

Research Article

Perceptions of Online Political Participation and Freedom of Expression: An Exploratory Study in Cambodia

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Abstract

This article focuses on Cambodian Internet users' perceptions of online freedom of expression as well as their perceptions of online political participation. This exploratory research focuses on the data from 895 Cambodians gathered through an electronic survey delivered to a simple random sample of 35,000 Cambodian smartphone users. The study concludes with a discussion on policy, practice, and future research about online expression and online political participation both in Cambodia and in the greater field of international development.

Access to the Internet by Cambodian citizens is rapidly increasing. This growth has been spurred primarily by the availability of Internet-connected mobile phones, known as smartphones. In 2015, 6.4 million Cambodians had Internet access. Additionally, of that number, 6.35 million Cambodians access the Internet via a mobile phone (Ministry, 2015). In response to this growing population of mobile Internet users (currently more than 40% of the population) and to confront alleged crimes of spreading misinformation online, the Cambodian government proposed several measures to monitor and control expression on the Internet. Proposed efforts include, but are not limited to, a draft freedom of expression law, a widely criticized draft cybercrimes law, a subsequent and updated version of the cybercrimes law, plans to install surveillance equipment on Cambodia's Internet service providers, and the creation of cyberwar teams to monitor the Web—particularly social media—for misinformation.

Conversations about Internet freedom and Internet control in Cambodia are limited by a lack of available data on Cambodians' perceptions of the applications and limitations of the Internet in their lives, politics, and society. This article addresses the shortage of information by seeking the opinions of Cambodian Internet users on matters of online freedom of expression and online political participation. The findings can be used to facilitate a more informed debate on the future of the Internet generally, and social media specifically, in Cambodia.

This article begins with a review of the literature related to Internet use and expression online in Cambodia. This review concludes with a discussion about what Cambodian officials have done to address political participation and free expression on the Internet. Following a review of the literature, the results of a national survey are presented as well as a discussion about the implications of those results. Recommendations for policy and practice are summarized in this article.

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Review of the Literature

The political tenor in Cambodia indicates that the country is on the brink of change. For example, in the 2013 elections the country witnessed the opposition party winning 55 of 123 seats in the National Assembly. Despite this shift, the 2013 election had one of the lowest reported voter turnouts in recent history, with about 68.5% of Cambodians casting a vote. This is down from 93% of Cambodians voting in the 1998 national elections (Teehan & Sokha, 2013). Although the ruling party is losing ground in offline political participation as measured by lower voting levels, the party might also be struggling in the court of public opinion as measured by online political participation. For example, Soeung (2013) noted that “social media has created a nascent and more pluralistic online political environment where Cambodians exchange different political viewpoints freely” (p. 2). Additionally, Meyn (2013) noted that “the rapid spread of social media is altering Cambodia’s political landscape, and the old guard is struggling to keep up” (p. 1). Meyn credited the opposition party’s online presence as a key reason for the large turnout against the prime minister in the 2013 elections. Online freedom of expression and online political engagement thus may have drastically impacted voter allegiance. With the next elections coming in 2018, the current majority party has much to lose.

Looking back at the 2013 election, it was found that “social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among others have been utilized by individuals, media and public institutions to post election related information contributing additionally to a more informed political environment” (Committee, 2013, p. 19). Soeung (2013) noted how “Facebook has evolved from primarily an entertainment website to an alternative news source and platform for self-expression” (p. 2). Looking toward the 2018 elections, Reuters (2015) reported that the current prime minister is posting images and videos about new projects that credit him as an economic developer. Reuters reported that the ruling party is “trying to counter the swell of online criticism since the last election . . . [where] part of the opposition’s gains were due to rapid online courting of young, urban Cambodians angered by issues like forced evictions, low factory wages and state graft” (para. 12–13).

According to Soeung (2013), the international community “should further invest in Cambodia’s emerging digital democracy and ensure that the Internet remains free” (p. 2). Thus, juxtaposing this political reality with a rapid increase of Internet access, which is spurred in large measure by the availability of smartphones within the country, we see Cambodia as an interesting and timely case study.

What follows is a discussion of the literature on freedom of expression in Cambodia. We then examine trends in Internet use in Cambodia. This is followed by a discussion of how the Cambodian government has sought to control various aspects of Internet use within the country.

Freedom of Expression in Cambodia

Despite efforts to ensure freedom of expression in Cambodia, there is a noted absence of mechanisms and protections to guarantee such freedoms. For example, The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (2013) found that all 11 television stations and more than 100 radio stations in Cambodia are fully or partially owned by the government or a ruling party affiliate. There are only four independent radio stations operating in the country. In the television sector, four companies account for 78% of viewership (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

As a result, Cambodians are circumventing traditional, closed information channels (e.g., newspaper, television, and radio) to obtain information via the Internet. As such, citizen use of the Internet is a concern for Cambodian politicians interested in maintaining control of the media, especially for political messaging. In reaction to this trend, the government passed a 2015 law that criminalized the use of any electronic communication determined to impact “national insecurity” (Peter & Jensen, 2016, para. 1). This term remains ill-defined.

