Beyond the newsroom

Cambodia's media from an audience perspective

An audience study

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Contents

1. Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a qualitative audience study conducted in Cambodia from December 2023 to February 2024. The study was commissioned by the international media development organisation IMS, International Media Support, and supported by the European Union.

The study aimed to assess news and media habits, preferences, and trust levels among media audiences in Cambodia. With little tradition of doing audience research in the country, the purpose of the study was to get deep insights into Cambodians' media patterns. The study involved interviews with 130 Cambodian individuals and 20 focus group discussions with a total of 129 participants. Participants were aged between 18 and 75, living across five different provinces.

With the shift away from printed newspapers, Cambodians have increasingly turned to smartphones as the primary device for accessing news and entertainment, particularly via social media platforms like Facebook. However, not all Cambodians have equal access to smartphones, internet, and technology due to high costs and media and limited digital literacy. Consequently, traditional media such as TV and radio remain important, especially among the elderly and women.

According to participants in the study, local media outlets in Cambodia have generally failed to gain the trust of audiences. Respondents noted that they found local journalists often broadcasting misinformation and failing to cover social issues, people's lives, and political topics comprehensively. Instead, they felt that the media, in particularly local TV stations, typically focus on traffic accidents, national pride, leaders' activities, entertainment, and alcohol promotion.

The study highlights the significant role of international media outlets and social media in filling the gap left by local media. Outlets such as Radio Free Asia (RFA), Voice of America (VOA) and Voice of Democracy (VOD) are praised for covering political matters and social issues comprehensively. Social media, particularly Facebook, is noted for providing diverse and timely news, although it is also criticised for occasionally spreading misinformation.

The report ends with lists of recommendations for future media development efforts in the country as well as recommendations for media that wishes to better connect with audiences and thereby build trust and hopefully more viable businesses.

2. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Cambodia has experienced rapid economic growth, maintaining an annual growth rate of 7.7 percent from 1998 to 2019. Despite this progress, the country continues to grapple with issues related to fundamental freedoms and human rights. Freedom of expression and press freedom, while protected under Cambodian and international laws, are not fully realized in practice. Reporters Without Borders ranked Cambodia 151 out of 180 countries in their 2024 annual press freedom index[1], and in 2024, Freedom House rated Cambodia as "not free" with a global freedom score of 23 out of 100.[2]

As of January 2023, there were a total of 2,171 media outlets registered in Cambodia, including 660 print media outlets, 878 online media outlets, 220 FM radio stations, 20 live broadcast TV stations, and 165 other stations.[3] The media landscape in Cambodia is highly concentrated, with most media either state-controlled or owned by private companies with close government ties. The last English-language newspaper in Cambodia, The Phnom Penh Post, ceased publication in April 2024.

The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, particularly on social media, has undermined trust in reliable sources. This trend has been exacerbated during significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2023 national election campaign.

As in other countries, Cambodia is undergoing a rapid digital transformation, with audiences increasingly relying on social media for news and information. In 2024 more than half of the Cambodian population are internet users. Interestingly figures reveal that close to 70 percent of the population are active on social media, primarily accessing the internet via mobile phones according to DataReportal[4].

Despite the digital shift, little is known about the current media habits and preferences of Cambodians due to the lack of audience measurement traditions in the country.

This research aims to fill that gap by conducting a qualitative audience study to understand media habits, news consumption patterns, preferences, and trust levels among people in Cambodia.

The research provides insights into where and how people obtain information, what they consider relevant and trustworthy, and how they evaluate content from various sources, including social media. The study's qualitative nature means it does not offer statistically representative results, but rather indicative insights based on a stratified purposive sampling strategy, reflecting different media habit types, geographical locations, gender, and age.

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[1] Reporters Without Borders (2024). 2024 World Press Freedom Index – journalism under political pressure, https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure?data_type=general&year=2024

[2] Freedom House(2024). Cambodia, Freedom in the World, https://freedomhouse.org/country/cambodia

[3] Khmer Times (2023, April 6). Increasing number of media outlets reflects freedom of expression and press freedom in Cambodia. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501269087/increasing-number-of-media-outlets-reflects-freedom-of-expression-and-press-freedom-in-cambodia/

[4] DataReportal. (2024, February 23) Digital in Cambodia, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-cambodia. The discrepancy between internet users and social media users could be found in the fact that some people in Cambodia only use social media and do not access the internet for other purposes. As DataReportal themselves stress social media users may not represent unique individuals, also contributing to an inflated figure. However, comparisons on data over the past couple of years indicate a continued increase in the number of people coming online in Cambodia, getting smartphones and using social media.

3. Methodology

Focus group discussion. Kampong Cham, Cambodia

3.1. Research design and data collection

This qualitative study aims to explore the complexities of media habits and preferences among diverse populations across three distinct regions of Cambodia: Central Plain-Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng; Tonle Sap-Siem Reap; and Plateau and Mountains-Ratanak Kiri.

The research design was carefully crafted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of media consumption behaviours without claiming statistical representativeness. Instead, the study sought to provide indicative insights into media habits and media literacy levels among various demographic groups. A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants, aiming for a high level of generalizability across different types of media users (heavy, medium, and light users; social media and non-social media users). This approach ensured representation from both urban and rural areas, diverse age groups, and genders. By stratifying the sample according to these criteria, the research aimed to capture diverse perspectives and trends among media consumers without achieving a fully representative sample. Research tools, including semi-structured questionnaires and moderator guides for interviews and focus groups, were developed in Khmer and underwent rigorous pre-testing. This process was essential to refine the instruments and ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness in data collection. Consent was ensured verbally from all participants and data was handled according to GDPR rules.

