Cambodian Communication Review 2020

Department of Media and Communication
Cambodia Communication Institute
Royal University of Phnom Penh

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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to sincerely thank all contributors who have submitted their works in this publication; this volume would not have been possible without their contribution. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers, who spent invaluable time to give their opinions and comments on the previous draft(s) of the works to help the authors improve their papers. Our sincere gratitude goes to DMC/CCI staff, including Ms. Chanmakara KOL and Ms. Socheata VINH, who provide every possible support from the beginning until the end of the project. Our sincere thanks go to Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Cambodia for the financial support for this publication.

Ms. Socheata VINH would wish to express her gratitude to the DMC Batch 16 alumni below for updating some of the media indicators for this publication: Chhaivathanak CHHUM, Sovathana DUONG, Chihor NGOV and Paroda SEM.

Disclaimer

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ISBN-13: 978-99963-779-6-9
Printed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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PREFACE

The publication of the Cambodian Communication Review 2020 represents yet another genuine commitment of the Department of Media and Communication and the Cambodia Communication Institute of the Royal University of Phnom Penh in promoting a research culture in Cambodian higher education institutions. The Review series aims to provide scholars, experts and practitioners with a platform to express their thoughts and ideas, especially on issues related to media and communication as well as to promote university as a public space, whereby ideas, thoughts, and thinking are openly expressed, contested, and debated.

There are three key sections in the Cambodian Communication Review 2020: the media snapshot, research works, and critical commentary. The papers were carefully written and then internally and externally reviewed, and the authors of the accepted articles (research papers and commentary) were required to respond and revise their works, accordingly. The articles in this issue touch on three important themes: social media and prevention of violence against women, students' readiness for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and media reporting about and during the global pandemic of the COVID-19.

The publication would not be possible without the valuable contribution from the authors, all of whom had put a great deal of effort to produce excellent pieces of writing for this issue and who had taken the pain to respond to the critiques and comments and to revise the previous version(s) of their works to meet our requirements. We would love to thank the contributors, potential contributors whose work did not pass the reviews, and the external reviewers for their contribution.

We are very open to constructive criticisms and comments and new initiatives from our supporters and readers to improve the quality of the future publication. We now present you the Cambodian Communication Review 2020 and hope it can be useful to your study, research and/or careers in one way or another.

Say SOK, PhD
Bun Y UNG
Phnom Penh, December 2020

INTRODUCTION

Say SOK and Bun Y UNG

The Cambodian Communication Review 2020 is made up of three sections: the Cambodian media snapshot, two research articles and one critical commentary. The media snapshot provides readers with important data on the latest economic, political, and demographic indicators and more importantly media and communication indicators for Cambodia. The media snapshot is followed by presentation of the two research articles. The first explores the positive influence of Facebook consumption on users' effort to prevent violence against women (VAW), and the second attempts to assess the readiness for online learning of undergraduate students in one major university in Cambodia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The commentary examines the state of media reporting on the COVID-19 by the Western media.

The first research article by Makara VORN examines the influence of Facebook consumption on users' effort to prevent violence against women. The research adopts a mixed-methods research design of online survey and in-depth interview to collect the data. Based on the information-processing model proposed by McGuire (1968), the author investigates the steps in information processing the research participants take in their social media consumption. This process starts from VAW information acquisition through internalisation of the messages to taking action against VAW. Overall, the paper argues that Facebook can be a potential source of information about VAW, and access to such information has empowered many individuals to promote gender equality and social justice and to address VAW in particular. Step-wise, the participants receive information, news and preventive messages about VAW from a wide range of online sources such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, their networks, and Facebook friends. Reasons for their access to VAW information include personal interest, peer influence, work, and automatic news feed. The information received from Facebook can improve their understanding of the matter and change their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. That is, upon internalisation of the messages and interpretation of the information, consciously and/or unconsciously, participants may take action, online and/or offline, against VAW and to promote gender equality at large.

The second research article by Raksmey CHAN and Seangmeng SARIK explores the preference and readiness of undergraduate students of one large public university for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uses online survey to collect quantitative data and focus group discussion to collect follow-up qualitative data. The authors explore the topic based on the online learning readiness framework and e-readiness dimensions of computer/Internet self-efficacy,

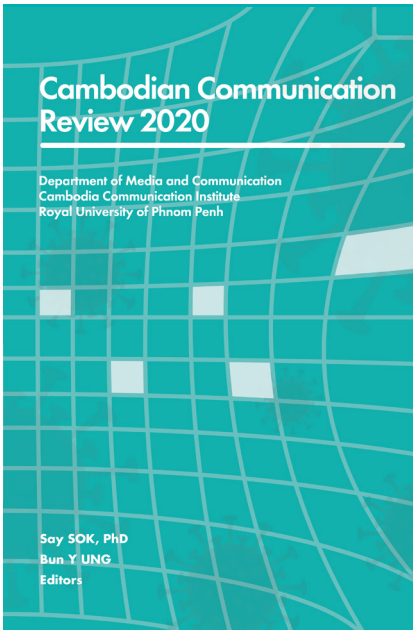
self-directed learning, learner control, motivation for learning, and online communication self-efficacy developed by Hung et al. (2010). Key findings are as follows. Despite having experienced online learning for one semester, students generally still prefer physical classroom. Reasons for disinterest for online learning include connection problems with the Internet, inability to catch up with lectures, low self-control, and for some majors of study, inability to conduct real on-site experiment. The authors argue that in the future, when appropriate, class should be conducted both online and physically as appropriate to improve students' learning experience and performance. Cambodian students possess average e-readiness for learning in the five dimensions measured. This level of readiness is lower than those of their peers from more advanced countries /territories such as Malaysia and Hong Kong. This can be understandable, given the abrupt adoption of online learning during the pandemic and unfamiliarity with online learning (familiarity with and widespread use of whiteboard and chalk for teaching in Cambodian institutions of higher learning). Universities are recommended to properly assess the readiness of their students and provide necessary and timely technical support to enrich the learning experience of their students. The study finds some statistical difference between male and female students and students from different year levels in some of the dimensions. Males are found to be better in computer/Internet self-efficacy and online communication self-efficacy, and senior students are more adept in online communication.

In the commentary "Lurking Propaganda: Western Media in the Digital Age and the COVID-19 Pandemic", Boraden NHEM explores how the Western media reported the COVID-19 pandemic and adeptly illustrates the 'double standard' and prejudice in news reporting on this subject matter, especially the different coverage and stance news media and journalists take in reporting the pandemic that happened in developed and developing countries in general and notably the United States of America and China in particular. Based on his analysis of 133 news articles from 13 'tops newspapers and magazines', he demonstrates the difference in how the Western media depict the pandemic in three themes: government's decision to adopt the lockdown policy, origin of the virus, and prejudice on the capacity of developing countries to handle the pandemic and its impacts. In many instances, the author argues that the news reporting has been lurking closer to propaganda than professional reporting and media. The author cautions against the danger of such a practice, especially during a time of heightened geopolitical rivalry and appeals to news media and journalists to adhere to their professionalism and to veer away from propaganda to maintain their position as a friend of the public.

We now present to you in order: the Cambodian media indicators, the research articles and the critical commentary.

Cambodian Media Snapshot 2020

Socheata VINH



This section provides a number of indicators for grasping an overall picture of the state of media in Cambodia by assembling the currently scattered information related to Cambodian media. Existing data are both limited in quantity and challenging in currency and accuracy. What is offered here is a brief snapshot by way of presenting existing indicators from a number of sources. These indicators are collated from different points in time, and they are every now and again at odds. Therefore, the sources are acknowledged here for every indicator, so that the readers can further access the sources and evaluate their currency and accuracy.

This section first presents a set of contextual indicator for Cambodia, from demographic to economic and socio-political, so as to allow the readers to draw a contextual sketch of the country to which the subsequent media indicators are related. Following the media-related contextual country indicators, we present accessible indicators, in order, for Cambodian newspaper, magazine, radio, television, cinema and audio-visual production, telephone, the Internet and social media.

1. CONTEXTUAL COUNTRY INDICATORS

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Economic & Socio-Political		
GDP per capita, 2019	US$ 1,643	World Bank
Human Development Index (HDI) 2020 Ranking	144 of 149	Human Development Report (2020)
Gender Equality Index, 2018	93 of 149	World Economic Forum, 2018
School enrolment, primary, 2019	106.475%	World Bank
Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines, 2012	17.7%	World Bank
Global Competitiveness Index 4.0, 2019	106 of 141	World Economic Forum (2019)
Legatum Prosperity Index, 2019	122 of 167	The Legatum Institute
Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2020	110 of 137	Bertelsmann Foundation
Network Readiness Index, 2020	106 of 134	Portulans Institute
Index of Economic Freedom, 2020	113 of 180	The Heritage Foundation
Democracy Index, 2019	124 of 167	The Economist Intelligence Unit
Freedom in the World, 2020	25 of 100 (Not Free)	Freedom House
Press Freedom Index, 2020	144 of 180	Reporters Without Borders
Demographic		
Total population, 2019	16,486,542	World Bank
Population male, 2019	48.812%	World Bank
Population female, 2019	51.188%	World Bank
Percentage of urban population, 2019	39.4%	General Population Census 2019
Urban population, 2019	6,135,194	General Population Census 2019
Rural population, 2019	9,417,017	General Population Census 2019
Phnom Penh Population, 2020	2.078 million	CIA World Factbook
Population annual growth rate, 2019	1.4%	General Population Census 2019
Percentage of population aged 0-14, 2019	29.4%	General Population Census 2019

Number of households, 2019	3,553,021	General Population Census 2019
Average household size, 2019	4.3	General Population Census 2019
Percentage of female-headed households, 2019	25.6%	General Population Census 2019
Population density (inhabitants per square km), 2019	87	General Population Census 2019
Urban population density (inhabitants per square km), 2019	874	General Population Census 2019
Rural population density (inhabitants per square km), 2019	55	General Population Census 2019
Youth (15-24) population, 2020 (estimated)	17.28%	CIA World Factbook
Middle age (25-54) population, 2020 (estimated)	41.51%	CIA World Factbook
National adult literacy rate (15 and above), 2019	87.7%	General Population Census 2019
Tertiary enrolment rate, gross, 2019	14.74%	World Bank
Labour force participation rate (15-59), 2019	81.7%	General Population Census 2019
Unemployment rate (15-64), 2019	1.2%	General Population Census 2019
Total fertility rate, 2019	2.5	General Population Census 2019
Infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births, 2019	18	General Population Census 2019
Maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births, 2019	141	General Population Census 2019
Life expectancy at birth, total, 2019	75.5	General Population Census 2019

2. PRINT MEDIA

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Newspaper agencies, 2020	450	Ministry of Information (2020)
Magazine agencies, 2020	196	Ministry of Information (2020)
Bulletin publishers, 2020	22	Ministry of Information (2020)
Printing houses, 2020	114	Ministry of Information (2020)

Book publishers, 2020	22	Ministry of Information (2020)
Foreign news agencies, 2020	24	Ministry of Information (2020)
Press associations, 2020	51	Ministry of Information (2020)

3. RADIO

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Radio stations countrywide, 2020	221	Ministry of Information (2020)
FM radio stations in Phnom Penh, 2020	83	Ministry of Information (2020)
FM radio stations in provinces, 2020	137	Ministry of Information (2020)
AM radio stations in Phnom Penh, 2020	1	Ministry of Information (2020)
Foreign news agencies, 2018	24	Ministry of Information (2020)
Percentage of households owning radio, 2016	30%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of Phnom Penh households owning radio, 2016	24%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of other urban households owning radio, 2016	30%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of rural households owning radio, 2016	30%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018

4. TELEVISION

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
National analogue TV stations, 2020	19	Ministry of Information (2020)
Digital TV stations, 2020	8	Ministry of Information (2020)
Cable TV stations in Phnom Penh, 2020	2	Ministry of Information (2020)
Cable TV stations in provinces, 2020	210	Ministry of Information (2020)
National broadcast channels in Phnom Penh	23	General Department of Information and Broadcasting Website
Percentage of households owning television, 2016	73%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of Phnom Penh households owning television, 2016	95%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of other urban households owning television, 2016	86%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of rural households owning television, 2016	68%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018