Freedom of expression is a basic human right, one that is fundamental to the development of a democracy. As such, the right to freely express oneself is noted in the International Covenants of Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966), which Cambodia adopted in 1992. Additionally, Article 41 and Article 31 of the Constitution of Cambodia guarantee the right to freedom of expression and a respect for human rights, respectively. The Internet, however, allows individuals to have a wider reach and an expanded audience base,

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in contrast to the point in history where these freedoms were espoused by the government of Cambodia. Thus, the scope of these rights has come into question.

To understand cross-cultural differences about online freedom of expression, Dutta, Dutton, and Law (2011) conducted a survey of 5,400 adults in 13 countries, including Cambodia. Their respondents generally supported freedom of expression online. "Users varied little cross-nationally . . . The majority of users across countries felt that people should be able to freely criticize their government online and express their opinion anonymously on the Internet" (p. 13). The authors found countries that more recently adopted the Internet tended to be more liberal and more positively supportive of online freedom of expression.

In a study examining the Cambodian public's opinions on the Access to Information Draft Law, Teang, Richardson, Nash, Duvigneau, and Le Coz (2012) surveyed 1,522 Cambodians and found over 90% agreed that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression without interference. Nevertheless, of the respondents, 16% reported fear of being threatened for seeking information and/or expressing their opinions. It should be noted that this study was not limited to expressions on the Internet, but rather expressions of opinion in any outlet.

Internet Use in Cambodia

The increase in Internet subscriptions in Cambodia is due in large part to an increase in the number of Internet-enabled smartphones. BuddeCom (2016) reported that mobile phone penetration rates reached 167% in Cambodia as of the end of 2015. One reason for such a high penetration rate was discussed by Richardson, Nash, and Flora (2014), who noted that Cambodians tend to have multiple SIM cards due to rates, promotions, anonymity, and SIM card sharing. Nevertheless, based on data from the Cambodian Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (2015), 98.99% of Cambodians who access the Internet do so via a mobile phone.

In a study of 2,066 Cambodians, Phong and Sola (2014) found that 57.2% of Cambodian smartphone owners used the Internet to check Facebook. Of those who had Khmer-enabled smartphones, 95.5% used it to check Facebook. Furthermore, King, Richardson, and Nash (2015) found that four out of five Cambodian smartphone users checked Facebook several times a day. Social Media Agencies Network (2016) also reported that as of early 2016, there were more than 1.7 million Facebook users in Cambodia and 1,100 new Cambodian Facebook users added daily. That equates to about one new Cambodian Facebook user every two minutes. Some authors have cautioned, however, that factors such as Cambodians who have multiple Facebook accounts and Cambodians who live abroad may distort these numbers (Chak, 2014). One reason for multiple Facebook accounts was noted by Niquet (2016), who reported that the ruling party hired poor and jobless people to create fake Facebook accounts to artificially boost the number of likes for the sitting prime minister. Another reason to create multiple accounts might be for anonymity, considering recent efforts to monitor online activity.

Government Concerns Regarding Cambodians' Internet Use

The proliferation of Internet access in Cambodia brings with it new avenues for freedom of expression, including political expression. The Internet also opens the door to nefarious acts such as cybercrimes. In Cambodia, cyberattacks by Anonymous Cambodia on the national election database, the websites of the Cambodian Press and Quick Reaction Unit, and the local government-aligned TV stations spurred the Cambodian government to draft cybercrimes legislation and pass various telecommunications laws (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2014). These laws are promoted to protect Internet users against hacking, identity theft, and destruction of online data (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2014). At the same time, these efforts place a limit on a citizen's ability to express themselves freely, especially if that expression or engagement is of a political nature.

Thanks to its sudden emergence, the Internet is one of the few spaces left for freedom of expression in Cambodia (LICADHO, 2015). Nonetheless, attempts by the Cambodian government to censor and interfere with freedom of expression persist. Freedom House (2013) found that in 2010 a government morality committee was convened in Cambodia to "review websites and block those in conflict with national values" (para. 16). In 2011, Cambodian government authorities began interfering with Internet access by blocking at least three overseas hosted blogs that criticized the government. Additionally, Freedom House reported

that “in 2012, government ministries threatened to shutter Internet cafes too near schools—citing moral concerns—and instituted surveillance of cafe premises and cell phone subscribers as a security measure” (para. 4). In another case, access to an anticorruption watchdog website was briefly blocked after it released a scathing report on Cambodia’s oil and mining industries (LICADHO, 2009).

In today’s digital world where access to news, facts, and opinions are plentiful, understanding Cambodia’s online expression and political participation is of interest. As evidenced in the review above, both are intricately linked. Such discussions can inform other nations whose citizens are increasingly becoming digitally connected and whose governments may be concerned with how citizens express themselves online. Our study thus is situated along two dimensions: online freedom of expression and online political engagement.