Training sessions were conducted to familiarise fieldworkers with the research tools and protocols. These sessions also addressed the challenges posed by varying participant interpretations and accessibility, thereby enhancing data validity. Data collection involved extensive interviews and focus group discussions with participants from different social statuses, ethnicities, ages, and settlements. These sessions provided rich qualitative data on participants' media consumption patterns, preferences, and perceptions.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using Excel. Themes emerging from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and significant insights into media use behaviours. While the qualitative nature of the analysis allowed for nuanced exploration, potential subjective biases were mitigated through rigorous analytical procedures aimed at maintaining objectivity.
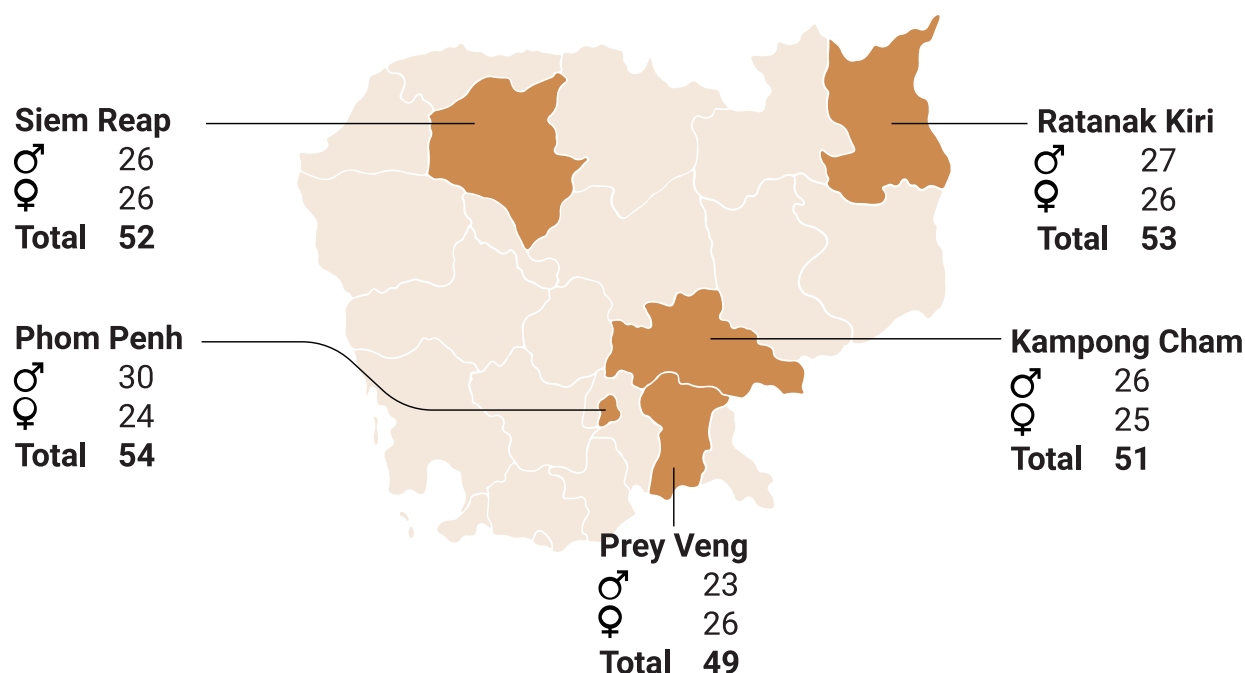
Siem Reap
♂ 26
♀ 26
Total 52

Ratanak Kiri
♂ 27
♀ 26
Total 53

Phom Penh
♂ 30
♀ 24
Total 54

Kampong Cham
♂ 26
♀ 25
Total 51

Prey Veng
♂ 23
♀ 26
Total 49

Figure 1: Overview of participants according to gender and provinces of study.

3.2. Participant diversity and limitations

Participants were purposefully selected to reflect the diversity of Cambodia's population, including ethnic minorities and varied socio-economic backgrounds. However, logistical challenges in recruiting specific age groups and achieving balanced representation across all demographic categories may have influenced the study's findings. One notable challenge encountered during data collection for the focus group discussions was related to the selection of participants based on specific age groups. The planned age groups were categorized into four distinct groups: 18-24, 25-39, 40-54, and 55 and above. However, the research team faced significant difficulties in recruiting participants that strictly fit into these predefined categories. Despite the initial plans, some groups did not meet the exact age specifications due to the unavailability of participants within the target provinces. To address this issue, the researchers adopted a flexible approach by mixing age groups in certain focus group discussions according to the availability of participants. For example, in Phnom Penh and Ratanak Kiri, the planned age group of males 18-24 was achieved, but other groups had to adjust their age compositions. This challenge highlighted the difficulty in adhering to strict demographic criteria in practice, necessitating a more adaptable recruitment strategy to ensure sufficient participant numbers and a diversity of perspectives in the discussions.

4. Findings

The following chapter presents the findings from the study organised around eight different themes that provide insights into people's media habits, media preferences and media literacy levels in Cambodia. The data reveal not only common trends but also distinct differences across urban and rural settings, between genders, and among different age groups and ethnic minorities. It paints a picture of a Cambodian media landscape undergoing significant change with audiences increasingly finding information on online platforms and demanding more from the media to deliver on their information needs.

4.1. Access determines usage

Before diving into media habits and media preferences, it is paramount to understand what media people have access to on a regular basis. Their access to devices and channels sets the scene for their news and information consumption and allows us to see emerging changes in habits and preferences. While we do not have a similar study to compare results to, we know that radio and television for many years have been the most dominant media in the country. However, their posi-

tions are threatened by mobile cellular technology that is currently being rolled out around the country at high speed and seeks to ensure that network coverage even for 4G and 5G gets to 100 percent[5].