5. CINEMA & AUDIO-VISUAL PRODUCTION

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Registered production companies, 2020	108	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of films licensed for production, 2020	23	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of TV dramas licensed for production, 2020	4	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of films licensed for showing, 2020	12	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of TV dramas licensed for showing, 2020	0	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of karaoke video volumes licensed for production, 2020	34	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Number of karaoke video volumes licensed for showing, 2020	27	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)
Cinema houses in Phnom Penh, 2020	14	Cinema & Cultural Diffusion Department (2021)

6. TELEPHONE

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Fixed telephone line, 2018	88,757	Knoema
Fixed telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, 2018	0.5	Knoema
Fixed telephone subscriptions by August 2020	52,663	Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia
Mobile subscriptions by August 2020	20,365,322	Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia
Mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	132.7	Knoema
Mobile operators by June 2016	9	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Fixed line operators by June 2016	9	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Number of phones used by Cambodians (aged 15 to 65), 2016 estimated	10,384,837	Mobile Phones and Internet in Cambodia 2016
Percentage of households owning cell phone, 2016	91%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of Phnom Penh households owning cell phone, 2016	97%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of urban households owning cell phone, 2016	95%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of rural households owning cell phone, 2016	89%	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2018
Percentage of households (aged from 15-65) owning at least one phone supporting Khmer script	76%	Mobile Phones and Internet in Cambodia 2016
Number of smartphones supporting Khmer script	90%	Mobile Phones and Internet in Cambodia 2016

7. INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

INDICATOR	FIGURE	SOURCE
Internet users in Cambodia, by January 2020	9,700,000	DataReportal (2020)
Website and Online TV, 2020	669	Ministry of Information (2020)
OTT services, 2020	7	Ministry of Information (2020)
Percentage of households having access to Internet	50.0%	General Population Census 2019
Internet subscriptions in Cambodia, by August 2020	15,262,526	Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia
Fixed (wired) Internet subscription, by June 2016	82,926	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Mobile Internet subscriptions, by June 2016	7,074,483	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Fixed (wired) Internet Service Providers (ISP) licensed, by June 2016	33	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Mobile Internet Service Providers (ISP) licensed, by June 2016	6	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Total com.kh domain name, by June 2016	2,844	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (2016)
Percentage of households owning a personal computer, 2013	9.3%	Cambodia Inter-Censal Population Survey 2013
Percentage of urban households owning a personal computer, 2013	30.2%	Cambodia Inter-Censal Population Survey 2013
Percentage of rural households owning a personal computer, 2013	3.8%	Cambodia Inter-Censal Population Survey 2013
Number of Facebook users, 2019	8,800,000	Cambodia Digital Statistics 2019 by Geeks in Cambodia
Number of Instagram users, 2019	720,000	Cambodia Digital Statistics 2019 by Geeks in Cambodia
Number of YouTube users, 2019	1,900,000	Cambodia Digital Statistics 2019 by Geeks in Cambodia
Number of TikTok users, 2019	500,000	Cambodia Digital Statistics 2019 by Geeks in Cambodia
Number of LinkedIn users, 2019	156,000	Cambodia Digital Statistics 2019 by Geeks in Cambodia

Influence of Facebook Consumption on Cambodian Users' Effort to Prevent Violence against Women

Makara VORN

ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Facebook consumption on Cambodian users' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in preventing violence against women (VAW) through information consumption and online participation. Results from an online survey—consisting of 109 respondents—and in-depth interview with 16 participants illustrate positive impacts on users who were exposed to VAW information on Facebook. This information exposure enables users to learn about VAW problems and to change their perceptions and attitudes towards VAW. Users' positive changes in social media consumption were evidenced through their sharing of information, commenting and voicing opinions to fight against VAW. Such online involvement has empowered women, who have, inter alia, demanded authorities to intervene to prevent VAW, and raised public awareness—all positive behaviour for combating VAW.

Keywords: Facebook Consumption, Social Media Consumption, Information Processing, Violence against Women, Prevention

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (1993, 1) defines VAW as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'. VAW remains problematic in Cambodia, with domestic violence (DV) and sexual violence (SV) being the most perennial (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2014, 3-5; Ministry of Women's Affairs & Australia Aid 2016, 2-3). It is estimated that one in five women have undergone intimate partner violence (IPV), physically and sexually, leading to severe physical and mental health problems (WHO 2015, 1-2).

Significant risk factors and causes of VAW include gender inequality, attitudinal acceptance, social norms, limited education, misuse of alcohol (WHO 2013, 4-7), media exposure (The Asia Foundation 2015, 3-5), weak law enforcement, corruption (Brickell, Prak & Poch 2014, 5-30) and discrimination against women (The Cambodian Committee of Women 2007, 2-3).

There are some gender stereotypes and social norms entrenched in Cambodian culture that appear to normalise dehumanisation of others (Gender and Development for Cambodia 2010, 12). Cambodian women have suffered from injustice due to local authorities not fully understanding the legal process to prosecute husbands in marital rape, thus granting impunity for perpetrators (The International Court of Justice & UN Women 2016). Female victims, especially those in rape cases, are commonly blamed because of patriarchal beliefs that the victims contribute to such tragic acts because they wear provocative clothes, go out alone or consume alcohol, which desensitises perpetrators. A recent case saw two television news anchors making fun of a rape case, blaming the victim for resisting the rapists and postulating that was why she was murdered (Kong & Baliga 2017, para.1-4; and San 2017, para.5-6). The presenters were made to publicly apologise following public outcry and a petition initiated by local activists through Facebook (Kann 2017, para.1-2; Sanders & Chhorn 2017, para.1-3).

Social media offer a platform to educate and inform users on VAW prevention (UN Women 2017, para.4; WHO 2009). Facebook has become one of the most influential platforms (Soh 2017) and potential sources of information in Cambodia (Phong & Sola 2015, i), with 4.8 million users from a population of 15 million in 2017 (Internet World Stats 2017, 1). However, many opponents argue that Facebook promotes VAW through cyber bullying, sexual harassment, online abuse and offensive and misogynistic images of women—so prevalent was this that the public and feminist activists led massive campaigns to demand Facebook to alter its policies for filtering hate speech and violent pictures (Bates, Laura 2013, para.1-6; Hudson 2013, para. 1-4; Jacobs 2013, para. 1-4; Macey 2013, para. 2-5). Statista (2017) reported that women worldwide experience online abuse and harassment through Facebook. The activism resulted in a review and change of Facebook's policies to stop sexual harassment across the platform, which was publicly announced by the company in 2017 (Cohen 2017, para. 1-5; Kelly 2017, para. 2-4).

Although the negative aspects of Facebook have been widely discussed, positive impacts should be admitted. These include educating users, allowing them to demand policy changes, and it provides a platform to campaign against VAW and promote gender equality. According to The Asia Foundation (2015), although media can negatively contribute to IPV through normalising and sensationalising violent behaviour, they can affect positive influence through raising public awareness and understanding to challenge social norms that tolerate IPV. The Cambodian Government, in collaboration with international organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs), has implemented a national action plan to combat VAW by changing Cambodians' perceptions, attitudes, behaviour and social norms through offline activities and social media campaigns (Ending Violence Against Women Program Management Office 2017).

However, Facebook has not been utilised widely to raise public awareness and to positively change users' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in preventing VAW although online and social media usage are stated in the action plan. As discovered by Domestic Violence Victoria (2015), Liou (2013) and Rasmussen (2015), the major role of Facebook in educating and allowing users to participate in discussion enables them to expand their understanding of and knowledge on VAW and its consequences and even promote their activism offline and in the local communities. A wide range of information from news media and campaigns from international organisations and individual posts promoting prevention of VAW is disseminated throughout Facebook, allowing users to not only consume the information but also involve themselves in addressing the issues. This shows that Facebook can raise public awareness and change users' behaviour to combat VAW.

Despite its potential contribution to preventing VAW, there has not been any reliable research to examine the effectiveness of Facebook consumption as a medium to prevent VAW in Cambodia. The government itself is yet to utilise Facebook in its VAW prevention campaigns. This research thus aims to understand Cambodians' perception of VAW, which ensues from information consumption, and to explore how Cambodian users process information on Facebook and subsequently change their attitudes and behaviour.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the reasons that encourage users to access VAW information on Facebook?
2. How can Facebook change users' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in relation to VAW?
3. What conclusions can be drawn from this study about the impacts of Facebook in changing users' attitudes and behaviour, and what are the implications (if any)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research focusing on adverse impacts of media (television, radio, etc.) on VAW demonstrates a link between news media consumption and risk factors encouraging VAW (Gender and Development for Cambodia 2010; The Asia Foundation 2015), attitudinal acceptance of VAW, and a culture of normalisation and desensitisation of violence towards women (Kohlman et al. 2014). Numerous other studies confirm the negative effects of social media on sexual abuse and VAW too. However, many studies also content that mass media can be a potential source of information about domestic violence regulations, which can change the misconception that violence on women is a private issue (Brickell, Prak & Poch 2014). The positive effects of media are evidenced in increasing information dissemination to provide victims or media consumers with preventive measures and promote interventions in domestic violence (Usdin et al. 2005) helping women to improve their sense of efficacy and better decision-making.

Impact of Facebook on Violence against Women

Facebook can potentially influence users' attitudes, intentions and behavioural changes (Moreno et al. 2013). However, there is no empirical research which explores the impact of Facebook consumption on users' behaviour in disseminating information about VAW, although there is an evaluation report on the effectiveness of social media campaigns (via Facebook, YouTube, and blogs) and demonstration that social media are an influential medium to help prevent VAW (Liou 2013). Rasmussen (2015) and Domestic Violence Victoria (2015) confirmed that social media play an essential role in preventing VAW because they allow the public to access information, which can lead to positive changes in social media consumption. Born (2015) clearly explained the advantages of social media in disseminating information about consequences of VAW, challenging myths that underpin VAW and promoting people's understanding of VAW to prevent and end VAW. Nevertheless, there are many studies evaluating the negative impacts of Facebook, which include violation of women's rights and provocation of sexual harassment. The sections below analyse the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook in connection with VAW prevention and eradication.

Positive Impacts

Liou (2013) argued that social media can be a powerful platform to prevent VAW when it is used in connection with other interventions. Interventions and preventions executed at the community level should be promoted on social media such as Facebook. Similarly, WHO (2009) emphasised the role of social media in preventing VAW through elimination of social stereotypes that empower men over women. With a wide range of alternative public spheres, Facebook empowers men and women to understand more about women's rights and change their behaviour in accepting and tolerating VAW.

The dominant concept of patriarchy has disempowered women in some countries, causing discrimination and violence, and has prompted women to use social media to promote gender equality and address gender issues (Odine 2013). Similarly, Domestic Violence Victoria (2015) reported that the involvement of news and social media can contribute to prevention of VAW as they reach diverse groups of people and raise public awareness about causes and risks of VAW and ways to mitigate them. Some social media campaigns in such countries as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand can draw the public's attention to and interest in DV (Manikam 2012). In India, the use of social media applications for VAW interventions enables women to retrieve safety information, report incidents to local authorities and request emergency help (Klugman et al. 2014).

Hamid, Ishak and Yusof (2015) discovered that Facebook allows women to empower themselves in economic, social and cultural, legal, political and psychological dimensions. The wide spread of information and accessibility of interactions on social networks can help reduce gender-based violence through active involvement of relevant partners working on women's issues such as NGOs, women's right groups, users and the government (Mishra 2016). A study in Bangladesh indicated that the influence of mass media is slightly effective in enhancing gender equality and curbing VAW; thus a new strategic method in utilising social media may increase such positive outcomes (Jesmin & Amin 2016).

Negative Impacts

Many studies argue that women suffer from cyber harassment in the modern era (Hinduja & Patchin 2010; Olumide, Adams & Amodu 2015; Choja & Nelson 2016) which affects their self-esteem and rights. Choja and Nelson (2016) showed that cyber harassment has resulted in an increase of psychological harm, emotional distress and suicide intention. Kohlman et al. (2014) emphasised the negative effect of social media, which appears to normalise and desensitise VAW through comedic portrayals and jokes, making audience view VAW as acceptable. Cyber harassment on Facebook also poses a major threat to women's mental wellbeing and health, and some offenders acknowledge their satisfactions in using Facebook to practise harassment against women (Choja & Nelson 2016). It is argued that Facebook allows users to provoke VAW through hate speech and images. Macey (2013) reported that the intervention from Facebook to alter policy restricting any content promoting VAW was resulted from a massive campaign demanding Facebook to take action against those using photos of women suffering from violence and hate words and threatening to boycott products advertised on Facebook.