Methods

Through this mixed methods study, the researchers investigated how a subset of Cambodians perceived online freedom of expression and online political engagement. The research team developed a questionnaire and a protocol for focus group interviews. This study was designed to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of Internet-connected Cambodians regarding online freedom of expression? and (2) What are the perceptions of Internet-connected Cambodians regarding online political engagement? The research questions are addressed primarily from survey data and nuanced with data from focus group discussions.

We view *online freedom of expression* to mean acts of engaging in Internet activities that are not necessarily political and doing so without fear of retribution. These acts might be posting opinions about goods and services to social media, to engaging in conversations on blogs about the merits of a television show. *Online political engagement* refers to activities such as interacting via blogs or social media, or sharing Internet resources that are explicitly political in nature. These acts might include sharing Facebook stories about the prime minister, commenting on blogs about the validity of local elections, or posting thoughts about local government officials to one’s personal social media pages.

Sample

The population in this study was a subset of Cambodian users of Internet-enabled smartphones. A simple random sample of 35,000 data subscribers of the mobile phone provider Smart Axiata comprised the sampling frame. At the time of the study, Smart Axiata (2013) had over 5 million subscribers in all of Cambodia’s 25 provinces, making it Cambodia’s second-largest mobile service provider and the largest mobile Internet provider. At the time of survey dissemination, Smart Axiata was the country’s only telecom company offering 4G LTE for high-speed mobile browsing. We selected this company because its services covered the entire country and included all levels of mobile Internet access speeds.

In a study conducted by USAID and the Open Institute, Phong and Sola (2015) found that in Cambodia the “cost of using the Internet monthly is very small” with smartphones (p. 24). In 2016 the cost of smartphone Internet access was about US\$5 a month for Cellcard (Move to Cambodia, 2016) and about same for Smart Axiata (Smart, 2016). Given that at the time of this study users could purchase data packages without identification, the socioeconomic profiles of all Smart Axiata users were unavailable. This practice of anonymity came to an end in 2015, when the government began to enforce regulations requiring registration of SIM cards.

Survey

The researchers developed a survey, with ongoing support from members of the Cambodian Center for Independent Media located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and with advice from various in-country stakeholders. Survey items were initially written in English and checked for face validity by the researchers. Survey items were loosely drawn from various surveys, including the Internet and American Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2013a) and a survey on cellphone activities (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Items were then translated into Khmer and back-translated into English for a second check for face validity. After editing, cognitive interviews were conducted in Khmer with volunteers to ensure items were understood as intended. English and

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Table 1. Three-Form Survey Design.

	Block X	Block Z	Block A	Block B	Block C
Form Number	5 Questions	5 Questions	7 Questions	8 Questions	15 Questions
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Completion Rate by Block.

Block	Number of Surveys Started	Number of Surveys Completed	Percentage of Surveys Completed
A	530	464	87.5%
B	507	429	84.6%
C	531	429	80.1%

Khmer versions of the survey were entered into Survey Monkey, a web-based survey tool with a mobile-friendly option for smartphone dissemination. A set of volunteers tested both versions of the survey on their phones to check for formatting and display issues.

Survey Design and Dissemination

A three-form planned missing data survey design was used in this study (as described by Graham, Taylor, Olchowski, & Cumsille, 2006). In a planned missing data survey design, participants are randomly assigned to conditions (i.e., blocks of survey questions) in which they do not respond to all blocks of items, but rather a subset of blocks of items. This technique is appropriate when completion of an entire survey would be too time-intensive for participants. Additionally, the planned missing data survey design was used because the survey addressed various question sets that addressed a variety of constructs. It should be noted that some of those constructs (e.g., personal social media use, Internet use, and Internet access) are beyond the scope of the research questions¹ presented herein and are not reported.

All participants were asked a common set of Z-block questions about demographics. All participants were additionally asked to complete a common set of X-block questions that focused on online freedom of expression. A-block questions focused on Internet use and access. B-block questions focused on social media use personally and around political issues. Finally, C-block questions focused on freedom of expression and politics. Table 1 details the three-form approach. For the current study, results are reported only for blocks X, Z, and C.

Response Rates

A web link to the survey was sent via text message to 35,000 randomly selected Internet-enabled smartphone users in Cambodia. The text message was disseminated on March 12, 2015. Between March 12–16, 2015, 884 responses (partial or complete) were received. A follow-up text message containing a link to the survey was sent on March 17, 2015 to members of the sample who had not completed the survey. On March 17–18, 2015, an additional 243 (partial or complete) responses were received. Researchers eliminated incomplete surveys, yielding a final set of 895 completed surveys in the study. Of that number, 464 completed Block A, 429 completed Block B, and 429 completed Block C. Response rates per form are reported in Table 2. Using a three-form survey design and based on a sample size calculator,² a minimum of 380 respondents per question

1. <https://goo.gl/Zr4Sn9>

2. <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>

were needed to ensure a 5% margin of error with 95% confidence. We achieved sufficient responses to ensure that each survey question had a 5% margin of error with 95% confidence.