As such participants in the study reported varying levels of access to digital devices and the internet. Smartphones were the most commonly used devices for accessing news

and information, particularly among younger participants and urban residents. However, high costs and limited digital literacy restricted access for some groups, especially in rural areas and among women.

However, in both rural and urban areas, television remains a significant medium, albeit with varying degrees of usage and preference. The data indicates that while television is still accessed by a notable portion of the population, its usage patterns have been affected by the convenience and multifunctionality offered by smartphones. For instance, in rural areas like Ta Ni village in Siem Reap, some participants have stopped using TVs altogether, citing issues with portability and energy consumption (Rural Participants, Ta Ni village,

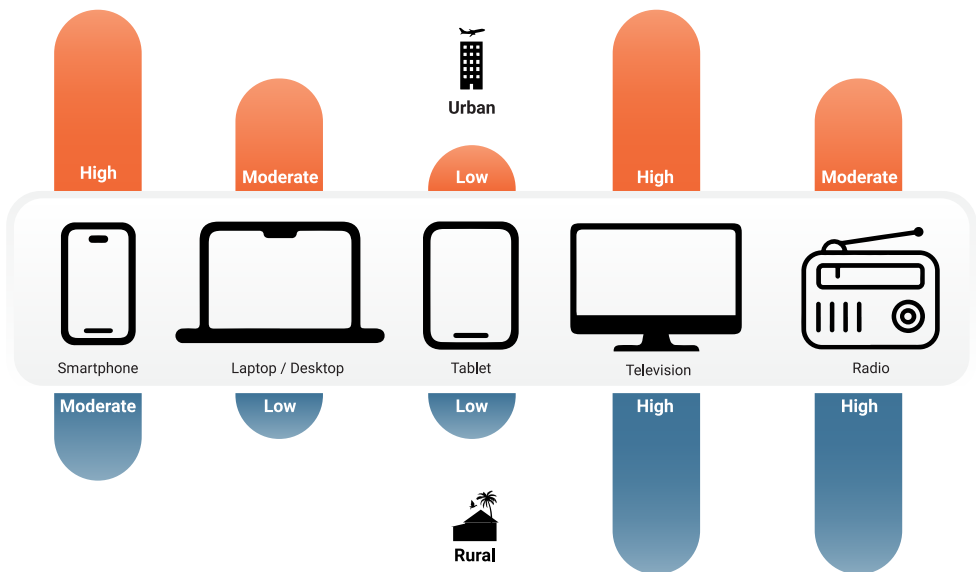|	Smartphone	Laptop / Desktop	Tablet	Television	Radio
Urban	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate
Rural	Moderate	Low	Low	High	High

Figure 2: Media and device usage.

[5]Khmer Times (2023, February 28) Cambodia sees internet, mobile subscription surpass population, https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501246252/cambodia-sees-internet-mobile-phone-subscriptions-surpass-population/

Siem Reap). This shift underscores a preference for devices that are more mobile and versatile, aligning with lifestyle changes and technological advancements.

Moreover, urban respondents also demonstrate a nuanced relationship with television. While it remains a source for news and entertainment, particularly for older demographics and those accustomed to traditional media consumption, its role has evolved. Urban participants highlighted using television primarily for accessing fast-breaking news, local politics updates, and entertainment. However, the data suggests a gradual decline in regular TV viewing habits, especially among younger generations and tech-savvy individuals who favour on-demand content available through smartphones and online platforms.

The same seems to be the case with the radio. Traditionally a vital source of information and entertainment in Cambodia, it is experiencing notable changes in its role. This change

might both be caused by the increased adaptation of mobile technologies but the forced closure of particularly radio stations in 2017[6] have most likely also impacted the decline of the radio. In both rural and urban areas, radio continues to be accessible, particularly among older populations and in regions where modern technology penetration is limited. For instance, as indicated by participants from two focus group discussions with women participants in rural areas, they still rely on radio for entertainment and news, with only one member possessing a mobile phone. Another participant shared, "I don't have a smartphone, so I listen to the radio every morning to stay updated" (55-year-old woman, rural Kampong Cham). This indicates that radio remains a critical medium in areas with limited access to newer technologies. However, even in these regions, there is evidence of changing habits as mobile phones become more prevalent.

Participants across various demographics mentioned that mobile phones, especially smartphones, offer a more convenient and versatile platform for listening to radio programs. The multifunctionality of smartphones allows users to access a wide range of content, including live radio streams, podcasts, and music apps, making them a preferred choice over traditional radio sets. This shift is particularly evident among younger and more tech-savvy individuals who value the on-the-go accessibility and diverse content options provided by smartphones.

Younger participants, especially those in urban areas, were generally more likely to own and use smartphones for daily

activities, including news consumption. One participant noted,

"My phone is my main source for news. I check it first thing in the morning"
25-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh

This mirrors findings from a BBC Media Action study[7] from 2021 which showed that 87 percent of people aged 15-30 are social media users – mostly using smartphones to access content. The majority of young social media users use social media from home and spends an average of 151 minutes online during weekdays and 173 minutes during weekends. An IMS audience research study from 2021 among young people in university cities revealed a similar trend and further showed that the Covid-19 pandemic may have spurred an acceleration of internet users in the country as people in Cambodia – similarly to around the world – were forced to work and study from home for almost 18 months. This resulted in many households acquiring a mobile phone for their children to continue their education online during lockdown.

Acquisition of desktop and laptop computers seems notably lower, with many citing the high cost and lack of necessity as reasons. "I can't afford a computer, and I don't really need one. My phone is enough" (18-year-old woman, rural Phnom Penh).