In support of this campaign, many companies many companies suspended online advertisement on Facebook which galvanised it to review its policy guidelines and practices to shutdown pages, including 'this is why Indian girls get raped', 'Violently Raping Your Friend Just for Laughs' or 'Raping your Girlfriend' (Macey 2013). While negative impacts of Facebook may have to be dealt with by the company itself, social campaigns can demand Facebook to take action too. The recent theft of users' personal information by Cambridge Analytic, allegedly for Trump's election campaign (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018) saw Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, questioned in a US Senate hearing (The New York Times 2018). The above examples are indicative that society supports the positive impacts of social media, including on VAW prevention, while it remains wary of and seeks to curtail its negative impacts.

Information-Processing Model

McGuire (1968) developed an information processing model (IPM) to understand the processes of people's attitudinal and behavioural changes after exposure to information/message. The six steps of the persuasion processes (see Figure 1) were designed to understand the attitudinal change of individuals. Hence, this analysis fits well into the nature of this study, which aims to explore the attitudinal change through information consumption leading to behavioural change.

Figure 1: Persuasion Process (McGuire 1968)

In this model, presentation refers to exposure to information or message disseminated on Facebook. Attention is the time that the audience is aware of the message or information that catches his/her attention (meaning he or she is interested in and cares about the message). Comprehension is the stage in which the audience understands the message consumed. Yielding is the process in which the audience accepts and agrees with the message and is willing to change his or her attitude. Retention involves the audience memorising and retaining the message. Behaviour is the final stage in which the audience acts based on the message.

Based on research in advertisement effectiveness, Scholten (1996) confirms that McGuire's information-processing model can be an effective measurement of advertisement when it is done appropriately based on a number of critical aspects to persuade consumers to buy products after being exposed to the messages.

Following McGuire's (1968) model, the present study adapted the six processes of information processing to investigate and explore behavioural changes of users after exposure to information related to VAW prevention on Facebook.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised mixed methods to collect the data. Online survey was used to collect quantitative data, and follow-up in-depth interview to collect qualitative data. The main method, in-depth interviews

with key informants, examined the way Facebook, through information consumption and online engagement, influences Cambodian users' efforts to prevent VAW. In-depth interviews fit the nature of the research questions and allow the writer to understand the phenomena and explore the respondents' thinking, understanding and feeling, and analyse their perception and attitude.

Data Collection

The online survey generated 109 respondents from 13th March to 1st April, 2018. The survey was created on Google Form and shared on the writer's personal Facebook account, friends' Facebook accounts and some Cambodian and student associations' Facebook groups in Australia to maximise the number of respondents. The survey was promoted multiple times to reach a wider range of respondents. The marital status of the respondents is presented in Table 1, and the socio-demographic data are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Online Survey Respondents' Marital Status

Participant's Status	Percentage
Single	40%
Married	48%
Divorced	4%
Having Boyfriend/Girlfriend	7%
De Facto Relationship	1%

Sixteen respondents, eight males and eight females, were selected for a follow-up interview. Each interview took between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in person with respondents living in Melbourne and via online call with those living outside Melbourne. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for later thematic analysis to understand and capture more contextual details and information processing emerging from participants' responses. Thematic analysis allowed the writer to examine and understand phenomena and pinpoint themes emerging from the data by using a deductive and inductive approach.

The selection criteria to recruit the interviewees are as follows:

- Cambodian and aged between 18 and 49 years old—i.e. people from the country of focus for this study and the age group in which VAW is most prevalent across Cambodia (Jewkes et al. 2017)
- actively uses Facebook at least four times per week and accesses information published by news media,personal posts, campaigns or other VAW information
- has access to different kinds of VAW information including laws relating to VAW; consequences, risk factors and forms of VAW; and news related to VAW (e.g. instances of DV, SV, rape and sexual harassment)—DV and SV being the most perennial forms of VAW in Cambodia (Ministry of Women's Affairs & Australia Aid 2016).

Table 2: Demographics of Survey Respondents

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	56
Female	53
Current Residential Location	
Cambodia	81
Australia	19
Canada	2
Europe	2
Myanmar	1
United States	1
Occupation	
NGO staff	19
Postgraduate	27
Company staff	22
Government employee	29
Business person	4
Others	8
Frequency of Facebook Use	
Daily	86
5-6 days per week	12
3-4 days per week	6
1-2 days and less than 30 minutes per week	5

FINDINGS

Facebook Changing Users' Perceptions, Attitudes and Behaviour in Relation to Violence against Women

Results from the interviews indicate that there is potential for Facebook to influence Cambodian users' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in preventing VAW through information exposure and online participation. Facebook plays an important role in disseminating different kinds of information about VAW published by news media, on NGO pages, in social media campaigns promoting gender equality and on individual posts. From this information exposure, participants can learn about VAW and increase their understanding about the matter leading to positive perceptual and attitudinal changes. Users' changes in social media consumption are shown through online participation—comments, shares and opinions. The analysis below explains the reasons behind users' information consumption and online engagement followed by an elaboration on the interrelationship between users' perception and behavioural change.

Information Exposure

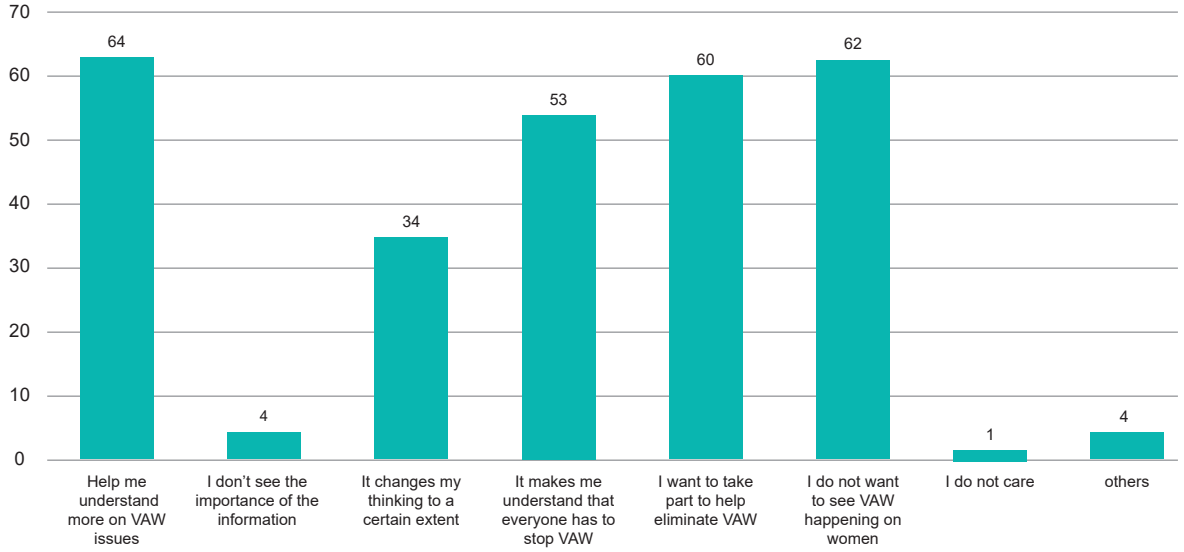
The results from the survey indicate that the participants receive different kinds of information on VAW from Facebook. Most survey respondents (92%) reported previous exposure to VAW information on Facebook. Respondents are familiar with reading and watching a wide range of VAW information, which includes laws (32%); consequences of VAW (43%); social norms (49%); sexual violence (52%); physical (61%), emotional (37%) and economic violence (28%); gender inequality (39%), rape issues (69%), sexual harassments (52%) and ways to prevent VAW (31%). The most VAW information viewed is related to rape (69%) and physical violence (61%). Table 3 presents the survey results on types of information related to VAW consumed by the survey respondents.

Table 3: Types of Information Related to VAW Consumed by Survey Participants

Information Consumption through Facebook	Number of Participants
Law related to VAW	35 (32%)
Consequences of VAW	47 (43%)
Social norms	53 (49%)
Sexual violence	57 (52%)
Physical violence	66 (61%)
Emotional violence	40 (37%)
Economic violence	30 (28%)
Gender inequality	43 (39%)
Rape issues	75 (69%)
Sexual harassment	57 (52%)
Ways to prevent VAW	34 (31%)
I read or watch VAW but cannot recall	14 (13%)
Others	9 (8%)

The survey also shows that most respondents receive information portraying VAW problems rather than educational messages about VAW (Figure 2). That is, amongst others, a vast majority of respondents (64%) stated that information about VAW on Facebook helps them understand perennial VAW issues. 62% stated that they ‘do not want to see VAW happening to women’, and 60% wants to ‘take part to help eliminate VAW on women’.

Figure 2: Respondents' Perceptions of VAW based on Information They Obtained



Reasons for consuming information about violence against women on Facebook

The interviews revealed four main reasons for the participants to access VAW information—personal interest, peer influence, work, and automatic news feed. Most participants confirmed that their interest and curiosity in women-related issues have inspired them to view any information on domestic violence, physical violence and gender inequality posted on Facebook, as illustrated in the two quotations below.

> 'I am a woman so I want to get informed about women's issues. Besides, I want to know what I can do to help other women. I want to get informed about those [VAW] issues.' (Participant 10)

> 'I am interested in [VAW] information, besides political issues. It attracts my attention and urges me to ask what is happening and why it is happening. How does it happen? I want to know how perpetrators are punished, so it [Facebook] helps me a lot to understand the current situation.' (Participant 11)

Peer influence is another factor that makes the participants read or watch news and information about VAW. Some participants receive VAW information shared by their friends on Facebook either in the group chats or on personal statuses. Participant 7 explained: 'I have a number of networks … and friends on Facebook who are activists. Some work with the government and NGOs; thus I think that all [VAW] information I get from my networks [and friends] is more reliable than that I get from newspapers.'

Some participants used to work on gender and women's issues and are keen to access VAW information, collect information and receive update about current issues in Cambodia and other countries to incorporate into their activities, training and meetings. One participant explained: 'I access VAW information because I have worked on this issue. I am interested in women's and children's [issues] and I have been working in this area for many years. I will continue working in this area because I think that [VAW] has continued to happen and I want to reduce it.' (Participant 16)

The automatic updates from the Facebook pages of news media, NGOs, ministries and advocacy groups have encouraged Facebook users to access VAW information too, as long as the headlines, pictures and/or videos are interesting. Participant 2 illustrated this in one instance she encountered on Facebook: 'Some graphic pictures of domestic violence on the news feed make me pity the wife who was beaten by her husband. I want to know how it happened and I want to know which news agency committed the unethical exposure of these pictures of the victim.'

Users' attention and understanding of VAW information

The regular VAW information exposure enables users to learn from both negative and positive aspects of the posts, which enhances their knowledge and understanding. Many respondents agreed that Facebook is an important source of information on VAW. Participant 13 explained: 'Before, we might not know a lot about VAW. Now we receive lots of information about VAW from Facebook, and people use it [Facebook] to share information.'

Participant 1 considered Facebook her main source of information for updates on VAW issues in Cambodia. 'I think I have gained more information from Facebook than from reading news on newspapers. I check Facebook anytime and at any place. In the past, we did not have Facebook to spread news or information, so I didn't know [about VAW]. But through Facebook, I can see that lots of violence is still happening on women.' (Participant 1)

Participant 8 claimed that her knowledge on VAW has increased after exposure to related information, especially from friends who raised the issues. She explained how the exposure could change her perception as follows:

> 'Sometimes I think it [information] can influence my perception. When my friends raise some VAW issues, I seem to reflect upon them. For example, I think that men should not commit violence against women. I have some friends who used to be harassed or suffer from verbal abuse and harassment. When I see my friend posted such on her status, it changes my perception and I think that if someone used those words or acted like that to me, I would consider it VAW too.' (Participant 8)

Some respondents have learned different ways to tackle violence from educational messages on Facebook. One participant who suffered from DV in her family as her father often resorted to violence against her mother during arguments explained:

> 'I think my knowledge and understanding [of VAW] have now increased a lot, if I compare it to the time I did not use Facebook, i.e. when I was studying at university. I like reading or watching educational messages on how to solve violence peacefully, and I think that if such violence happens to me one day or to my family again, I will use that knowledge [to deal with it].' (Participant 3)

Participant 5 also emphasised the significance of Facebook in exposing her to different VAW cases and educational messages. According to the participant, 'Facebook is extremely important to help prevent VAW. It helps people learn and know more about VAW issues. Facebook can expose hidden stories about VAW, so it can help us find a solution through digesting opinions or viewpoints of [Facebook] users and promoting involvement of the local authorities in addressing the issues.' (Participant 5)

The knowledge gained from Facebook can influence the way the participants think and behave towards VAW. All participants are well educated, and some used to work in the area of gender and VAW issues. Therefore, their level of understanding and knowledge received from Facebook may differ from other Facebook users who do not have similar knowledge and experience.