Focus Groups

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group. If so, they were taken to a new survey, thus not linking survey responses with contact details. The focus group questions are found in Appendix A. The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit specific details about the research questions to better understand respondents' perceptions of how the government's efforts to control and monitor the Internet might impact online expression. Of the 311 respondents who indicated interest in participating in focus groups, 60 accepted an invitation. Fourteen respondents were chosen (based on time and location availability) to participate in one of three focus group interviews conducted by the researchers face-to-face.

Survey Demographics

Linguistic preferences. Roughly 75% of respondents completed the survey in Khmer. The remaining 25% chose to be redirected to an English-language version of the same survey that featured an additional question confirming the respondent's Cambodian citizenship. Noncitizens were disqualified from participating.

Age. Respondents' average age was approximately 25 years old ($M = 24.81$). This result is in line with national data that indicate the median age as of 2015 was 24.5 years old, with about 51% of Cambodians being age 24 or younger (*CIA World Factbook*, 2015). Our sample mirrors national data that indicate 50% of Internet users in Cambodia are 18–24 years old and 28% are 25–34 years old (Social Media Agencies Network, 2016).

Gender. 632 respondents (74.9%) were male and 186 (22%) were female. The other 3% selected "prefer not to answer" or "other." These data are slightly skewed toward men given that national statistics show that 62% of Internet users in Cambodia are men and 38% are female (Social Media Agencies Network, 2016). Each survey item was analyzed by gender, but no statistically significant differences were found and thus are not reported.

Place of residence. Respondents from 22 of the country's 25 provinces participated in the survey. Provinces not represented were Kep, Monduliri, and Stung Treng. Notably, 66.6% of respondents were from Phnom Penh. Other provinces drawing substantial percentages of respondents had large urban areas, including the provinces of Siem Reap (6.2%) and Kandal (5.9%), where the latter surrounds the special administrative area (treated like a province) of Phnom Penh. The *CIA World Factbook* (2015) estimated that 20.7% of Cambodians live in urban areas as of 2015. This indicates that survey respondents tended to be from urban areas in contrast to the general population.

Education. Survey respondents were better educated than the general population, with just over 55% of respondents having completed a bachelor's degree and 25.5% having earned a high school diploma. Nine percent of the respondents completed secondary school, and 2.1% completed only primary school. According to the *CIA World Factbook* (2015), as of 2010 the average years of education is 11 years.

Income. Most respondents (63.1%) reported earning less than US\$500 per month. The largest single percentage of respondents (35.2%) indicated their personal income ranged from US\$100 to US\$299 per month. Of those who responded to this question, 23.5% reported earning US\$300–999 per month. Finally, 25.5% chose not to answer this question. In 2017 the average annual per capita income of a Cambodian was US\$107.33 per month (Vietnam Plus, 2017).

Smartphone use. Nearly all respondents (97.5%) reported using their smartphone to access the Internet at least occasionally. We found that 77.6% of participants reported their smartphone was their preferred device for accessing the Internet. Thirteen people (2.5%) reported that they never use their smartphone to access the Internet. Since the survey was taken on a smartphone via an Internet survey, this indicates some participants were not clear when they were online. This phenomenon is not uncommon in less developed countries. For example, Mirani (2015) described studies in Indonesia and Africa, where millions of Facebook users did not realize they were online.

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Table 3. Frequency of Expressing an Opinion Online About a Social or Political Issue in Past 12 Months.

Frequency	n (%)
Never	188 (39.6)
Once or twice	125 (26.3)
Once or twice a month	80 (16.8)
Every week	41 (8.6)
Every day	41 (8.6)
Total	475 (99.9)

Internet access. Most respondents (91.2%) reported they accessed the Internet at least once per day. Almost 66% of survey respondents accessed the Internet continuously through automatic updates to their phones. Slightly more than 25% of respondents reported accessing the Internet more than once daily. These data correspond with the considerable number of respondents (97.5%) who reported they preferred to access the Internet via smartphone.

Focus Group Demographics

The average age of focus group participants was 23.43 years old. Ten males and four females participated, all from either Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. Four participants had a high school degree; eight had a bachelor's degree; two had a graduate degree. Two participants earned less than US\$100 per month, whereas three earned US\$100–300 per month. Five participants earned US\$300–499, and one earned US\$1,000–2,999. Three participants did not provide these details.

Results

The results are organized around the research questions. First, we report the degree to which this sample of Internet-connected Cambodians use the Internet (and its applications such as social media) to express themselves. Second, we describe how this sample of Internet-connected Cambodians perceive and reportedly engage in online political participation.