Differences in access between genders were also observed. Men, particularly in urban areas, reported higher access to digital devices compared to women. This disparity was attributed to socio-economic factors and cultural norms that prioritize men's access to technology. "My husband has a smartphone, but I don't. He uses it for work, and I use the radio for news" (38-year-old woman, rural Siem Reap).

Adding geographical aspects to the mix, the digital gender divide becomes even more apparent. In urban areas, men tend to exhibit a higher level of digital engagement, often using smartphones for multitasking and professional purposes such as file sharing and accessing up-to-date information relevant to their careers. For instance, a male participant in the 25-39 age group from Phnom Penh highlighted using a smartphone for learning agricultural techniques, demonstrating a practical approach to using digital tools for skill development. Conversely, women in urban settings often emphasize the social and educational aspects of smartphone use. They are more inclined to use smartphones for social media interactions, accessing educational content, and connecting with

[6] In 2017, ahead of the elections in 2018, the main opposition party, Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was dissolved after their leader was arrested for "dubious charges of treason", and more than a hundred party members were prohibited from political activity. Furthermore, several human rights activists were prosecuted, among them women's rights activists and women's rights defenders, and the government forced the closure of several independent media, including radio stations and key contributors of public interest information in the country (See for instance Human Rights Watch (2018). World Report 2018 – Cambodia. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-

chapters/cambodia. These crackdowns continue to haunt civil society and to this day has a visible chilling effect on freedom of expression.

[7] Khmer Times (2023, February 28) Cambodia sees internet, mobile subscription surpass pBBC Media Action (2021). Understanding how young Cambodians (15-30 year olds) use mediaand information, https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/asia/cambodia/klahan9-media-infographic-2021/

peers. For example, female participants in urban areas noted the ease of accessing educational news and the convenience of using smartphones for daily communication.

In contrast, rural areas exhibit more pronounced disparities in digital access between genders. While both men and women rely on smartphones for communication and accessing news, women in rural settings often face greater challenges related to internet connectivity and digital literacy. They are more likely to use smartphones for basic communication and accessing essential information due to limited access to internet-enabled devices and infrastructure challenges. Limited internet connectivity and high data costs were frequently mentioned as obstacles that prevented consistent access to online news and information. "Internet here is expensive, and the signal is not always reliable. Sometimes I have to walk to the market to get a better connection" (26-year-old woman, urban Ratanak Kiri). Moreover, digital literacy emerged as a crucial factor. Many participants indicated that while they had access to smartphones or other devices, they lacked the skills to navigate digital platforms effectively. "I have a smartphone, but I only use it for calls and texts. I don't know how to use apps or browse the internet" (46-year-old man, rural Prey Veng). This gap in digital literacy was more pronounced among older participants and those with lower levels of formal education. Training and education on digital skills were suggested as essential steps to improve access and ensure that more people can benefit from digital media. "We need more training on how to use these technologies. It would help us a lot" (55-year-old man, rural Kampong Cham).

However, despite these gaps, it is clear that mobile technologies play a gradual bigger role in people's lives across the country. Participants highlighted the significant role that access to digital devices plays in their ability to stay informed. For many, smartphones were the gateway to news, social media, and communication tools.

4.2. That's news to me

Understanding the concept of news is fundamental to audience research as it reveals how individuals define, value, and interact with information that impacts their daily lives. In Cambodia, the concept of news encompasses a wide range of topics, including politics, social issues, entertainment, and local happenings, reflecting the diverse interests and concerns of local communities. News concept refers to the types of information people consider newsworthy and their expectations regarding the timeliness, reliability, and relevance of this information.

Participants generally had diverse interpretations of what constitutes news. For many, news was defined by its relevance to their daily lives, including local events, economic updates, and social issues. There was a clear preference for news that provide practical information and address immediate concerns. Participants expressed that news should be timely and relevant to their everyday experiences. For example, information about local events, weather updates, and economic developments were highly valued. "I want to know what is happening in my town and how it affects me" (18-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh). These types of news were seen as directly impacting their lives and were thus prioritized over other forms of news. Another participant added, "Economic news helps me understand the market and plan my business" (23-year-old man, urban Ratanak Kiri).

++In contrast, news about international events or national politics was often perceived as less relevant unless it had a direct impact on their local community. Participants also mentioned a preference for news that provided practical advice or tips, such as health advice, agricultural information, or job opportunities.

The concept of news varied across different demographics.

Local Events

"News about our community is what matters most."
40-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh

Social Issues

"We want to hear about issues that affect our society, like health and education."
50-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh

Economic Updates

"Information on the economy helps us plan our future."
19-year-old woman, rural Prey Veng

People watch the ICJ verdict on TV in Sra Em markets, some 30km from Preah Vihear temple on 11 November 2013 in Sra Em, Cambodia

Younger participants tended to have a broader definition of news, including entertainment and social media updates, while older participants focused more on traditional news topics like politics and local events. This difference highlights the evolving nature of news consumption and the need for media outlets to adapt to these changing preferences.

When asked about their opinions on specific news topics and their relevance, participants interestingly seemed to have narrower preferences – or struggled to form an opinion about the relevance of different topics. The highest agreement was found around "breaking news" where the main part of participants agreed to have an interest in this and deemed it highly relevant. However, people were unprompted able to

indicate a high interest in topics pertaining to politics and social issues – with some clearly stating their dissatisfaction with the media to report on these issues. One participant for instance remarked: "Local media does not broadcast on political or social issues, the challenges of the poor, nor help the poor but only shows the activities of the leaders, entertainment, traffic accident, and social security news" (Woman, mixed age group between 29-60 years old, urban Phnom Penh).