Users' Perceptual and Attitudinal Change

VAW information on Facebook has seemingly prompted positive change in the perceptions and attitudes of the participants. All participants perceived VAW as an unacceptable behaviour and demanded it be eliminated from society. One respondent explained: 'When I see VAW [posted on Facebook], I do not like it and it is unacceptable as I am one of the educated people. It [Facebook] can change our perception through the information we received. I don't want to see violence on women and want to do something or participate in combating [VAW].' (Participant 15)

Evidence from the interviews clearly indicated the change in users' perceptions towards VAW after the exposure on Facebook. Some participants reflected upon the negative aspects of VAW on Facebook and demanded effective law enforcement and legal action against perpetrators. They also tried to obtain educational messages from the post, condemned negative acts and avoided doing any kind of violent acts that may harm and/or hurt women. The quotation from one respondent is revealing:

> 'Before, when someone posted on a status, I used some words to tease her and I did not realise that it affected her feeling. I have stopped teasing people after I learned about VAW from Facebook.… During a group chat, when my friends use some words that may hurt women's feeling, I tell them to stop doing it because it can affect women's value and emotion.' (Participant 3)

Another participant also learned from and avoided committing negative acts that some people used on Facebook to indirectly devalue and abuse women. According to the respondent:

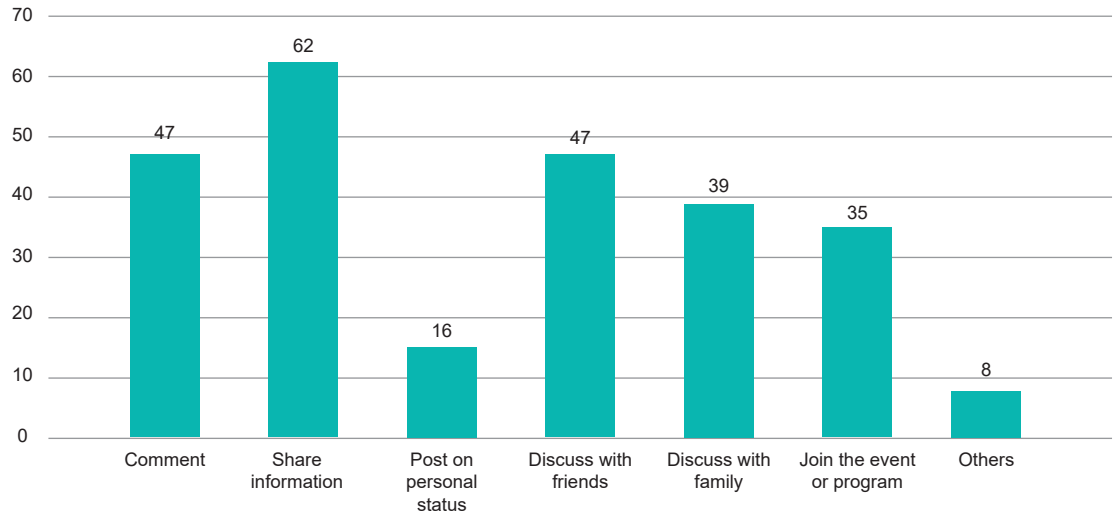
> 'I learn a lot from the negative aspects of VAW. When I see them [a senior politician and a lecturer] doing things which I think are inappropriate, I avoid doing them myself. I saw their status and think that it indirectly violates women's rights as it mocks, teases, and makes fun [of women] for their pleasure. Their stories are about going to a karaoke parlour, drinking, telling something that explicitly implies their affairs with entertainment workers, regardless of what their wives think.' (Participant 12)

The ability to interpret and analyse information obtained from Facebook has contributed to participants' understanding of VAW, which allows them to avoid committing it and vehemently advocates its elimination—an undoubtedly positive attitudinal change.

Behavioural Change After Information Exposure

The positive attitude and behaviour after exposure to VAW information on Facebook is captured in the results from the survey. A majority of the respondents (62%) had shared VAW information on Facebook. Posting opinion in personal statuses (16%) was infrequent, while commenting (47%), discussing it online (47%), discussing it with family members (39%) and participation in different (offline) events (35%) are a more frequent act (see Figure 3). These are indications that Facebook users can change their behaviour and get involved in preventing VAW after learning of VAW problems and obtaining educational messages on Facebook.

Figure 3: Respondents' Involvement in Online and Offline Anti-violence against Women after Exposure to Related Information on Facebook



Online participation

Evidence from the interviews reveals four avenues users take to prevent VAW—demanding authorities to intervene, empowering themselves, voicing their opinion, and raising public awareness—after VAW information consumption. They believed that when information about VAW is shared widely, local authorities will take action against unacceptable acts and ensure justice for the victims. Two participants aired their opinion below:

> 'So, when I share [a post related to VAW], I hope to pass the information to the local authorities to take action. When someone films a criminal act and posts it on Facebook, everyone is aware of it. I have a number of friends on Facebook, so the information I share can reach and demand the local authorities to intervene more quickly.' (Participant 5)

> 'Facebook is very good for information dissemination. For example, if something happens and the story is disseminated, shared and commented upon across the platform, the story becomes widespread. If we don't bring the matter up [on Facebook], the problem will be forgotten or ignored. If we want to prevent [VAW], we should use Facebook.' (Participant 8)

A notable case was a television star who was beaten at a club by a rich man. The incident was disseminated through Facebook in 2015 (ABC 2015; Huot & Blomberg 2015), and the public outcry pushed the police to (unusually) take fast action resulting in charges against the perpetrator who was jailed and required to pay compensation to the victim (Lewis 2016).

Facebook users believe that actions will be taken by the authorities more quickly if the cases are disseminated in the social media. Many participants contented that Facebook empowers them to stand up against adverse social norms and the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Participant 10 shared her opinion: 'Sometimes, some people blame the victims saying that they wear sexy clothes or go to unsafe places for women, which puts them in a dangerous situation. I react against this social norm which always blames the victims.'

Most participants claimed that Facebook provides them with an opportunity and space to speak out and express their concerns about VAW after consuming information on Facebook. This indicates a positive impact of Facebook in combating VAW.

Raising public awareness is another reason that participants share VAW information and comment on Facebook. VAW information shared by friends inspires other friends to pay more attention and learn more about it, which can possibly refrain other users from using violence intentionally or unintentionally on women. Participant 15 said: 'When I see news about violence, e.g. a man murdering a woman, I think that when I share it, I let my friends know about the issue. I want them to know about it and to think for themselves if it is acceptable or not and if they can do anything to help the victim.'

Despites the positive impacts of online engagement, participants pointed out negative consequences of Facebook, such as the possibilities that users may share and post fake or abusive information which may incite VAW if the consumers are not aware of gender inequality issues and have limited knowledge of VAW, especially those in rural areas and young adults. Two respondents expressed their concern as below:

> 'Some users are young. When they see pictures about violence, they may not think much and may commit the same [violence]. For adults, it depends on their personality. Some old people tend to imitate these acts too. They might think that they are men and powerful, so they can do the same and have the right to control women.' (Participant 15)

> 'If there is no measure or policy against VAW, some users may continue [using Facebook] to harass or abuse women. Some men may film improper acts and post the clips online. This can negatively affect younger generations who are not well aware of VAW issues and they might think that it is normal.' (Participant 4)

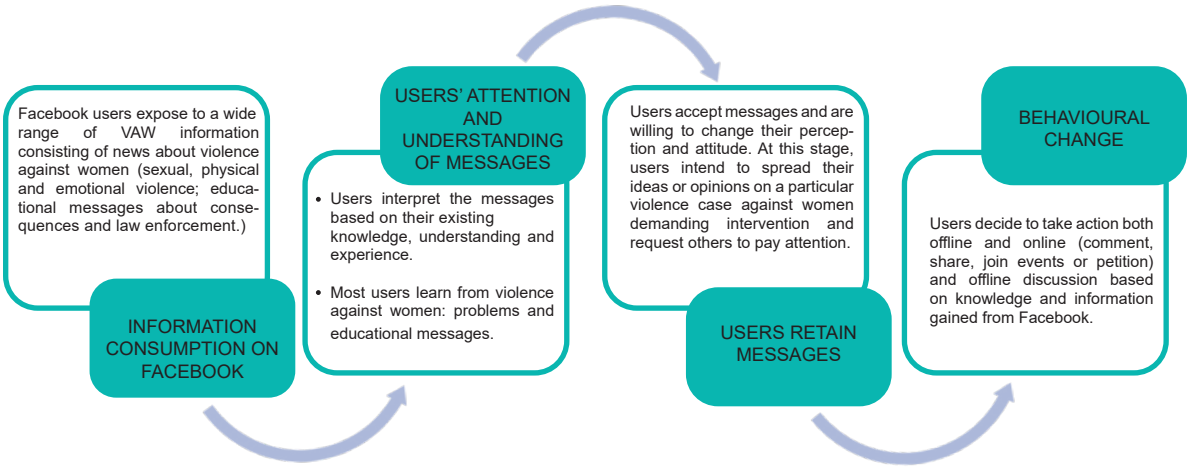
Offline participation

Another benefit of VAW information consumption through Facebook is to take action offline, especially bringing up VAW cases and sharing educational messages to peers and family. Some participants reported using information obtained from Facebook to produce news articles related to sexual abuse or integrate VAW cases from Facebook into their daily work. These offline actions show that information disseminated through Facebook has emboldened them to change their behaviour.

As an illustration, Participant 9, who had produced many news articles aiming to find justice and demand authorities to intervene in VAW, had been working as a journalist for the Phnom Penh Post for two years. She had produced news articles after the public outcry about the television news anchors on Hang Meas TV who blamed an eighteen-year-old woman raped and killed by a taxi driver. The anchor had joked that the victim may have been spared if she had not resisted the sexual demand from the attacker (Kong & Baliga 2017; Sanders 2017). She explained her decision to take action: 'This case of VAW is so serious, so I produced many news articles as a follow-up. When violence happened on women, you cannot blame the victims. He [the presenter] made a joke around this serious issue, which is inappropriate and unacceptable.'

The anchor apologised after the news spread across Cambodia and after an online petition on Facebook demanding him to publicly apologise collected over 1,500 signatures (Kann 2017).

Overall, this is the process by which information exposure through Facebook influences Cambodian users' effort to prevent VAW. In the first stage, Facebook users receive a wide range of VAW information consisting of news about violence against women, educational messages, and law enforcement. Following the information exposure, users appear to pay more attention and understand the messages and they somehow retain the messages. This possibly leads to positive behaviour to combat VAW through online participation such as comments, shares, and/or join offline events and discussion.



DISCUSSION

The proliferation of Facebook use in Cambodia has enabled the platform to become a primary source of information for users to understand and learn about VAW and gender inequality. As experience elsewhere has confirmed, VAW information disseminated on Facebook has seemingly prompted positive change in perceptions and attitudes of the participants. Many have thus unconsciously joined hands in combating VAW. This is generally in accordance with Potter (2012), who claimed that everyday exposure to media content may lead users to acquire knowledge on a topic and to take action. According to IPM, after the internalisation of the messages, the users interpret and accept the messages and then experience the behavioural adjustment (McGuire 1968). Bryant et al. (2008) claimed that as part of the learning process, individuals process all information mentally based on the media content they are exposed to. Women use social media platforms to disseminate information and convey educational messages not available in conventional media platforms. In line with the findings by Odine (2013), women's empowerment has been promoted through the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to fight against gender inequality and discrimination embedded in Arab society. Hamid et. al. (2015) also argued that social media, particularly Facebook, provide benefits for women to exercise their rights and empower themselves.

