out that almost none of the students read novels. If they read books at all, it is mostly self-help books and other non-fiction. To heighten their interest in reading, I put together a small reader with short stories in relatively easy English (by authors such as Franz Kafka, O. Henry, Raymond Carver). I had this reader printed at my own expense and distributed it as a Christmas present among the students from year two and three.

Hands-on Learning

Every type of journalistic writing discussed goes through several rewrites after a thorough critique in class. In one instance, the students had to write a short news piece on a fire in a hotel three times until they 'got it right'. These exercises often leave me with up to 30,000 words to read in a given week.

In order to experience the work on a larger publication, students produce a magazine at the end of school year. The first one was on the cinema of Cambodia, the second was on the music of Cambodia.

I picked these topics because I feel that the students are often forced to work on subjects that their foreign professors consider to be important: the Khmer Rouge, poverty, HIV, etc. While there is nothing wrong with these topics per se, I try to find subjects that cast a more positive light on their country. Thirty years after the end of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, it is not all doom and gloom in Cambodia anymore, and I try to reflect that in my choice of story topics.

I have experimented with Wikispaces in my class for group research. However, as Wikispaces is not an academic platform, I found the site somewhat lacking. It is also difficult to track individual contributions to the site. At the same time, I find it important to make the students understand that not every information is available online. Therefore, I came up with a research exercise that I call 'Good question'. For this module, I give every student a question that cannot be answered by using Google, but where they have to use other means of research. For example, 'How many tourists are staying in Phnom Penh on an average night?', 'When was the first radio antenna built in Phnom Penh?' or 'How many calories are contained in one glass of sugarcane juice?' These questions forced the students to call the authorities in charge or even to go to the National Archive.

However, all these efforts cannot make the students become accomplished journalists. They need to practice. Thus I visit the Phnom Penh Post with my students once every school year to expose them to the newsroom environment, and to enable them to get to know some of the editors. This has resulted in a good number of students who contribute to the Post on a regular basis. Other students work for Khmer papers. A youth supplement of the Post titled *Lift* is written almost exclusively by DMC students. Some students even had investigative stories about Cambodian seamen, Khmer Rouge survivors and other difficult topics published in the papers.

Critical Thinking

You would expect that in a country like Cambodia—where the political opposition has systematically been marginalized by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) of Prime Minister Hun Sen and where critical media are the exception—students are not very critical about their country and its politics. Most of DMC students, however, have a good understanding and opinions of the country's politics, which they freely discuss in class.

To check that my students do read the news, but, more importantly, to foster political discussion, I introduced a module 'News of the World'. Once a week, I ask them about the most important local and world news and explain why they find these stories relevant. That is often an opportunity for me to explain some more hard-to-understand news and to give context and background to some stories. I point out media-related stories that I found significant. For instance, Wikileaks and the microblogs of China, and new developments that concern the media in Cambodia (such as the new Criminal Code that came into effect earlier this year).

I started a 'DMC Night', a monthly event that takes place at Meta House, a cultural center in Phnom Penh. Once a month, students show their recent works, mostly documentaries and video features, but we have also used the opportunity to launch our magazines. The number of visitors varies between around ten to up to 100, and the regular Q&A sessions force the students to talk about their work to people from outside of the department. The presentation on Cambodian cinema that we developed for the launch of our cinema magazine led to invitations for talks in Siem Reap, Vientiane, Hanoi and at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh.

Conclusion

Indeed, teaching journalism as a foreign instructor in Cambodia has been a steep learning curve. One needs patience, cultural sensitivity, willingness to shift one's dominant learning paradigms, aptitude to adapt to the local culture and empathize with the student's stance without straying from the core values and standards of good journalism. I am glad I was able to teach in Cambodia for two years. My students at DMC might very well be the most motivated (as well as fun-to-be-with) students that I ever had or will have.

Notes

1. It is difficult to assess the independent Khmer press from that period today, as most of the newspapers that were held in the National Library in Phnom Penh and had survived the war on culture of the Khmer Rouge were pulped in 1979 by Vietnamese propaganda units, that needed paper for leaflets and pamphlets.
2. Interviews with staff members.
3. Retrieved August 2010, from www.internetworldstats.com.
4. For a more comprehensive overview about the restrictions on the freedom of expression, see the yearly reports by the Cambodian Human Rights NGO Licadho (2008, 2009, 2010).
5. For a very comprehensive overview about the many journalism education initiatives, see Clarke (2000).
6. Hamilton, Denise: Hart of the Gutenberg Galaxy. What kind of a man wants to put the 10,000 most important books online by 2002 and make them available for free? (Hint: the kind of man who puts sugar on his pizza.), Wired 5.02., February 1997, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.02/esgutenberg_pr.html

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