Perceptions of Online Freedom of Expression

As detailed in Table 3, slightly more than 60% of respondents indicated they expressed an opinion online about social or political issues at least once in the last 12 months. Among these, slightly over a third of respondents (34%) reported using the Internet to express opinions on a regular basis (i.e., once or twice per month or more), and 17.2% reported doing so at least once per week. These results included public online expression and expression shared between two people via Internet-enabled applications. Additionally, 61.1% of all respondents indicated they have used social media to encourage others to act on a social or political issue at some time. Focus group participants were relatively satisfied with their current level of freedoms with regard to online expression. However, a main concern was ensuring truthfulness in journalistic reporting. One focus group participant said, "I think the online local news has been circulated freely and sometimes it becomes unreliable when some people just exaggerate it for fun without considering the fundamental consequences."

Most survey respondents (62.7%) indicated they felt either "very free" or "somewhat free" to express their opinions online without fear of repercussions. Only 15.9% reported experiencing some level of fear of repercussions when expressing themselves online. It should be noted that according to a survey of Cambodian public opinion by the International Republican Institute (2014), 71% of respondents reported feeling freer to express their opinions during the 2013 national election than in previous elections.

Of respondents who admitted feeling "somewhat fearful" or "very fearful" of physical repercussions for their online expression, 65.6% pointed to legal threats as being one potential repercussion that concerned

them. Legal threats were a leading area of concern among the three listed on the survey (legal threats, physical harassment, threats to economic wellbeing). This perception on the part of “fearful” Internet users may be informed by recent events, such as the country’s first defamation conviction in January 2013 over a Facebook post (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2014).

Almost 37% of “fearful” Internet users pointed to physical harassment as a potential repercussion for expressing their opinions online. In 2013 and 2014, there were brutal beatings of journalists and activists who engaged in expressing opinions offline (Cambodian Center for Independent Media, 2015), a journalist who exposed illegal fishing was murdered (Radio Free Asia, 2014), a leading social media activist was threatened for her online expression (*Cambodia Daily*, 2014), and Cambodian citizens faced legal threats and charges for expressing opinions online (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2014). Half the focus group members spoke about their fears of expressing themselves online. One participant said, “I have used the Internet long enough to say that Cambodians can express themselves freely. However, some of them still have a fear because we do not have laws to protect online expression.” Another participant noted, “I feel not at ease when I am going to discuss anything if the government monitors social media.”

Perceptions of Internet freedom. Many survey respondents (75.7%) agreed that the Internet is becoming more open and free. However, 5.3% of respondents reported they felt the Internet was becoming less free, and 19% reported that the Internet had not changed significantly with regard to freedom of expression. This, despite almost a year of debate over freedom of expression online, was sparked by the release of a leaked draft cybercrime law in April 2014.

Fear was a prevalent emotion expressed by the focus group participants. One person said, “I want to have an Internet law, but I am worried about its implementation. If we have a law, but people do not follow, then there will be chaos in our society.” However, participants supported laws that protect society against cybercrimes. One person said, “I want a law that protects us from any online crimes. The law will give power to the government to govern all bad things that happen online.” Another person said, “I think it would be good if the government installs Internet surveillance because it would help to monitor the guilty online.” There were additional concerns expressed about fear of protecting Cambodian culture and the need for some level of monitoring and control. In contrast, focus group participants were concerned about censorship:

I do not support a law that prohibits pornography websites or the posting of sexy photos on Facebook. However, a regulation to limit access to such websites would be a good tactic. For example, users under 18 years old should not be allowed to access the website.

Regarding censorship, one person noted, “I have discussed with my friends on Internet governance. I believe that there will be a strong protest if that really happens.” These comments indicate the respondents believed that some controls over the Internet were needed, yet those controls should not impede freedom of expression.

Perceptions of surveillance and control of the Internet. A large majority of respondents (88.4%) indicated they were unwilling to express political opinions online if the government began to monitor and control Internet activity. These responses are particularly relevant in light of recent government announcements that it will install surveillance equipment directly into the country’s Internet service providers and that it will create cyberwar teams to monitor the Internet for antigovernment messages. One focus group participant said, “If the reason behind the government monitoring is to protect our culture, then they should consider educating people to not access pornography—not monitoring individual online activity.” Another participant said, “If the government monitored online activity, freedom of expression and access to information would be limited. And I am afraid that my online activities would be used to attack me someday.”

A strong majority (89.6%) of survey respondents said they did not believe they would be able to access independent news and information online if the government monitored and controlled Internet activity. Slightly over 10% of respondents reported they would be able to access independent news and information despite government monitoring efforts.

Focus group participants had mixed reactions to government creation of laws that impose controls over

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Table 4. Level of Agreement Regarding Potential Effects of Government Efforts to Monitor and Control Internet Activity.