How much and whether the users can rightly interpret the information available on Facebook and to take appropriate action against VAW also depends on their existing knowledge, experience and personality. Positive and negative contents are shared and published on Facebook globally and nationally. All participants in this study are rather well educated and are more likely to promote gender equality, thus they can properly internalise the news and information from Facebook and take proactive action against VAW. Like what their peers elsewhere have done against gender inequality as reported in Liou (2013) and Rasmussen (2015), upon receipt of information and news on VAW from Facebook, many have taken the matter into their hand, such as through expressing their opinion online, demand concerned individuals to take appropriate action, promote educational messages in offline discussion with family and friends, and even integrating the knowledge and information into their work. This is a clear positive behavioural change in users. Moreno et al. (2013) argued that Facebook can have potential influence on its users' attitudes, intentions and behavioural changes. Besides, Liou (2013) puts it rightly that social media can be a powerful tool for preventing VAW when they are used in combination with other interventions, and this argument is confirmed by experience in other parts of the world (Klugman et al. 2014; Manikam 2012).

Two implications can be drawn from this study. According to Hamid, Ishak and Yusof (2015), Facebook enables women to empower themselves in economic, social and cultural, legal, political and psychological dimensions. In Cambodia, Facebook users empower themselves to combat VAW through Facebook involvement after receiving VAW information. Most participants are able to express their opinions opposing objectionable contents and prevalent VAW issues, while others post their personal stories seeking intervention and promoting VAW prevention. Although Facebook has not changed users' behaviour immediately, it is a crucial medium for users to convey their points of view and demand actions to be taken by relevant individuals and institutions. Users' opinions and reaction can attract their followers or friends to join hands too. This shows that users' active participation via Facebook can help support reduction of offensive acts of VAW. Findings by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) in another setting also confirm that people can use Facebook to present and empower themselves and fulfil their gratifications.

CONCLUSION

Facebook can positively influence users' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour to induce them to combat VAW. As a process, users acquire new information about current VAW issues and learn from educational messages about the consequences and aspire for law enforcement in support of the victims. This positive attitudinal change documented in this study proves that Facebook is a powerful means, which can change users' attitude and behaviour after they consume information about VAW.

Although this study confirms the effectiveness and positive influence of Facebook on a group of Cambodian users in combating VAW, there are limitations. First, while the negative impacts of Facebook consumption on gender inequality and VAW in particular is admitted, it is not explored in this study. This warrants thorough examination. Second, the sample size for the survey is small

due to time and resource limitations. The author attempted to mitigate this through conduct of in-depth interviews with the participants, but the demographics of the sample remain limited. Relatedly, the sample is also very skewed and is not representative. Most survey respondents and interview participants are friends or friends of friends of the author, and their current social status and education levels are on average higher than those of Facebook users in rural areas of Cambodia (i.e., those most prone to VAW). Finally, the failure to include people from the rural areas has thus also contributed to a limitation of this study's findings.

It is recommended that future research may want to examine the impact of Facebook consumption by Cambodia's rural dwellers in relation to VAW. Future studies should also focus on young adults exposed to VAW content whether from viral videos or news post to identify the negative and positive impacts from such exposure. The sample should be larger and nationwide to increase the reliability and accuracy of the studies. Since a vast majority of Cambodians access news about VAW through Facebook, the content analysis of news broadcast by media institutions through Facebook should be examined in details.

Basic Demographic Information about Informants in In-depth Interviews

N	Gender	Age	Occupation	Current Country of Residence	Facebook Use	Interview Date
1	F	27	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	07 April 2018
2	M	31	Government officer	Cambodia	Daily	07 April 2018
3	F	28	NGO staff	Cambodia	Daily	08 April 2018
4	M	38	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	09 April 2018
5	M	40	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	09 April 2018
6	F	27	Government officer	Cambodia	Daily	11 April 2018
7	F	33	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	11 April 2018
8	F	29	Company employee	Cambodia	Daily	11 April 2018
9	F	30	Journalist	Cambodia	Daily	12 April 2018
10	F	27	Freelancer	Cambodia	Daily	12 April 2018
11	F	28	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	14 April 2018
12	M	31	Consultant	Cambodia	Daily	15 April 2018
13	M	30	NGO employee	Cambodia	Daily	15 April 2018
14	M	30	Journalist	Cambodia	Daily	16 April 2018
15	M	30	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	18 April 2018
16	M	28	Postgraduate	Australia	Daily	18 April 2018

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Assessing the Readiness of Undergraduate Students for Online Learning during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Education in Cambodia has been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring a rapid shift in conduct of all types of learning. The advancement to distance learning has brought about challenges to all stakeholders, partly due to their limited, inadequate digital competency and little preparedness for the technology adoption. Many studies examine students' readiness for online learning in technologically advanced countries, yet few studies on this topic have been done in the developing world. This study addresses the gap through exploring whether students want to take online class and assessing the e-readiness of undergraduate students of one university in Cambodia. The tool employed to collect quantitative data is the Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) developed by Hung et al. (2010), which uses five dimensions of e-readiness: self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/Internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy. Qualitative data is collected based on follow-up focus group discussion. 440 students are randomly selected to complete the survey and twelve students are contacted to partake in the follow-up discussion. The data is analysed through thematic analysis and statistical software-SPSS. The results reveal that most students do not want to take online classes owing to instable Internet connection, unfavourable learning environment, and lack of digital competency, self-direction, and comprehension. Students possess the readiness slightly above the moderate level, and male students tend to have higher readiness level in some dimensions. There is a significant difference between freshmen and seniors in terms of e-readiness, namely in the computer/Internet self-efficacy dimension.

Keywords: Readiness, Online Learning, Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS), Cambodian University Students

INTRODUCTION

Online and blended learning have been widely used for teaching for years in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Lim and Libing 2016), as they could enhance learning experience and performance of learners. Regardless of the practice, the embrace of technology integration in teaching and learning does require students to possess some key competences such as adequate technical skills, self-learning ability, communication and motivation (Topal 2016).

Despite having little or no experience with implementing online learning, developing countries such as Cambodia have been slowly introducing distance learning platforms so as to follow the rapid development of technologies. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has somehow stopped the business as usual, and HEIs and students are forced to adopt online learning without delay. That is, they have no choice, but to adapt or to abandon.

Ever since the first case of COVID-19 was found, the government has begun initiating the country's defensive system to combat the pandemic, inter alia, by shutting down or taking stringent measures in sectors that are densely full of people. Education, public and private institutions of learning, is in the frontline of this unprepared pandemic. Classes at all levels of education in all types of learning institutions have been frequently postponed and moved online as the fear of students and teachers contacting with the virus grows.

The application of traditional teaching in the physical setting has been severely compromised amid the pandemic as university closure has frequently occurred countrywide. During the initial closure, students were left idle without having to attend class for weeks. However, before the pandemic, few HEIs had been trying to adopt digital content in teaching and learning for some time (Richardson 2011). The outbreak of the global pandemic is a testimony of desperation call for education institutions to embrace new changes in teaching and learning. Even though the performance result might not be very promising, the situation has been very dire; hence the urgent implementation of distance learning is not only very crucial but also critical.

While the move to online teaching and learning seems to be challenging, many HEIs are resilient and have implemented distance learning in no time during this difficult period. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has encouraged schools and universities to adopt online learning to ensure learning continuity. Some tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams have been used for synchronous learning.

The radical shift from traditional to online teaching and learning is an unprecedented phenomenon in Cambodia. A majority of students, who are the long-term residents of Phnom Penh, are more accustomed to the use of such technologies for learning. Nevertheless, many are new to the technologies, and these are chiefly the new students who just move from provinces or live in provinces. They can have difficulty in using these technologies for their learning, not to mention affordability to purchase the devices. Online learning is perceived to be not effective for underdeveloped countries due to the fact that technological competence and financial support are limited (Adnan and Anwar 2020).

Research Objectives and Research Questions

As online learning has been introduced on a massive scale, assessment on the readiness of students for online learning is of importance so as to understand the current state of the matter and to examine the students' readiness for e-learning. A previous study indicates that it is necessary to check students' readiness for online learning before introducing such practices (Hung et al. 2010). Hence, the results from this study can shed light on the situation and inform future research and practices. The objective is to understand if students want to pursue online learning during the pandemic and to explore undergraduate students' readiness for online learning.

This research aims to address these three research questions:

1. Do students want to take online learning? Why and why not?
2. What is the readiness of undergraduate students for online learning?
3. Do students' gender and year level make any difference in the readiness for online learning?

Paper Outline

The paper begins with the introduction, which also includes the research objectives and research questions. This is followed by the review of literature, research methods, presentation of the results, and discussion. A conclusion is then drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning readiness or e-readiness is defined as "the degree to which learners are ready to take courses in online learning environment" (Alem et al. 2016, 194). As online learning has gained its popularity in the last decades and become more critical during the pandemic, understanding whether students are ready for this learning platform is necessary. To measure students' readiness for online learning, numerous researchers have developed different scales of measurement and adopted different frameworks for their research.

Some prerequisite skills are required when students commence an online course, and these include behavioural attributes, skills and orientations (Alem et al. 2016). The authors developed an e-learning readiness framework (ELR) and suggested five constructs: self-competence, self-directed learning, motivation, finance, and usefulness (Alem et al. 2016). They assert that educational practitioner can prevent high dropout rate from online learning when they consider these factors in their adoption of online teaching.

Developed from the Student Integration Model (SIM) that stressed the importance of integration of students' social and academic aspects, another researcher has conceptualised the Students Online Learning Readiness model (SOLR) suggesting an alternative lens to assess student's readiness in online learning environment. The model indicates the necessity to check four components of students readiness: social competencies with the instructor, social competencies with classmates, communication competencies, and technical competencies (Yu and Richardson 2015). In addition, this study found that academic achievement has positive relation with these four factors.

Subsequent study suggests other constructs to be considered including information communications technology engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, and learner characteristics, and all of them do not differ much from the early frameworks (Doe, Castillo and Musyoka 2017). In general, all constructs have little difference from an existing Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) developed by Taiwanese researchers, which includes five dimensions of computer/Internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning (SDL), learner control, motivation for learning, and online communication self-efficacy (Hung et al. 2010). The validity of the latter framework has been validated in several studies in different countries around the world.

Dimensions of Online Learning Readiness Scale

In this study, the authors adapted the framework and instrument of OLRS developed by Hung et al. (2010) above due to its relevancy and intriguing findings in early works that used this framework. The five dimensions are elaborated as follows:

Computer/Internet self-efficacy is a dimension that focuses on individuals' perceptions of using a given technology and their ability to use the technology for learning. Low computer/Internet self-efficacy can result in dire consequences for academic success (Schlebusch 2018). An early study with Romanian students reports a significant difference between male and female learners as the latter tends to have lower computer efficacy, higher computer anxiety and less positive attitude towards the use of the Internet for learning (Durndell and Haag 2002).

Self-directed learning refers to how much the learners can direct their way of learning. This includes the competency of learning autonomy and ability to find conducive environment for learning either in isolation or with a group (Maclean and Wilson 2009). Knowles (1975) defines SDL as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles 1975, 18). And these constructs covering students' attitude, ability and characteristics to respond to online learning have been included in the OLRS model (Hung et al. 2010).

Another dimension is learner control. Different from learning in physical classroom, students have to take full control of their online learning without direct support from the teacher. Students can manage how to learn through their own pace, order and choices. With the mass availability of technologies such as Learning Management System (LMS), students can select their own content and learn based on their own preference and style. They can individualise the instructional strategy and maximise their learning performance (Merrill 1983). Findings from a comparative study of two groups of students reveal that learners who take control of their progress can perform better than those whose learning is taken control by the program (Shyu and Brown 1992).

It is known that students' learning performance is significantly influenced by motivation to learn (Hung et al. 2010). Motivation of learning is a dimension which comprises intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The prior refers to internal drive that is shaped by our core values, interests, and personal sense of morality, and the latter is known to be influenced by grading systems, evaluations, awards, and respect and admiration of others (Ackerman 2020).