Traffic accidents generally seem to be a conflicting topic. Cambodian media outlets spend a lot of time and efforts to report on the many accidents that take place on the roads every year as road safety is a serious problem in the coun-
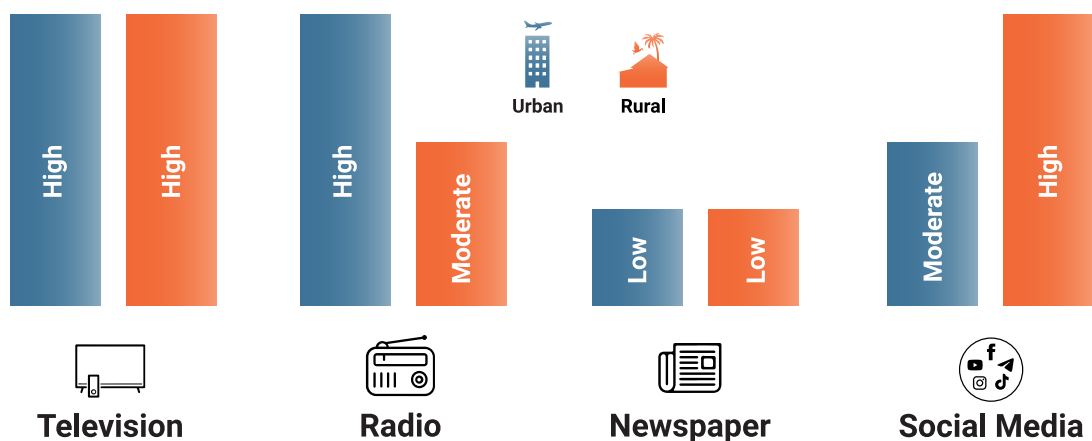

Figure 3: Media habits and media preferences.

[8] UNDP (2021). Road Traffic Accidents in Cambodia, https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications/road-traffic-accidents-cambodia

try. According to a UNDP report[8], an average of 5.4 people die every day from traffic accidents in Cambodia, making it the sixth leading cause of mortality. However, the media often sensationalise traffic accidents and particularly at local level, there is limited understanding of ethics when report ing on the topic. The emergence of social media has only exacerbated the issue with people live reporting (using for instance Facebook Live) from traffic accidents, completely disregarding privacy concerns and respect for the bereaved. As is also evident from this study, people in Cambodia are growing tired of the media's eager to report on the topic – particularly due to the disrespecting nature of the coverage and the fact that it takes away attention from other concerning matters in the country. Like one respondent stated: "The local TVs channels have broadcasted only information concerning traffic accidents, but they have not aired anything about land conflict issues" (Man, mixed age group between 23-57 years old, Phnom Penh).

To summarise, participants emphasised the importance of news that is relevant, practical, and directly applicable to their lives. They appear to have a high interest in news but are also concerned about the media's priorities and abilities to report on the topics that matter most. This insight suggests that media outlets in Cambodia could benefit from tailoring their content to meet the specific needs and interests of their audience, ensuring that they provide valuable and timely information. "News should be useful and help us in our daily lives" (Man, mixed age group between 44-57 years old, urban Siem Reap).

4.3. Media habits

Moving from specific news preferences to people's actual news and media habits reveal where people go for news – and not just what they use in general. It is important to remember that there are potential big differences between platforms and devices people use for entertainment and communication purposes and what they use to obtain news and information. While we for instance have concluded that mobile technologies and the internet play an increasingly bigger role in people's lives, these are not necessarily the preferred devices and platforms for news. As such, television and radio seem to remain important sources of news, especially for older participants and those in rural areas. In contrast, younger and urban participants predominantly use social media platforms such as Facebook for news and information.

Television is the primary source of news for many participants, particularly in rural areas. It is considered a reliable and accessible medium, with national and local news programs being the most watched. "I watch the news on TV every evening. It's a routine" (67-year-old woman, urban Kampong Cham). Radio is also popular, especially among older participants and those living in areas with limited access to other forms of media. Radio news programs are valued for their immediacy and the ability to provide news in the local language. "The radio is always on in our house. It's our main source of news" (65-year-old man, rural Ratanak Kiri).

Social media has clearly emerged as a dominant platform for news consumption among younger participants. Facebook is the most commonly used platform, followed by YouTube and Telegram. Participants appreciate the convenience and accessibility of social media, as well as the ability to interact with news content and share information with their networks. "I get my news from Facebook because it's quick and easy" (26-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh). However, there are concerns about the reliability of news on social media, with many expressing doubts about the accuracy and credibility of the information they encountered.

Local Media

Limited trust
due to perceived biases

International Media

Trusted
for comprehensive coverage

Social Media

Mixed Trust
depending on the source

Figure 4: Trust in media.

"Sometimes it's hard to tell what's true and what's fake on social media"

20-year-old woman, urban Siem Reap

The study also found significant differences in media habits based on gender. Women are more likely to consume news through social media and television, while men are more inclined to use a variety of sources, including radio and online news websites. These differences are most likely influenced by factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, and cultural norms.

In terms of frequency, participants reported varying habits. While some access news multiple times a day, others do so only occasionally, depending on their interest in current events and the availability of news sources. Those in urban areas tend to consume news more frequently, benefiting from better access to digital media and higher levels of digital literacy. "I check the news on my phone several times a day" (28-year-old man, urban Siem Reap).

4.4. Trust is tricky

Trust in media varied significantly among participants. Local media outlets were often distrusted due to perceived biases and misinformation. In contrast, international media and certain social media channels were considered more reliable, particularly for political and social issues. Interestingly, radio stations seem to be trusted more than newspapers and television stations. Whether this is due to historical reasons from before the 2017 crackdown on independent radios or whether it is in fact still the case that people experience more independence from radio stations is difficult to say but the reputation of radios remains strong among people.