Level of Agreement	Political Disinformation Would Be Reduced	Electronic Data Would Be Safer	Online Business and Financial Interests Would Be Safer
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Strongly disagree	147 (33.9)	180 (42.3)	168 (40.4)
Somewhat disagree	239 (55.2)	212 (49.8)	205 (49.3)
Somewhat agree	24 (5.5)	15 (3.5)	24 (5.8)
Strongly agree	23 (5.3)	19 (4.5)	19 (4.6)
Total	433 (99.0)	426 (100.1)	416 (100.1)

Internet activities. For example, one person noted, “I do not support the government’s effort of monitoring and controlling the Internet because it suppresses freedom of expression online.” In contrast, another participant stated, “I think the government monitoring online efforts has both good and bad consequences. A good one is to protect people from online fraud and other crimes.” Yet another participant stated, “The government should not limit freedom of expression of Internet users if what they share or comment is true. The author who wrote the article should be held accountable for his work.”

Overall, despite focus group respondents’ perceptions that protections are needed against immoral and potentially unlawful material online, survey respondents expressed doubts about the government’s ability to address common cybercrime/cyberethics by monitoring and controlling Internet content. One of the most common arguments used by proponents of Internet controls in Cambodia—that monitoring and controlling online activity would help reduce the amount of political disinformation—did not resonate with focus group participants. This result was also evident in the survey, where 89.6% of respondents either “strongly disagreed” or “somewhat disagreed” that government intervention would allow for free access to independent news. Nevertheless, most respondents (59%) reported that the Internet played a “somewhat positive” or “very positive” role in Cambodian society. Another 39.4% of respondents reported that the Internet plays a “neutral” role in society, and only 1.6% reported that the Internet’s role in society was “very negative” or “somewhat negative.”

Another argument cited by proponents of Internet controls is safeguarding user data and business interests. Support for this argument was not well received by survey respondents, where 92.1% disagreed that their electronic data would be safer if the government monitored and controlled the Internet. Similarly, 89.7% of respondents disagreed that online business or monetary interests would be safer if the government monitored and controlled the Internet. Focus group participants also discussed a need for protections against cybercrimes and cyberethics violations. For example, one participant noted, “I am happy with the development [of] the open and free Internet and social media use, but at the same time, our culture must be protected by not exposing too much unacceptable content such as pornography and hate speech.” Another participant said, “I think it is good that the government controls social media because I do want protection from unjustified information.” With regard to acting ethically online, one participant noted, “Sometimes information online is dangerous and anarchic; people just use bad words and invade in one another’s privacy.”

Online Political Participation

Some examples of online political engagement might be contacting a politician online, making online contributions, sending political messages online, and writing a letter to the editor of an online newspaper (Yang & DeHart, 2016). Related to, although not identical to online political engagement, online civil engagement is also important to a society. Online civic engagement includes aspects of consuming news and engaging in research about political issues (Bennett, 2008). Given that fostering informed and active citizens is vital in a free online society, the current study investigated both issues.

We explored the frequency with which Internet users shared news articles on social or political issues. As

Table 5. Political Engagement Online.

Frequency	Post or Share Links About Political Issues	Post Thoughts or Comments About Political Issues	Encourage Others to Take Action on Social or Political Issues
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Never	130 (26.5)	180 (38.5)	189 (38.9)
Every few weeks or less	91 (18.5)	94 (20.1)	100 (20.6)
1–2 days a week	49 (9.8)	36 (7.7)	51 (10.5)
3–4 days a week	75 (15.3)	61 (13.0)	60 (12.3)
About once per day	50 (10.2)	41 (8.8)	34 (7.0)
Several times per day	96 (19.6)	56 (12.0)	52 (10.7)
Total	491 (99.9)	468 (100.1)	486 (100.0)

noted in Table 5, slightly more respondents (73.5%) were willing to share articles on social or political issues than to post their own comments on social or political issues (61.5%). The difference in responses between the two questions indicates that some users may perceive sharing articles on social or political issues as a safer or more neutral activity than expressing their own opinions on those same issues.

Only 28.4% of respondents said they used the Internet to interact with a local or national government official or government office over the last year. This is not surprising, considering that most government ministries have been slow to adopt e-government practices. Many offices still require that communications and inquiries be filed in hard copy with official stamps.

Most participants (69.2%) have never signed an online political petition. However, of the 30.8% of respondents who reported having done so, almost 17% did on a regular basis (i.e., at least once per week). Many respondents (59.2%) have been prompted to learn more about a social or political issue because of something they read on the Internet. Just over one-third (38.9%) decided to take action on a social or political issue because of something they read on the Internet.

With regard to general online civic engagement, substantially more respondents reported having used the Internet to look up information about government services, policies, or laws, with 70.4% having done so at least once in the past year. One-third of respondents (33.4%) said they looked up government information at least once per week. These responses indicate that this sample of Cambodians often uses the Internet to find information they may not easily be able to find offline.