With the absence of face-to-face communication, online learning demands students to interact with the teacher and peers by posting questions and answer them virtually, which is noted as online communication self-efficacy. Without this ability, students cannot express their thought and interact with the others well. Increase in readiness of students in learning online is closely related to the increase in the communication interactions (Dermir, Kaymak and Horzum 2013).

Students' Gender and Year Level with regard to Online Learning Readiness

Whether gender can be a determinant of online learning readiness is still inconclusive. A previous study shows that some dimensions of readiness for online learning can be determined by gender (Durndell and Haag 2002). Female students are likely to be more ready since they are more digitally competent for online learning. In contrast, two other studies in Malaysia and Taiwan indicate that gender has no significance in determining the readiness for online learning (Chung, Noor and Mathew 2020). A study among first-year undergraduate students in Africa demonstrates no significant difference between male and female students on anxiety in using computer and attitude towards the Internet use for online learning (Durndell and Haag 2002).

Students' attitude towards a particular type of learning can be determined by year levels too. More senior students are thought to be more mature, and more junior ones are noted to be less mature and more dependent in their learning (Hung et al. 2010). The latter can have lower self-directed learning, lower computer and Internet self-efficacy, and less control over their learning. Students pursuing a diploma course are found to possess lower readiness than students enrolled in a degree program (Hung et al. 2010). Students' maturity plays a role in determining the motivation, control, management and monitoring of one's learning.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study selected a mix-methods research design to answer the research questions. The quantitative method aims to measure the readiness and test the relationship among the five dimensions and the readiness, and the follow-up qualitative method is to explore the main reasons for preference for online learning or not.

Prior permission for conducting this study was sought from the university, and permission to conduct this study with the university students was approved by the vice rector in charge. Simple random sampling was used to select 440 students from all five faculties and one institute in one public university for the survey. Since the university campus remained closed, the survey was conducted online through a Google form. Support was enlisted from four main groups of university students to help disseminate the questionnaires, and several lecturers were asked to help randomly distribute the questionnaires to their students. The request to use the response for the research purpose was mentioned in the questionnaire.

Because of the university closure, judgemental sampling was used to collect qualitative data. The follow-up focus group discussion was done online with three groups of four participants from two faculties and one institute. They were recruited amongst the survey respondents. The participation was voluntary, and the consent form was sent to all participants.

The OLRS instrument is used to develop the survey questionnaire. Several questions tailored to meet the research objectives were developed and used to guide the focus group discussion. Since OLRS is written in English, all items were translated into Khmer to make it convenient and understandable to all participants. It was translated by the authors and piloted with four students to check its face and content validity and was revised, accordingly. The statistical software SPSS 26 was used to check data normality and analyse the data. T-test and One-Way ANOVA were used

for the analysis. The qualitative data were transcribed manually, and manual thematic analysis was conducted.

Participants and Reliability

Based on Yamane sampling, this study initially planned to select the sample for the survey with five percent errors and 95% confidence level from the population (N=20,000). The proportionate sample was n=392. Within one week of posting the questionnaire online, the study received (n=440) participants.

Table 1 illustrates the gender, year level, and faculty of the participants. The number of participants from the second year is quite low. This may be caused by the long sojourn of the foundation program amid the university closure. While the former second and third year students had already started their semester in the new academic year, most of the foundation year students were still working on their semester of the previous academic year and were not yet promoted to the second year when the survey was conducted.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	221	50.2
Female	219	49.8
Total	**440**	**100**
Year		
Year 1	132	30
Year 2	10	2.3
Year 3	114	25.9
Year 4	184	41.8
Total	**440**	**100**
Faculty*		
IFL	58	13.2
FE	11	2.5
FEd	5	1.1
FSSH	124	28.2
FS	198	45
FDS	44	10
Total	**440**	**100**

*IFL= Institute of Foreign Languages, FE= Faculty of Engineering, FEd= Faculty of Education, FSSH= Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, FS= Faculty of Science, FDS= Faculty of Development Studies

Because the number of participants from Year 2 is very low, the authors decided to combine it with Year 3 students. This was done because both groups of students share many common things such as studying duration and learning experience. Table 2 demonstrates the revised year level of the participants.

Table 2: Revised Year Level of Participants

Year (Revised)	Frequency	Percent
Year 1	132	30.0
Years 2&3	124	28.2
Year 4	184	41.8
Total	440	100.0

Table 3: Reliability Analysis

Dimension	Items	Composite Reliability
Computer/Internet self-efficacy	3	0.88
Self-directed learning	5	0.87
Learner control	3	0.859
Motivation for learning	4	0.847
Online communication self-efficacy	3	0.855

Even though the instrument's reliability was checked in previous studies, it is still necessary to check it again to ensure that they are applicable. The internal consistency reliability of the Online Learning Readiness Scale was checked with Cronbach alpha coefficient. The alpha values range from .84 to .88 suggesting that the constructs are reliable.

FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings is guided by the three research questions.

R1: Do students want to take online learning? Why and why not?

The survey questionnaire begins with background information, which includes gender, year level and department in which the respondents study. Students were also asked whether they experienced online learning in the last semester and about their willingness to continue or start online class next semester.

Table 4: Frequency of Students Attending Online Learning Last Semester

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	367	83.4	83.4	83.4
	No	73	16.6	16.6	100.0
	Total	440	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Students' Responses on Continuing/Starting Online Learning in Next Semester

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	107	24.3	24.3	24.3
	No	308	70.0	70.0	94.3
	Other	25	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	440	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 illustrates the frequency of students' response to the question "Did you study online last semester?" The result shows that a majority of students (f=367) studied online, while only a small percentage (f=73) did not.

They were asked if they want to continue/start online learning next semester. The result shows that approximately 70% (f=308) is not willing to take online class, and only 24.3% (f=107) shows the interest in learning online (Table 5). The results from the focus group discussion confirm that students do not want to take online class, although they are now more familiar with it. A few participants stated:

> "If you ask me whether I want to study online or not, I still prefer physical class." (Participant 4)
>
> "I want to come back to (physical) class but if the university requires me to study online, then I have no choice." (Participant 2)
>
> "My major is Chemistry and ..hmm I need to do practice in the laboratory. I cannot depict the explanation in my head; you know it is like when we study at high school... Online learning is unpractical in my case." (Participant 9)

The participants raised a number of issues during their virtual learning last semester. A very common issue is with the Internet connection. Students argued that sometimes they could not ask questions or receive clear explanation from their teachers because of the instability of the Internet connection, and they are reluctant to ask for the explanation again. In addition, many were having

difficulty in using online learning tools in the first few months. Some could not even share screen or access the classroom without help from their peers. Some students cannot find an appropriate place for learning, and they are frequently disturbed by family members or the surrounding environment during class.

Lack of self-direction and learning autonomy are another issue. Most participants agree that they know what to do but they cannot control themselves. Two participants confessed their poor self-direction: “Sometimes, I fall asleep during class. Since the teacher does not require me to open the webcam, I can lay down on my bed.” (Participant 2) “In MS Teams, I can record lectures and watch them over and over again. However, I never do it because to watch it again takes me 3 to 5 hours.” (Participant 10)

Two participants emphasised the difficulty in comprehending the lessons in their fields of study. Since they are from the Faculty of Science, in which the nature of the course demands practical sessions in the laboratory, it is reasonable that they do not support complete online learning. Both of them want to do the real experiment rather than to watch a demonstration video because on-site visualisation makes them understand better. In addition, both prefer to seek for prompt and direct inquiry with teachers to actually comprehend the phenomenon.

Table 6: Challenges of Online Learning Raised by Students in Focus Group Discussion

Common Issues	Participant [P]
Unstable Internet connection	[P2, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11]
Digital illiterate (using online learning software)	[P1, P2, P7, P8, P9]
Unfavourable learning environment (disturbance)	[P3, P5, P10, P11]
Lack of learning autonomy and commitment	[P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P10, P11, P12]
Difficult to understand the lessons	[P9, P12]

R2: What is the readiness of undergraduate students for online learning?

Table 7: Means and Standard Deviations of Five Dimensions of OLRS

	N	Mean	SD
Self-directed learning	440	3.42	.77
Computer/Internet self-efficacy	440	3.31	.96
Motivation for learning	440	3.26	.94
Online communication self-efficacy	440	3.12	1.0
Learner control	440	3.10	.86
Valid N (listwise)	440		

Table 7 depicts the results of the five dimensions of OLRS in descending order of the mean scores. From the five-point Likert scale, self-directed learning received the highest mean score (M=3.42), following by computer/Internet self-efficacy (M=3.31), motivation for learning (M=3.26), online communication self-efficacy (M=3.12) and learner control (M=3.10). The five dimensions have the mean score a bit higher than the average theoretical mean (M=3), showing a rather acceptable degree of readiness for online learning, although the level of certainty is not quite high.

R3: Do students' gender and year level make any difference in the readiness for online learning?

Table 8: Comparison of Male and Female Students on Five Dimensions of OLRS

Variable	N	SD	t	df	p	d
Computer/Internet self-efficacy			3.36	438	0.001	.3
Male	3.46	.98				
Female	3.15	.92				
Self-directed learning			60	438	.547	.05
Male	3.44	.77				
Female	3.40	.76				
Learner control			1.21	438	.226	.1
Male	3.14	.89				
Female	3.05	.82				
Motivation for learning			1.69	438	.091	.2
Male	3.33	.99				
Female	3.18	.88				
Online communication self-efficacy			2.28	438	.023	.2
Male	3.22	1.02				
Female	3.01	.96				

To check if there is a difference of the five dimensions between male and female students, t-test analysis was performed. Table 8 shows that males were significantly different from females on computer/Internet self-efficacy (p=0.001). The two group means indicate that the average computer/Internet self-efficacy score for female students (M=3.15) is significantly lower than the mean score (M=3.46) for males. The difference between the means is .3 points on a five-point Likert scale. The effect size d is approximately .3, which is a typical size for effects in the behavioural sciences. Males' mean score also differs significantly from that of females on online communication self-efficacy (p=.023). The effect size d again is approximately .2 which is a small size for effect. Males do not differ significantly from females on the other three dimensions.

To compare the mean score of students' year level on the five dimensions, One-Way ANOVA test was conducted. Table 9 presents the means and standard deviations of these groups, and Table 10 shows the whole summary of the One-Way analysis of variance.

Table 9: Means and Standard Deviations Comparing Three Year Groups of Students

		Computer/Internet Self-Efficacy		Self-Directed Learning		Learner Control		Motivation for Learning		Online Communication Self-Efficacy	
Year level	**n**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Year 1	132	3.10	1.04	3.48	.77	3.13	.84	3.37	.93	3.2298	1.00
Years 2&3	124	3.30	.83	3.40	.75	3.05	.84	3.16	.90	3.0887	.95
Year 4	184	3.47	.96	3.41	.78	3.11	.88	3.24	.96	3.0670	1.02
Total	440	3.31	.96	3.42	.77	3.10	.86	3.26	.936	3.1220	1.00

Table 10: One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary Table Comparing Students' Year Level on Five Dimensions of OLRS

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Computer/Internet self-efficacy					
Between groups	2	10.5	5.30	5.85	.003
Within groups	437	395.28	.90		
Total	439	405.87			
Self-directed learning					
Between groups	2	.51	.26		
Within groups	437	259.67	.59	.432	.650
Total	439	260.18			
Learner control					
Between groups	2	.40	.20	.27	.76
Within groups	437	322.09	.74		
Total	439	322.49			
Motivation for learning					
Between groups	2	2.90	1.45	1.26	.19
Within groups	437	382.35	.88		
Total	439	385.26			
Online communication self-efficacy					
Between groups	2	2.23	1.11	1.12	.33
Within groups	437	435.12	1.00		
Total	439	437.34			

A statistically significant difference is found among the three groups of the year level of students on computer/Internet self-efficacy, F(2,437)=5.85, p=.003. Table 9 shows that the mean score of computer and Internet self-efficacy is 3.10 for Year 1 students, 3.30 for Years 2&3 students, and 3.47 for Year 4 students. Post hoc Tukey HSD test indicates that Year 1 and Year 4 groups differed significantly in their mean score with a medium effect size (p=.002, d=.6).