Participants did however express scepticism towards local media, citing instances of biased reporting and the influence of political and commercial interests. Many felt that local news outlets were not transparent in their reporting and often omitted important information.

"I don't trust local news because they only tell one side of the story"

39-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh

This lack of trust was more pronounced among younger participants and those with higher levels of education.

Some media do however stand out. Participants specifically highlighted RFA (Radio Free Asia), VOA (Voice of America), VOD (Voice of Democracy), The Cambodia Daily Khmer, and RFI (Radio France International) as independent media outlets. These stations are praised for their professional reporting on sensitive issues like land conflicts and corruption, without facing pressure from local authorities. Common for these are their more international status or English language reporting that allows them to report differently than their more local Khmer counterparts. Particularly the international media such as RFA, VOA and RFI seemed as more credible and unbiased. "I rely on international news for a more balanced perspective" (33-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh). Another participant noted, "The reason these radio stations dare to spread factual news in Cambodia and can broadcast on sensitive issues is because they are not under pressure from the powerful men in the country" (Man, mixed age group between 34-53 years old, urban Kampong Cham).
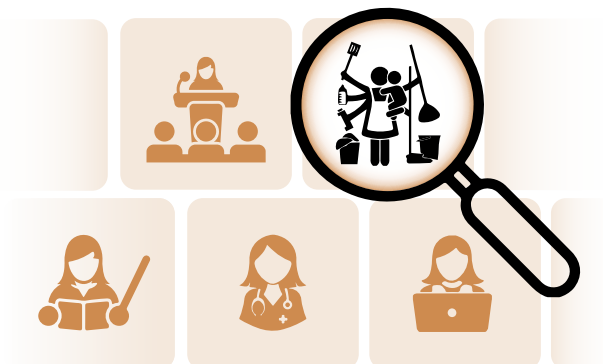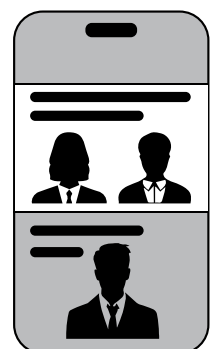

"Women need to be shown in diverse roles, not just as caretakers"
Women
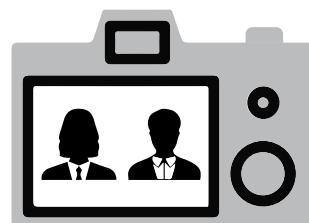
"We rarely see stories about the challenges faced by minorities"
Marginalized Groups

In contrast, local TV stations are often perceived as untrustworthy, focusing primarily on entertainment, celebrity news, and the achievements of leaders, while neglecting critical issues affecting people's lives. One participant criticized local TV, stating, "The local TV channels have broadcasted only information concerning traffic accidents, but they have not aired anything about land conflict issues" (Man, mixed age group between 23-57 years old, urban Phnom Penh). Moreover, TV reporters are seen as less approachable due to fears of reprisal from authorities, as reflected in the comment, "The suffering people themselves dared not to call the TV reporters or journalists to come and gather information because they were afraid of being charged" (Man, mixed age group between 23-57 years old, urban Phnom Penh). Some participants also felt that TV stations have a tendency to distort stories: "I only trust the media ten percent of the time because I have seen how they have changed stories from black to white" (Man, mixed age group between 23-57 years old, urban Phnom Penh).

Social media platforms presented a mixed picture. While some participants trusted news shared by reputable sources on social media, others were wary of misinformation and fake news. The credibility of social media news often depended on the source and the individual's ability to verify the information. "I follow verified pages on Facebook for news, but I'm careful about what I believe" (Man, mixed age group between 44-57 years old, urban Siem Reap).

To improve trust in media, participants suggested several measures. These included increasing transparency in reporting, ensuring balanced coverage, and implementing stricter regulations to prevent the spread of misinformation. "We need more honest and balanced news. Journalists should tell the whole story" (33-year-old woman, rural Phnom Penh). Participants also emphasized the role of media literacy in helping individuals discern credible news sources and avoid falling victim to misinformation. "Education is key. People need to know how to identify reliable news" (52-year-old man, urban Kampong Cham).

4.5. Gender and representation

In addition to classic topics such as media habits and news preferences, the study also sought to investigate representation in the media. The intention was to look into perceived representation by the respondents and get their views on whether they felt the media in Cambodia are able to represent the viewpoints of women and marginalised groups in society, Data from the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews showcase significant disparities in media representation, with women and marginalised groups being notably underrepresented. Participants generally called for more inclusive and diverse media coverage that reflects the true makeup of Cambodian society.
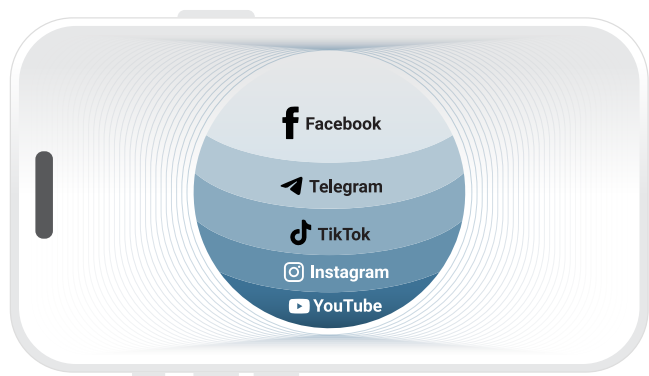

Figure 5: Top five social media platforms.

Participants, particularly women, noted that women were often portrayed in stereotypical roles or were entirely absent from news stories. This lack of representation was seen as reinforcing gender inequalities and limiting the visibility of women's contributions to society. Some participants suggested more women in the media industry as they felt female reporters would be better positioned to cover family issues compared to their male counterparts. Women were also described at being more attuned to advocating for justice for the common people, making female reporters better positioned to cover gender issues, women's rights and social issues.

Marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, were also perceived as being underrepresented in media coverage. Participants highlighted the need for media to cover the issues and challenges faced by these groups, as well as their achievements and contributions.

"The media should tell the stories of all people, not just the majority"
37-year-old woman, rural Ratanak Kiri

Interestingly, participants pointed at specific celebrities and social media influencers as inspirations for more inclusive content on women and minorities. Independent journalists Sovan Rithy and Chun Chanboth were mentioned alongside YouTuber Kanitha and the musician Kea Sokun as people who had shed light on vulnerable groups and social injustice. These individuals have with their content been able to cover stories with more inclusive perspectives otherwise overlooked by the media.

Furthermore, to address the lack of representation in the media, participants suggested several strategies. These included implementing policies to ensure more balanced and diverse representation in media, providing training for journalists
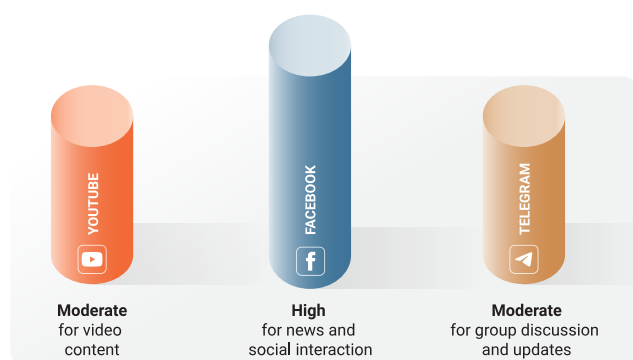
Figure 6: Social media platforms preferences.

on inclusive reporting, and encouraging media organisations to actively seek out stories from underrepresented groups. Participants also emphasised the role of media consumers in demanding more inclusive content. They encouraged individuals to support media outlets that prioritise diversity and to hold those that do not accountable. Another recommendation would be to further investigate media content and assess representation through content analysis. This would also provide more specific insights into the ways the media is currently portraying different groups in society.

4.6. Social media: A double-edged sword

While the proliferation of mobile technologies, the internet and social media have created new opportunities for people to access news and information, it also brings new challenges. Numbers from the study show just how much of a reach the internet has in today's Cambodia. Three out of four participants in the FGDs reported using the internet every day and a whopping four out of five participants from the in-depth interviews reported the same. And if you have access to the internet, you most definitely use it to access social media. Also, every day and most likely more than one time during the day. It is clear that there is no middle way if you have access to the internet and social media: you either have access and use that access every day or you don't have access.

Looking at people's platforms preferences, Facebook stands out as the overall favourite. Four out of five participants in the study use Facebook on a regular basis. The runner-up is Telegram which about half of the respondents use regularly. Newer platforms like TikTok seems however to be gaining in on the others even though only about a third of respondents in our study indicated using the video platform on a regular basis.

Participants appreciate the real-time updates and the ability to engage with news content through comments and shares

on the social media platforms. "I like that I can see the news as it happens and discuss it with others" (23-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh). Social media also allowed for a more personalised news experience, with algorithms curating content based on user preferences. "My Facebook feed shows me the news that interests me most" (20-year-old woman, urban Ratanak Kiri).

It is interesting to note that people almost view Facebook as a unified media in the way that they describe the platform. Facebook clearly has a special role to play in the Cambodian news and information ecosystem that goes beyond that of a social media to engage with friends and family. Finally, despite concerns over false or misleading information on the platform, four out of ten participants did reply "yes" to the question "Do you trust information from Facebook more than from other sources" – implying that some social media users place high importance on the personalised experience and direct contact with news outlets and other sources of information, including friends and family.

Despite these advantages, participants did express concerns about the reliability of news on social media. Many reported encountering false or misleading information regularly, which led to confusion and mistrust. "It's hard to know what to believe on Facebook. There's so much fake news" (44-year-old woman, urban Ratanak Kiri). This issue was exacerbated by the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly during significant events like elections or public health crises. "During the elections, there was a lot of fake news. It was difficult to find out what was true" (31-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh).

Participants emphasised the need for media literacy education to help users navigate social media effectively. They suggested that social media platforms should take more proactive measures to identify and flag false information. "We need to be taught how to spot fake news, and platforms should do more to stop it from spreading" (23-year-old woman, urban Prey Veng). This included providing tools for users to verify the credibility of news sources and report false information easily. "There should be a way to check if news is reel or fake right on the platform" (29-year-old man, urban Siem Reap). The role of social media influencers and content creators was also discussed. Participants noted that influencers have a significant impact on public opinion and can be powerful agents for spreading both accurate and false information. There was a call for influencers to act responsibly and ensure that the information they share is accurate and reliable.

"Influencers need to be careful about what they share. They have a lot of followers who trust them"
27-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh

Overall, while social media offers numerous benefits for news gathering and communication, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed. Improving media literacy and promoting responsible usage of social media platforms are essential steps towards mitigating the spread of misinformation and enhancing the quality of news and information available to the public. "Social media is a great tool, but we need to use it wisely" (34-year-old man, rural Kampong Cham).

4.7. Mis- and disinformation: An emerging challenge

The prevalence of mis- and disinformation was a recurring theme in the study. Participants shared numerous examples of encountering false information on social media, ranging from fake news articles to misleading videos. This issue is particularly pronounced during significant events, such as elections or public health emergencies, where the spread of false information can have serious consequences. "There was so much false information during the pandemic. It was hard to know what to do" (32-year-old woman, urban Phnom Penh). These events may have raised people's awareness on the matter as more than half of participants in the study indicated having heard about the concepts of mis- and disinformation and knowing that they mean. However, it is clear that there is still a large group in Cambodia that is not familiar with the concepts as four out of 10 participants in the study did not know what either mis- or disinformation meant.