Slightly fewer respondents said they used the Internet to look up information about politicians, political candidates, or political parties, with just over half (55.9%) reporting they used the Internet for this purpose during the last year. A smaller percentage (16.5%) of respondents reported having done so every day, and 31.9% reported doing so at least every week during the last year. These results provide evidence of a small population base that regularly relies on the Internet for information that might inform their political choices.

In total, 59.4% of survey respondents reported that the Internet plays a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” role in Cambodian politics, with another 39% of respondents reporting that the Internet plays a “neutral” role. These findings run counter to the government narrative noting a need to control political misinformation online, which became prevalent in the 2013 national elections. That the Internet and social media played a game-changing role in the 2013 national elections is without question and has already been widely discussed. These responses show that most of the survey respondents perceive the Internet’s role in politics as being a largely positive one.

Despite many respondents’ belief that the Internet plays a positive role in Cambodian politics, respondents overwhelmingly said they do not believe the Internet increases political participation among Cambodian citizens, with 85.8% either “strongly disagree” or “somewhat disagree” with a statement to that effect. Only 14.2% reported believing that the Internet increases political participation in Cambodia.

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Table 6. Internet Use for Seeking Political/Public Information in the Past 12 Months.

Frequency	Contact a Local or National Government Office		Look Up Information About Government Services, Policies, or Laws		Look Up Information About a Politician, Political Candidate, or Political Party	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
Never	341	(71.6)	141	(29.6)	174	(44.1)
Once or twice	52	(10.9)	99	(20.8)	95	(24.1)
Once or twice a month	39	(8.2)	77	(16.2)	0	(—)
Every week	18	(3.8)	78	(16.4)	61	(15.4)
Every day	26	(5.5)	81	(17.0)	65	(16.5)
Total	476	(100.0)	476	(100.0)	395	(100.1)

Limitations

The study has few limitations with regard to selection bias. First, Cambodians often have more than one mobile number and more than one mobile data subscription. Thus, we are uncertain how many of the Smart Axiata subscribers targeted in this study were duplicates. However, given the time commitment required to complete the survey, we have no reason to believe that multiple surveys were completed by the same person on two smartphone data accounts. Second, because taking the survey on a mobile phone used mobile data, some participants may have had to bear a personal cost in terms of mobile provider fees. Thus, it is possible that the sample is limited to only those who could afford the cost. Third, it is possible that some Cambodians who engage in online political expression prefer to access the Internet via a computer and not a mobile device. Those people would not be captured in this data set. However, given that 98.99% of Cambodians who access the Internet do so via their mobile phone, this limitation likely would have little impact on the results of the current study. Fourth, the data do not speak for all Internet-connected Cambodians, but rather a sample of those using the Smart Axiata network. Finally, it is possible that one's inclination toward online participation and desire to express political views might impact participation in the study.

Discussion

In discussing what constitutes good research in the field of information and communication technologies for development (ICTD), Burrell and Toyama (2009) proposed that different research approaches are needed in the field of ICTD. However, the authors noted that one of the key elements that makes research in the field good is its generalizability. Thus, in this section, we elucidate how the findings of the current study might apply and be generalized to other contexts across the field.

In the current study we used methods rarely (if ever) used in a nation at such a low level of technological development. Hence, the research design herein is novel (a need espoused by Burrell & Toyama, 2009). The use of smartphone surveys combined with a planned missing data approach was successful. We achieved our threshold for a 95% confidence interval for completed returned surveys for each of the three forms (i.e., A = 464, B = 429, C = 429). Thus, the methods for collecting data appear to be accessible to Cambodians who were Internet-connected mobile phone users on this network. These methods can be used in other contexts to collect data beyond online social or political engagement. Additionally, this study adds much to the existing body of literature in that its methods are both transparent and sound.

Smith and Spence (2011) pointed to multiple instances when mobile phone use can increase access to information while also strengthening the connectedness between people. Mobile phones do this in three ways: expanding social networks, strengthening economic networks, and enhancing government networks. However, negative outcomes are just as likely. That is, as mobile phone access increases, nations could just as easily limit economic networking, control social networking, or restrict access to government networks. As demonstrated in the current study, Cambodia is presently experiencing a mix of the positive and negative

aspects of these three dimensions. More research needs to be conducted across nations to better understand the affordances and limitations of online freedom of expression and online political engagement along these three dimensions.

As with offline speech, online expression of opinion is protected under international law as a basic human right. While most Cambodians in this study reported feeling free to express themselves online, it is notable that some participants were fearful of repercussions for expressing themselves online. Social media is becoming woven into the fabric of life in most countries regardless of level of development. As Dick (2012) noted, "Social media can test how firmly entrenched Internet freedom is in establishing democracies" (p. 259). Given the proliferation of Internet-connected mobile devices across the world, it is likely that freedom of expression via social media will be a litmus test for democracy.