DISCUSSION

A majority of students who completed their previous semester online are not committed to continuing/starting their online learning in the following academic year. Issues raised by the students include instable Internet connection, lack of technical skills and self-direction, unfavourable learning environment, and inability to get a good understanding of the lessons. A study among Malaysian students similarly raised the issues of Internet connection and ability to comprehend the lessons as challenges to their online learning (Chung, Subramaniam and Dass 2020). When appropriate, therefore, universities should consider adopting an alternative efficient learning method such as hybrid learning as this would enable students to balance their learning both theory and practice. Students who need practical session in the laboratory, for instance, could take the on-campus session to do it while leaving the off-campus session to deal with theory and lectures. By doing so, the comprehension issues could be minimised. Support for digital infrastructure such as subsidy for the Internet fee can be considered as much as possible to mitigate all technical issues and to offer conducive environment for learning. In addition, universities must offer a preparatory course on how to learn effectively and promote independent learning skills amongst the learners, especially those struggling with online learning as early as possible.

On average, students are ready for online learning. The mean scores for the five dimensions are a bit higher than the theoretical mean of 3. This demonstrates that a majority of students vote between neural and agree on their readiness for online learning, which signifies the above medium level of readiness in all dimensions. This result is congruent with previous studies in Taiwan, Turkey and Malaysia, even though the level of readiness is not as high as those cases (Hung et al. 2010; Chung, Noor and Mathew 2020).

This finding shows that students nowadays are quite ready to direct their own online learning. They know how to manage their time and study plan. Most of them are also competent in basic computer and Internet skills to facilitate their learning. Motivation for learning, which includes being open to new ideas and practice, learning from their own mistakes, and being willing to share ideas with others, are also relatively higher than average, which is consistent with previous findings (Hung et al. 2010; Chung, Noor, & Mathew, 2020). Students rate online communication self-efficacy and learner control lower than the previous three dimensions, which supports the findings of Martin, Stamper and Flowers (2020). This reflects that learners are not really certain in asking questions and discussing online. They could also be distracted while learning by instant

messaging and other online applications. Since online learning is a new platform for students, they may encounter problems and have uncertainty to express their ideas online. This may be caused by difficulty in using learning applications for writing and conversing. Also, being distracted by the Internet connection and instant messaging is not a new issue for learners and other users. It has been reported in earlier studies (Hung et al. 2010), and this requires learners to be in control of their learning by applying various strategies to deal with it.

There is a significant difference between males and females in computer/Internet self-efficacy and online communication self-efficacy. Males tend to have higher computer and Internet skills. This finding is contrary to that in an East European case, in which females are found to perform better (Durndell and Haag 2002). Male students can be more familiar with technology and online applications. In addition, they are more attracted to online gaming and Internet surfing, which can help with their technology adoption for learning, while females could be less exposed to such distracting activities. Culturally, male students can be more outgoing and braver in expressing their ideas, and females tend to be soft and are unlikely to express their feelings.

This study supports findings in early studies, which show that higher year level students possess higher readiness for online learning. However, only the difference in computer/Internet self-efficacy between freshmen and senior students is found. The other four dimensions show no significant difference between the groups at all, which contradicts findings in Malaysia and Taiwan (Chung, Noor and Mathew 2020). Senior students have used technologies for their learning for a longer period of time before class moved online, and hence their digital competency has increased over the years and can give them some advantage over the freshmen.

CONCLUSION

Implementing online learning in Cambodia during the pandemic has been a big challenge, while a majority of students still hold a strong preference for face-to-face learning and amid the fact that all learning has moved online. The best practice forward could be a blend of online and physical classroom as a hybrid platform. Students in the study possess the readiness level slightly above the average mean score for online learning. The results indicate that there is a need to provide proactive training and support from the university in order to prepare them well for online learning. The intervention should take the difference between the gender and year level into consideration.

There are a few limitations. One is the lack of representation of all majors in the university in the sample. Besides, the participants are recruited from only one university; thus the generality of the findings is limited. Future research may want to include samples from a wider range of majors and universities. The qualitative data collected are rather restricted in extent and depth. Future study may want to cover students' perceptions more extensively. Despite the caveats, this study still contributes significantly to the literature on online learning in Cambodia, which is scarce. Such study can provide a basis for further research in the future, where blended learning is the way to go.

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Lurking Propaganda: Western Media in the Digital Age and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Boraden NHEM

THE JOURNALIST PROFESSION AND ITS DARK-SIDE COUNTERPART

During a trip in 2014 to a place called the "Newseum" in Washington, DC in the United States of America, a museum where they exhibit the relics of the journalist profession, I saw a short, but interesting quote by Charles Anderson Dana which was displayed at the entrance: "When a dog bites a man, that is not news. But when a man bites a dog, that is news."[1] The quote perhaps sums up the journalist profession. Confronted with various 'truths', the journalists tend to opt for something that is infrequent and bizarre and immediately grabs attention. This quote captures well the behaviour of most media outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this commentary, we shall see that journalism could be viewed as an activity on a spectrum as it varies from professional journalism on one end to propaganda on the other. This stands in contrast to the conventional wisdom which tends to view journalism and propaganda as a rigid dichotomy.

On the one hand, journalism is about objective reporting of facts. An ideal journalist would try to be a reporter, an analyst, a watchdog, an enabler of the public access to information, and a provider of entertainment (infotainment), and most importantly he or she should do so in an accurate and objective manner (Cassidy 2005). In one study of the keywords used by scholars and journalists to describe the profession found in the first 14 volumes (2000–2013) of the two most internationally acknowledged journals dedicated to journalism studies, Steensen and Ahva (2015) found that the most frequent keywords used were: ethics, objectivity, and professionalism. Unsurprisingly, the keywords found in older period but were the most infrequent keywords in the digital age were: campaign, ideology, participation, propaganda, public relations, and sociology (Steensen and Ahva 2015).

On the other hand, the logic of free market forces the media to take market pressure into consideration. John Zaller (1999) contended that while the media need to be objective in order to stay relevant for the mass and politicians, he also suggested that journalists need to respond to market pressure, meaning citizens' consumptions and competition from other media outlets. It is precisely this pressure that often pushes the media to the brink of propaganda.

1. The quote is variously attributed to Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe (1865–1922) and John B. Bogart (1848–1921) but the Newseum chose Charles Anderson Dana.

In some sense, propaganda does not always have the negative connotation it does today. In an introduction to Edward Bernays' book *Propaganda*, Mark Crispin Miller (2005) noted that during World Wars I and II, both sides used propaganda, but the term got its negative connotation because the United States of America sought to discredit German propaganda. The fundamental assumption of propaganda is that the public opinion is malleable (Bernays 2011). With correct techniques and conditioned to some limits, the public opinion can be moulded into something that serves the interests of the propagandists. One of the most well-known propagandists (but who preferred to call himself "public relations counsel"), Bernays had worked for the tobacco company and was largely credited with the rise of female smokers when he crafted the message that smoking is a form of female empowerment and controlled the way the media portrayed it. In the conventional thinking, a professional journalist should stay away from propaganda which is often considered a tool of communist and dictatorial regimes during the Cold War. The COVID-19 pandemic turned this conventional thinking on its head.

THE MEDIA PANDEMIC

In this commentary, I have selected 133 news articles related to COVID-19 that were published by 13 top newspapers and magazines identified by Forbes as the authority in providing trustworthy news (Glader 2017). The table containing the titles and links to all articles can be found in the Annex. Three themes emerge: 1. The assessment on the measures taken by different countries to curb the spread of the virus, 2. The origin of the COVID-19, and 3. The COVID-19 and the hidden outbreak in developing countries.

Assessment of Lockdown Policy

When the outbreak was first reported at the end of 2019 and the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a health emergency, the Chinese authority carried out severe measures to curb the spread of the virus. Wuhan, the city of roughly 15 million people, was locked down with armed forces and police enforcing the order on the road in and out of the city. Many Western countries started to express concerns that such policy would violate human rights. But around February and March 2020, it became clear that community transmission had already occurred undetected in Spain and Italy for months. Immediately, these two countries imposed a lockdown policy similar to the one seen in China.

In the sample, there are 22 articles which separately talked about these two cases. A CGTN's editorial captured the double standard: the New York Times suggested that in China, the measures were in violation of human rights while the same measures in Italy was praised as the willingness to overlook the economy in order to save lives (CGTN 2020). In the sample, we see the same pair where many newspapers published articles with opposite assessments of the two cases. The CGTN article sarcastically noted that it took the New York Times less than 30 minutes to change its mind as it gave different assessment on the Chinese and Italian lockdown policy.

The Origin of COVID-19

While the virus originated in Wuhan, China, the WHO did not seek to put blame on any country but that did not stop the United States of America, ostensibly former President Donald Trump, to accuse China as the origin of the pandemic. Trump generously used the term “China virus” and even suggested that China should pay compensation for all the damages caused by the virus (BBC 2020). In the sample, a whopping 49 articles followed the story in this theme. The story is quite convoluted, but it could be summarised as follows. The virus was manmade, and it was either brought to or developed at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which happened to be located near the epicentre of the outbreak. Social media then exploded with a picture of an apparently damaged seal on the fridge containing the virus at the institute (Owen 2020). The articles pointed to China’s attempt to suppress the information which, they claimed, led to the pandemic. The bottom line was clear: China knew in advance of the virus outbreak but tried, and failed, to cover it up and therefore China should be held responsible for the damages.

A similar story of denial and attempted cover-up occurred in Germany but received far less media’s attention than the Chinese case (Apuzzo, Gebrekidan and Kirkpatrick 2020). In late January 2020, a team of scientists and medical workers in Munich had observed a case where seemingly healthy people could pass on the virus. The so-called “silent spreader” caused so much controversy because of the consequential measures that are required if one accepts its existence. If one assumes that only sick people (i.e. with visible symptoms) can spread the virus, then the authority can put in relatively relaxed measures such as “stay at home if you are sick.” On the other hand, if the silent spreader exists, then it would require tougher measure such as mandatory face masks in public space or a ban on public gathering. Because the authority did not want to implement such unpopular measures, the research result by the Munich team was disparaged and ignored, not just by the authority but also by rival academics (Apuzzo, Gebrekidan and Kirkpatrick 2020). Some even suggested they change the wording to follow a rival research result by another team of scientists in Bavaria.

There has also been a comparison between the enormous, negative reaction to the COVID-19 which originated in China and the modest reaction to H1N1 (colloquially known as Swine Flu) originated in the United States of America. American news outlet then published a series of “fact-checking articles” to try to dispute that observation (Cox 2020). A simple search in Google no longer returned the results regarding the claim of double standard, but only its rebuttal.

Prejudice Instead of Aid and Assistance

The coverage on developing countries in the context of COVID-19 pandemic can be divided into two stages. In the first stage which ran from January to March 2020, there were nine articles which talked about how the pandemic would ravage the poor countries.

The articles talked about the lack of healthcare infrastructure, low skill of healthcare workers, lack of equipment, and poverty which would impede these countries’ ability to fight against the COVID-19. Starting in February and March 2020, however, it became clear that the pandemic has hit the Western and developed countries first. Widespread community transmission of the virus seemed to have started in Germany in late January and then Italy, Spain, and Britain; the United States of America was hit in late February, and France was hit in early March. As it became clear that

Western countries bore the brunt of the pandemic, it made no more sense to worry on behalf of the poor countries. Then the coverage of developing countries entered the second stage. It started with a short wave of articles which still denied the relatively better performance by the developing countries. In one typical example, Reuters noted that the lack of testing masked the true scale of the outbreak in developing countries such as in Africa (Houreld and Lewis n.d.). In a sense, there is some truth to the argument that fewer tests would produce fewer cases. But this does not warrant a premature, negative assessment on the capacities of developing countries to combat the outbreak without a concurrent call for assistance to address the problem. After it became evident that Western countries were hit the hardest by the pandemic, the media settled on a more defensible theme, namely that the developing countries would be hardest hit by the economic downfall.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE JOURNALIST PROFESSION

In this section, I observe a tendency and two paradoxes before assessing the future of the profession.

A Tendency: In some sense, one can say that bias is normal in the media. But for Western media, this was simply unacceptable. To be the model for others to follow, the Western media need to adhere to its professional standards. For Western media, that includes objectivity, advocacy, autonomy, and immediacy, among others. The trace of propaganda in the Western media's coverage of the COVID-19 is a worrisome slippery slope from the standpoint of journalist professional standards.

