



Micro-Policy Intervention

CONTEMPORARY POLICY DISCUSSION IN CAMBODIA



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Chapter 8 | Digitizing Cambodia's Diminishing Writing Industry

Dalis SAR

Executive Summary

With the rise of technology, the culture of reading books, magazines and newspapers has declined. Readers, particularly teenagers and young adults, are now shifting their attention from books to other media and activities that revolve around their electronic devices. This has seriously impacted authors and writers, and even greater consequences are expected in the future. If the demand for books continues to decrease there will soon be fewer authors. Most importantly, globalization has brought people closer. As a result, English has become one of the most common languages for communication. In response to the influence and domination of foreign languages, Cambodian authors must be encouraged and supported as their achievements are an essential contribution in helping to protect and foster the development of Khmer literature. With that in mind, this paper suggests establishing a Khmer Literature website to encourage Khmer authors to publish online. Readers will be required to pay a fee in order to access content and revenue will be allocated in the form of royalties paid to authors, with a small administrative charge deducted for operational costs.

Introduction

Khmer literature has slowly developed from one era to the next. In the past, it was mainly used for official government purposes. After the period of the French protectorate when the country's education system was restored, many classical literary works were published and the printing system was introduced (Jarvis, et al., 2006). As a result, 48 novels were issued to the public by the end of the French protectorate in 1953. Meanwhile, from 1954 to 1969 more than 500 novels were

released. While these numbers show the huge success of Cambodian literature (Smyth, n.d.), unfortunately this prosperity did not last. When the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh in 1975, many works were destroyed and most intellectuals were killed or fled to other countries. This was a great loss for Cambodia.

By the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia began to rebuild all of its devastated sectors, including the writing industry. Although there were some signs of slow progress, the market was not profitable. Many intelligent people, experienced writers, students, and resources had vanished, leaving a largely illiterate population intent on trying to survive. Literacy has become one of the main struggles for the country. Bit-by-bit Cambodia has been able to reduce the illiteracy rate and by 2017, according to the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey, the percentage of adult literacy for both genders had reduced to 82.5% (Ministry of Planning, 2018).

One hundred and thirty-eight publishing houses now function in Cambodia; however, there are no statistics relating to the number of books that Cambodians read each year. Consequently, there are no precise statistics on the culture of reading in Cambodia (Ban, 2019). Nevertheless, authors now face another challenge: the increasing popularity of social media and online entertainment competing with reading culture.

Background to the Problem

The Decline of Physical Books

From 1980-1991, Cambodia was able to print 441,910 Khmer books. At the same time, the number of imported volumes was about 1.5 times greater, at 674,918 books (Altbach & Hoshino, 1996). Unfortunately, the total number of physical books sold to the public is unknown, but Sipar, one of the largest publishing houses in the country, has printed 2,300,000 books since 2000 (Sipar, 2019). At the same time, due to the small demand from customers, publishers in Cambodia struggle often struggle to even make back the cost of production (Jarvis, et al., 2006).

Factors that discourage authors from writing

There are many reasons why authors hesitate to write and publish, which has gradually led to the decreasing number of writers in Cambodia. First,

improvements in technology, which increases access to information, has directed popular interests, particularly those of young people, away from reading. Through this technological growth, the internet has become a platform of creation, connection, and exploration for billions of users around the globe. According to the Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia (n.d.), the number of internet subscribers continues to increase every year. From more than 13 million subscribers in 2018 to 16 million in August 2019, almost every Cambodian has access to the internet. Online social entertainment such as social media, online games, e-books, videos, movies, and music have become extremely popular, coupled with a decreased popularity of reading physical books.

A survey on the reading habits of students aged 17 to 25, at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, revealed that their reading sources were 83% books, 67% online news, and 43% school materials only (Nou & Prum, 2016). This is quite concerning, as almost half of the students do not engage with any other reading materials besides those assigned to them. In addition, 67% only read from their electronic devices (Nou & Prum, 2016). While 53% of students spent more than 8 hours a month reading, 17% spent only 1 to 2 hours (Nou & Prum, 2016). Consequently, not many teenagers seem to explore books beyond those required for their studies. This results in less book consumption from youth and explains why most of the target audience for Khmer literature consists of children and elders.

Secondly, writers are underpaid and many cannot earn enough to make a living from writing alone. According to a survey conducted through the Publishing in Cambodia project, only those who work under contract receive wages, while most independent writers do not make any income from writing. Thus, they typically make the decision to sell their work to publishers or printing houses (Jarvis, et al., 2006). Mao Samnang, one of the most well-known Cambodian novelists, earns 1,219,000 riel to 2,033,000 riel (\$300 to \$500 USD) per novel she writes. However, her earnings have nothing to do with how popular her work becomes. She is paid a onetime fee by a publishing house, which can then print her book as many times as they like. Meanwhile, very few printing houses offer royalty payments. One of these, Neak Meas Printing House, offers authors 500 riel (12 cents) per book, which amounts to about 1,478,700 riel (\$360 USD) per printing round, which is usually around 3000 copies. If their work is successful

and is reprinted, the author will be paid per copy until their death. However, such practices that honor authors intellectual rights are rare in Cambodia (VOA, 2008). For the average novelist, regardless of the time and energy they put into their work, their income from writing only covers the most basic daily expenses. This has deterred many talented young authors from writing (Seourn, et al., 2010). At the Royal University of Phnom Penh, while the Department of Khmer Literature has an enrollment of three hundred students annually, most graduates select the field of teaching rather than writing, as they are afraid that they might not survive on such a low income (Khan, 2016).