The effects of mis- and disinformation have nonetheless begun to influence people's perception of news and information, and participants in particular highlighted the impact of mis- and disinformation on public trust in the media. The frequent exposure to false information has led many to question the credibility of all news sources, making it difficult to discern reliable information. This erosion of trust is seen as a significant barrier to informed decision-making and public engagement. As one participant noted: "I don't trust any news now because I can't tell what's real and what's fake" (36-year-old man, urban Siem Reap).

To address this challenge, participants emphasised the importance of media literacy education. They called for initiatives to teach individuals how to critically evaluate news sources and identify signs of false information. This included understanding how to verify the credibility of sources, recognising common tactics used in misinformation campaigns, and knowing where to find reliable information.

Interestingly, many people do however showcase high confidence in their own abilities to discern truthful from false content on social media. When asked explicitly about how good they were at distinguishing truthful content from false content, more than six out of ten participants indicated that they saw themselves as being fairly good, good or very good.

Despite this, participants did underline the need for more proactive measures from competent authorities to combat the issues. Participants also suggested that social media platforms should take more proactive measures to combat the spread of false information. This could include implementing stricter policies for content verification, providing clear labels for verified news sources, and creating tools to help users report false information easily. "Social media companies should do more to stop fake news from spreading" (30-year-old man, urban Phnom Penh).

Moreover, there was a call for collaboration between media organisations, social media platforms, and educational institutions to promote media literacy and ensure that individuals have the skills needed to navigate the digital landscape effectively. This collaborative approach was seen as essential to building a more informed and resilient public. "Everyone needs to work together to fight fake news. It's a big problem" (39-year-old man, rural Kampong Cham).

"We need to learn how to check if the news is true or not"
29-year-old man, urban Kampong Cham

5. Conclusion

The Cambodia Audience Study set out to explore the media habits, news consumption, and trust levels among Cambodian audiences. By utilising qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and group discussions, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Cambodian news and information habits, the challenges they face in accessing reliable information and their media and digital literacy levels.

From the data collected, it became clear that media habits in Cambodia are shaped by a variety of factors, including age, location, and digital literacy. Younger and urban participants show a strong preference for social media platforms, while older and rural participants rely more on traditional media such as television and radio.

One of the key findings was the significant barriers to accessing digital media, particularly for those in rural areas. High costs, limited digital literacy, and unreliable internet connectivity are major obstacles that prevent many from fully participating in the digital media landscape. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring equitable access to information and empowering all Cambodians to engage with digital media effectively.

The study also revealed that trust in media is a complex issue. While local media outlets are often viewed with scepticism due to perceived biases, international media and certain social media channels are considered more reliable. This disparity in trust underscores the need for media organisations to prioritise transparency, balanced reporting, and the promotion of media literacy to rebuild public trust.

Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women and marginalised groups in media is a significant concern. Participants called for more inclusive and diverse media coverage that accurately reflects the makeup of Cambodian society. This includes implementing policies to ensure balanced representation and providing training for journalists on inclusive reporting.

Social media emerged as a double-edged sword in the study. While it offers a convenient and interactive platform for news consumption, it also poses significant challenges, including the spread of misinformation. Enhancing media literacy and promoting responsible use of social media are essential steps towards mitigating these challenges and ensuring that the public can access reliable information.

In conclusion, the study has provided valuable insights into the media habits and preferences of Cambodian audiences. By addressing the identified challenges and promoting inclusive and responsible media practices, there is an opportunity to create a more informed and engaged public. The findings of this study should serve as a foundation for future initiatives aimed at improving media access, trust, and representation in Cambodia.

6. Recommendations

As a final element, the report ends with lists of recommendations emerging from the findings of the study. It is hoped that the recommendations can serve as inspiration for future media development efforts in the country and inspire local media to better cater to the needs of audiences.

For independent media and journalists in Cambodia:

- Prioritise coverage of local events and social issues to increase relevance.
- Enhance efforts to fact-check and ensure the accuracy of news.
- Improve gender and minority representation in media content.
- Increase engagement with audiences through social media platforms.
- Develop digital literacy programmes to educate audiences on identifying reliable information.
- Foster collaborations with international media for comprehensive coverage.
- Encourage investigative journalism to build trust and credibility.
- Utilise multimedia formats to diversify news presentation.
- Promote transparency in news reporting and editorial processes.
- Address and mitigate the spread of misinformation through proactive measures.

For media development organisations:

- Support training programs for journalists on digital literacy and fact-checking.
- Fund initiatives aimed at improving media representation and inclusivity.
- Facilitate cross-border media collaborations to share best practices.
- Provide resources for investigative journalism and in-depth reporting.
- Advocate for press freedom and the protection of journalists.
- Develop community outreach programmes to understand audience needs better.
- Support the development of digital tools for news verification.
- Encourage research on media consumption and trust in various demographics.
- Promote the use of data-driven journalism to enhance reporting quality.
- Foster a culture of ethical journalism through workshops and training.

For the international donor community:

- Increase funding for independent media organisations in Cambodia.
- Support initiatives aimed at improving digital infrastructure and access.
- Promote partnerships between local and international media.
- Fund media literacy programmes to combat misinformation.
- Advocate for policy changes that protect press freedom.
- Support research on the media landscape and audience needs.
- Provide grants for innovative media projects and startups.
- Encourage capacity-building programmes for journalists.
- Facilitate international forums for knowledge exchange.
- Promote diversity and inclusivity in media through targeted funding.

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