During the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, the media did not follow the same theme as it did in the case of the COVID-19. After all, there was no call for investigation into the origin of the H1N1 and no premature lamentation on the eventual predicaments of poor countries; nor did the journalists compare (with contempt) the measures taken by different countries to fight the virus. Some may argue that the lack of controversy was due to the fact that H1N1 was less infectious and less deadly, and above all, was properly contained. But it suffices to say that the controversy over the COVID-19 occurred even before we know anything about it and before it surpassed the H1N1 in terms of confirmed cases and fatalities.

But the year 2020 was different. Tensions between the United States of America and China were at all time high. And then when the virus hit, the frictions and disunity among the major powers only widened. Here we see a correlation: the media ran various propaganda themes aimed at attacking the rivals. Changing geopolitical landscape, it appears, caused the media to increase propaganda elements in its coverage. This is a slippery slope. If one day, this propaganda machine is kicked into high gear, it will endanger the very core of Western professional journalism.

The Paradox of Plenty: Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye wrote in 2012 in the fourth edition of their book *Power and Interdependence* that the world today is transformed by the digital revolution (Keohane and Nye 2012). In it, they predicted that the revolutions in information and communication technology would create "the paradox of plenty". In other words, in (their) future, the world will have plenty of knowledge for everyone. But writing back in 2012, Koehane and Nye also cautioned that such plentifulness does not necessarily mean accurate and good knowledge for everyone. Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, and clickbait news are some

notorious examples of the perils of the Internet. They noted that this would lead back to the reliance on a few authoritative sources that can provide credibility with the knowledge that they own.

The same thing is currently happening with the media in the context of the pandemic and the rise of propaganda. In a global report by the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, journalists around the world were surveyed for their perception of the state of the profession in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). A sizeable number of respondents identified government agencies (25% of respondents), politicians and elected officials (46%), and state-linked networks (23%) as the top channels of disinformation (i.e. propaganda) (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). Social media were uniformly identified by respondents as sources of fake news. At the same time, and paradoxically as Keohane and Nye predicted, 43% of respondents observed that there seems to be an increase of credibility for their outlets during the pandemic (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). The bottom line is that the media has followed a slippery slope, but it is still reversible if the journalists withdrew themselves to review how their professional ethos were affected by the frenzy of controversy during the pandemic and take appropriate corrective measures. This leads to the last point.

The Paradox of Crisis: Benjamin Franklin once noted that “a crisis is simply an opportunity in disguise.” The paradox of plenty actually turns out to be a good thing for journalists. The printed media has been on the steady decline for years due to the rise of the digital media. The pandemic and the resulting lockdown policy imposed another debilitating burden on the struggling industry. In the report by the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, revenue fell at least by half and in some cases the figure could be as high as 75% (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). Outlet closure, pay cut, and downsizing were common for many media outlets and journalists.

But in Darwinian terms and combined with the need for an authoritative source that can provide credible news, there could be a silver lining for the industry. The COVID-19 related adverse effects could eliminate weak outlets, the ones that cannot preserve their professional ethos and thus cannot provide reliable news in the age of confusion. Reversing the current tendency to embrace propaganda in the coverage is the first step in this direction.

Direction for future research: In most instances, scholars and practitioners alike tend to view journalism and propaganda as a dichotomy. Either you are adhering to professional journalism or you are engaged in propaganda. The consumers also seem to adopt this dichotomy, praising the news they like as professional and the news they do not like as propaganda and dismiss them just as quickly. The discussion about the traces of propaganda in Western media, long considered to be the bastion of professional journalism, shows us that perhaps it is more useful to consider journalism as an activity on a spectrum. If you adhere to a strict professional code, then it is journalism. But if the very same activities are carried out mostly for nefarious purpose or simply out of prejudice, then it is no longer journalism. Future research should take into account the fact that the danger of propaganda always lurks in the background and would take over the profession if there is no professional control mechanism. Scholars, for instance, should devise a methodology to determine how much propaganda appears in the wave of coverage of a certain high-profile event. It is through this self-evaluation that the profession could maintain its integrity and avoid falling into the dark abyss of propaganda.

Nº	News Sites	China Lockdown and Italy Lockdown (Double Standard) 22	Covid-19 Origin 49	Covid-19 Affecting Developing Countries 47	Under Report of New Cases due to Low Testing 15
1	**The New York Times** Subtotal: 8	-March 7, 2020: **China May Be Beating the Coronavirus, at a Painful Cost** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/asia/china-coronavirus-cost.html -March 11, 2020: **Italy Locks Down Much of the Country's North over the Coronavirus** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/europe/coronavirus-italy.html?smid=tw-bna -April 23, 2020: **Scale of China's Wuhan Shutdown Is Believed to Be Without Precedent** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/asia/coronavirus-quarantines-history.html Subtotal: 2	-February 17, 2020: **Senator Tom Cotton Repeats Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/business/media/coronavirus-tom-cotton-china.html -August 19, 2020: **Local Officials in China Hid Coronavirus Dangers from Beijing, U.S. Agencies Find** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/world/asia/china-coronavirus-beijing-trump.html Subtotal: 2	-March 24, 2020: **In World's Most Vulnerable Countries, the Pandemic Rivals the 2008 Crisis** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/business/coronavirus-per-country-pandemic.html -May 18, 2020: **Poor Countries Borrowed Billions from China. They Can't Pay It Back** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/business/china-loans-coronavirus-belt-road.html -June 11, 2020: **As Energy Prices Tumble, Developing Countries Trim Subsidies** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/business/energy-environment/countries-slash-energy-subsidies-coronavirus.html Subtotal: 3	-April 9,2020: **In Scramble for Coronavirus Supplies, Rich Countries Push Poor Aside** https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/world/coronavirus-equipment-rich-poor.html Subtotal: 1
2	**The Wall Street Journal** Subtotal: 13	-March 10, 2020: **How China Slowed Coronavirus: Lockdowns, Surveillance, Enforcers** https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-slowed-coronavirus-lockdowns-surveillance-enforcers-11583868093 -March 16, 2020: **Lockdown of Recovering Italian Town Shows Effectiveness of Early Action** https://www.wsj.com/articles/lockdown-of-recovering-italian-town-shows-effectiveness-of-early-action-11584391837 Subtotal: 2	-April 21, 2020: **Coronavirus and the Laboratories in Wuhan. Their Researchers Travel to Caves across China, Where They Capture Live Bats to Study Viruses.** https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-and-the-laboratories-in-wuhan-11587486996 -July 28, 2020: **How to Hold Beijing Accountable for the Coronavirus Why Did China Cover up the Epidemic? The Most Plausible Explanation Involves a Wuhan Lab.** https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-hold-beijing-accountable-for-the-coronavirus-11595976973	-June 19,2020: **As Covid-19 Hits Developing Countries, Its Victims Are Younger** https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-covid-19-hits-developing-countries-its-victims-are-younger-11592578205 -July 26, 2020: **Covid's Next Economic Crisis: Developing-Nation Debt Emerging Economies Like Zambia's Were Ill-Prepared for the Pandemic's Financial Pain** https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-coronavirus-developing-nation-africa-debt-crisis-11595455147	-August 30, 2020: **In the World's Coronavirus Blind Spot, Fears of a Silent Epidemic** **In Africa, Limited Testing and Spikes in Respiratory Illnesses Raise Concerns That Covid-19 Could Be Spreading Unnoticed** https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-the-worlds-coronavirus-blind-spot-fears-of-a-silent-epidemic-11598806800

			Subtotal: 2	-August 5, 2020: **Covid-19 May Keep Developing Countries from Catching up to Rich Ones** https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-may-keep-developing-countries-from-catching-up-to-rich-ones-11596625207 -September 1, 2020: **In Race to Secure Covid-19 Vaccines, World's Poorest Countries Lag Behind** https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-race-to-secure-covid-19-vaccines-worlds-poorest-countries-lag-behind-11598998776 -September 16, 2020: **Rich Economies Set to Recover More Quickly from Covid-19 Contractions** https://www.wsj.com/articles/rich-countries-set-to-recover-more-quickly-from-covid-19-contractions-11600246800 -September 17, 2020: **Developing Countries Push to Limit Patent Protections tor Covid-19 Vaccines** https://www.wsj.com/articles/developing-countries-push-to-limit-patent-protections-for-covid-vaccines-11600355170 -October 7, 2020: **Coronavirus Has Thrown Around 100 Million People into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates** https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-has-thrown-around-100-million-people-into-extreme-poverty-world-bank-estimates-11602086400 Subtotal: 7	-October 8, 2020: **Indonesia Has 270 Million People—And One of the World's Lowest Covid-19 Testing Rates Nation Has Tested Smaller Share of Population Than Every Other Major Economy, Leaving Extent of Infection Uncertain** https://www.wsj.com/articles/indonesia-has-270-million-peopleand-one-of-the-worlds-lowest-covid-19-testing-rates-11602154803 Subtotal: 2
3	**The Washington Post** Subtotal: 9	-January 27, 2020: **China Coronavirus Lockdown – Brought to You By Authoritarianism** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/27/chinas-coronavirus-lockdown-brought-you-by-authoritarianism/	-April 15, 2020: **What Caused the Coronavirus? A Sceptical Take on the Theories about the Outbreak's Chinese Origin.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/16/what-caused-coronavirus-skeptical-take-theories-about-outbreaks-chinese-origin/	-April 20, 2020: **Lockdowns Will Starve People in Low-Income Countries** https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/20/lockdown-developing-world-coronavirus-poverty/	-April 24, 2020: **Limit Testing in Brazil Are Hiding the True Dimension of Latin Americas' Largest Outbreak** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/coronavirus-brazil-testing-bolsonaro-cemetery-gravedigger/2020/04/22/fe757ee4-83cc-11ea-878a-86477a724bdb_story.html

		-February 24, 2020: **Italy's Coronavirus Lockdown Shows How the Outbreak Is Testing Democracies** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/coronavirus-explodes-in-italy-cases-surge-from-3-to-more-than-200-in-a-few-days/2020/02/24/e4640f60-5687-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html Subtotal: 2	-April 30, 2020: **Chinese Lab Conducted Extensive Research on Deadly Bat Viruses, But There Is No Evidence of Accidental Release** https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/chinese-lab-conducted-extensive-research-on-deadly-bat-viruses-but-there-is-no-evidence-of-accidental-release/2020/04/30/3e5d12a0-8b0d-11ea-9dfd-990f9dcc71fc_story.html Subtotal: 2	-May 14, 2020: **Hunger Could Be More Deadly Than Coronavirus in Poorer Countries** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/hunger-could-be-more-deadly-than-coronavirus-in-poorer-countries/2020/05/14/32fd3f9a-8bd3-11ea-80df-d24b35a568ae_story.html -September 10,2020: **UN: Covid-19 Could Fuel More Conflict, Poverty, Starvation** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/un-covid-19-could-fuel-more-conflict-poverty-starvation/2020/09/09/0c699092-f2d3-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html Subtotal: 3	-September 9, 2020: **African Countries Can Fight Coronavirus Better When Citizen Encourage One Another** https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/09/african-countries-can-fight-coronavirus-better-when-citizens-encourage-one-another/ Subtotal: 2
4	**BBC** Subtotal: 8	-March 17, 2020: **Coronavirus: How Are Lockdowns and Other Measures Being Enforced?** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51911340 -April 8, 2020: **Coronavirus: Wuhan Emerges from the Harshest of Lockdowns** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52197054 Subtotal: 2	-May 1, 2020: **Coronavirus: Trump Stands by China Lab Origin Theory for Virus** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52496098 -May 5, 2020: **Coronavirus: France's First Known Case 'Was in December'** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52526554 -June 15, 2020: **Coronavirus: Fact-Checking Claims It Might Have Started in August 2019** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53005768 Subtotal: 3	-April 23, 2020: **Developing World Economies Hit Hard by Coronavirus** https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52352395 -May 16, 2020: **How Covid-19 Is Threatening Central America's Economic Lifeline** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52550389 Subtotal: 2	-April 28, 2020: **Coronavirus: 'One Billion' Could Become Infected Worldwide** https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52453640 Subtotal: 1
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PUBLISHED BY

DMC
Department of Media and Communication

Cambodia Communication Institute

SUPPORTED BY

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

ISBN-13: 978-99963-779-6-9