The third reason deterring Cambodians from pursuing writing careers is the lack of trust in publishers, which is only exacerbated by loose copyright laws. According to the Law on Copyrights and Related Rights, ratified by the National Assembly in 2003, “the author of a work shall enjoy an exclusive right on that work, which shall be enforceable against all persons.” Most importantly all writers are entitled to retain both moral and economic rights of their work (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2003). Despite these laws, writers still face insecurity in terms of their work being stolen or republished, and often feel that their rights as owners are abused (Seourn, et al., 2010).

As previously stated, most Cambodian writers sell their work to publishers due to the risk of not making a profit when publishing independently. If writers choose to publish on their own work, they need to front up to 2,033,000 riel (\$500 USD) for publishing costs. If they choose to sell their copyrights directly to publishers they receive no future profits or royalties even if their work becomes successful (Ellen, 2013). Moreover, there are doubts as to whether the publishers follow contracts and print the exact number of books agreed upon. A publisher can easily reprint and sell more books without the writer’s knowledge (Ellen, 2013).

Micro-Intervention

A) Overview

One promising solution is to encourage authors to put their work online in order to keep up with the increasing trend of online engagement. With the aim of creating a competitive market, trusted and well-established publishing houses, who already have a full understanding of the book industry and an extensive

knowledge of marketing strategies, could design interesting websites where writers could release their work.

B) Justification

Nowadays, writers who publish their pieces on the internet find that it is more convenient, eco-friendly, faster, and reaches a wider audience. In recent years, there seems to be signs that Cambodian writers are trying to participate more fully in this trend. After facing the many obstacles when trying to get a book printed, one writer decided to publish online through Sabay e-novel. For each short story, he received payments of 1,219,000 riel to 2,033,000 riel (\$300 to \$500 USD) (McPherson, 2014).

C) Implementation

As mentioned above, the e-publishing sector in Cambodia has yet to become competitive. There are few publishers in this field and a current unwillingness to take risks where readership is low. Therefore, it is critical to design attractive, effective websites that can capture the attention of readers.

Currently, there are millions of websites on the internet; however, it is common for users to encounter many problems. Most websites use outdated designs and low-quality images or have too many advertisements on the screen, poorly written content, slow speeds, clickbait, or loose security systems (Garnett, n.d.). Hiring a professional design team is a must, especially when the website involves the use of personal information, such as credit card numbers for paid content. Although it might be expensive, prices come in different ranges, beginning at 406,000 riel to 2,031,000 riel (\$100-500 USD) per website. Further upgrade and development of the website can be undertaken once the income revenue stream begins.

Web design alone is unlikely to be enough to captivate readers. Cover design for individual novels or stories must also be considered. The old adage 'do not judge a book by its cover' is well known yet somehow still ignored by many. However, garnering readers attention does not stop there. People tend to choose the book that most easily captures their attention and the read the summary on the back. If it suits their tastes then they will make a purchase. The same goes for novel or story covers released online.

While the design is crucial, it is also important to recruit as many writers as possible. The first step is to provide clear contract guidelines, including website publishing instructions and, more importantly, the percentage of their royalties. To attract a sufficient number of authors, it is necessary to pay them an adequate percentage of the revenue. For example, to gain access to a book, readers could pay for each chapter at a proposed cost of 3050 riel (\$0.75 USD). If the publishing website takes a 10% cut of the revenue, the author could receive the remaining 90%. Therefore, if the authors are able to publish frequently they will be able to earn an adequate salary per month. For example, if they publish one chapter per week they can earn almost 11,000 riel (a little under \$3 USD) per reader in a month. If they can attract 50 readers a month, then they might earn around 549,000 riel (\$135 USD) per month. If they have 100 readers they could earn around 1,098,000 riel (\$267 USD), while with 1000 readers they could make 10,980,000 riel (\$2,673 USD).

To sustain the publishing website and generate more income, some advertising can be added. The website owner can charge a flat rate, which is common for new startups. This allows the advertiser to choose space on the website for a specified period of time at a price agreed on by both parties (AdSpeed, 2010). Moreover, since the website is promoting paid content it might be able to enter into a partnership agreement with a national bank. Likewise, the advertising revenue may allow them to provide additional bonuses to the authors.

Essentially, the website should guarantee the safety of authors' copyrighted work by first, registering with the Department of Intellectual Property Rights, and second, taking firm action against reposting or illegal sharing. Existing laws can be strengthened by simply implementing a properly designed system that ensures proper enforcement. In the past, without such a mechanism, ignorance and the lack of proper practice have prevailed. As soon as paying for content becomes an accepted custom, people will realize how important the ownership of copyrights are for writers.

Conclusion

The writing industry is now being threatened by many factors, but mainly by the third industrial revolution. Technology is slowly diverting attention away from traditional reading practices, and will only continue to do so. Authors and writers

cannot make a dependable income due to the unprofitable market conditions, combined with weak law copyright enforcement and ignorance of intellectual property rights. Fewer people reading results in fewer people writing. This is a huge for concern in the writing industry. In order to boost the culture of reading it is necessary for everyone to become a part of this movement. Little by little the micro-intervention of an online platform for Khmer literature will surely make big changes in the writing sector, changing the perception of writers from low-income workers to talented individuals whose work helps preserve the Khmer language.

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