In Cambodia, we see that the government has expressed concern about what is posted socially and politically online. Further, the government is actively trying to impose restrictions on freedom of expression despite constitutional protections. The Cambodian government is working to control and monitor that voice, to what may be deleterious effect. However, these types of actions are occurring worldwide across all levels of development. For example, in 2011 the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom advocated the government should ban certain people from social network sites (Halliday & Garside, 2011). Thus, the notion of what can be said online socially or politically is testing what it means for citizens to have a democratic voice. This line of research is burgeoning and is much-needed in the field.

The findings of the current study can also impact policy. Citizens of a nation need to be clear about exactly what is permissible in an online environment. If there are limitations to speech, those should be clearly elucidated in policies and practices. As is evident in this study, there exists a level of fear in the populace due to a lack of transparency and clarity. Governments must also realize there is no clear division between the impact of online engagement and various dimensions of life including economic wellbeing, cultural maintenance, governmental transparency, political engagement, and social interactions. Internet-connected citizens of any nation can thus be manipulated for political purposes, nationally or internationally to "empower the existing ruling elites . . . [that] perpetuates the disempowerment of the rest of society" (Albirini, 2008, p. 49). Each of these elements is dramatically impacted by the Internet and each has deep tendrils into the other. Thus, limiting engagement in one area will have ripple effects.

Conclusions

In Cambodia, engaging, connecting, and learning online are imperatives. Although Internet penetration rates are modest, smartphone connectivity, social media engagement, and online political engagement are prevalent and rapidly increasing. As such, this study yielded some interesting results regarding Internet-connected Cambodians' perceptions of online freedom of expression, how they perceive the government's efforts to control the Internet and how those might eventually impact online e-political engagement.

Although it is difficult to measure tangible impacts of ICTs on human rights, it may be said that, judging by the proliferation of Facebook users in Cambodia, it is undeniable that ICTs and social media play an intrinsic role in the lives of many young Cambodians. As such, the human rights community cannot ignore the huge potential of ICTs as an advocacy tool; if organizations wish to move forward they must ensure they adopt strategies that support and build capacity of online activists. (Chak, 2014, p. 445)

Many Cambodian Internet users in the current study reported feeling free to express themselves online. Most Cambodian Internet users also reported feeling free to express their opinions online without fear of repercussions. Most respondents reported using the Internet at least once during the last 12 months to express an opinion on a political or social issue. Nevertheless, we found that this set of Cambodians has conflicting feelings regarding Internet controls and monitoring. For example, of those respondents who said they were "somewhat fearful" or "very fearful" of repercussions for engaging in free expression online, most were concerned by legal threats (65.6%), but concerns of physical harassment (36.8%) and threats to economic wellbeing (30.6%) were also reported.

We found that government efforts to monitor and control online activity could have a devastating effect on online freedom of expression, with most survey respondents (88.4%) saying they would not feel free to

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engage online if the government enacted the proposed surveillance policies and practices. At the same time, focus group participants expressed concerns about what they perceived as an abundance of misinformation, immorality, and online crime on the Internet. Though participants wished to see these activities limited, they expressed little confidence that the Cambodian government would be able to address these problems via regulations, laws, or policies.

In terms of societal contribution, around 60% of respondents said the Internet plays a positive role in both overall society and in politics. Cambodians in this study reported they use the Internet to access news and information they cannot find offline or in the country's mainstream media. In fact, over three quarters of respondents reported that the Internet is useful for accessing news and information they cannot find elsewhere. At the same time, the amount of misinformation online has led many of these Internet users to be highly skeptical of all online news. This issue is of utmost importance, given that as of late 2016 it has been reported that almost half of Cambodians now own a smartphone and use Facebook as their primary news source (Millar, 2016).

The freedom to express oneself is core to modern life, both in an analog format and a digital format. The freedom to express oneself online is core to the modern political process. In Cambodia we see that both realities have the potential to be hindered by regulations, policies, and laws. Cambodia is a nation on the cusp of change. By keeping dialogue open and the channels of communication unfettered, the citizens of this quickly developing country are poised for authentic engagement—politically and socially. Not doing so only empowers those who wish to corrupt and control for their own gain.

Although this research is exploratory in nature, it provides insights for future researchers as we follow the development of Cambodia in a digitally suffused world. Researchers and human rights organizations must remain vigilant to monitor and explore the nuances of these topics. In contrast, policymakers and government officials must remain open to the multitude of benefits that a free, autonomous Internet can have on society, culture, and the political wellbeing of the nation. ■

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Appendix A: Focus Group Discussion Questions

- Do you feel the Internet in Cambodia is increasingly becoming more or less free? Please give an example.
- Do you feel free to express your opinions on the Internet without fear of repercussions? Why or why not? Do you have an example of when this happened?
- If the government began monitoring and controlling Internet activity, how would this affect you?
- What contribution does the Internet make to Cambodian politics?
- How comfortable do you feel discussing government attempts to monitor and control online activity? Do you have an example of when you felt this way?

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