



Challenges for Independent Media 2020

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1 Executive Summary

Cambodia has outperformed its neighbors with some degree of freedom of press and expression (Williams & Rich, 2014). The Kingdom was ranked 128th in 2016 in the World Press Freedom Index by the Reporters Without Borders, a remarkable performance for the post-conflict country like Cambodia. This honeymoon has fallen short and deteriorated since after the crackdown on civil society, political opposition, and the independent media in the run up to the National 2018. Cambodia is ranked 144th out of 180 countries in 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2020), a worse performance compared to its rank in 2016. These regulations have signaled the loss of emancipatory democratic principle (Beban et al., 2020) where independent media is seen as one of effective tools to promote good governance and the principle of democracy.

The data analysis of this research study reflects literature review and the state of independent media in the Kingdom. The news covering without fearing of repercussion, for instance, remains the primary challenge for many journalists. The total 90.65% of respondents say they are concern reporting corruption scandals. And 81.31% of them say they have experienced self-censorship because of the current political environment. And despite a large percentage of respondents say they have experienced legal, physical, and psychological threats, only 43.93% of them say they are provided necessary training and support to address these issues.

The other emergence issues are the growing concern of fake news and its implication on public trust on media and journalism. The survey records 62.62% of respondents say they find it difficult to identify between fake and reliable news. And 93.46% of the total respondents think that fake news is undermining public trust on media and journalism in Cambodia. Another similar finding is the lack of scientific knowledge in identifying scientific trust, not opinion, among journalists when reporting the novel Covid-19 which accounts for 57.01% of the total respondents.

When it comes to respondents' perception on press freedom in Cambodia, only 9.52% of them think that the press freedom in 2020 is better than the one in 2019. And about 22.64% of the total respondents think that the press freedom in 2021 will be better off compare to the press freedom in 2020. Surprisingly, only 16.82% of the total respondents think that the press freedom in Cambodia is on the right path.



2 Research Objective

The fundamental objectives of this research paper are to assess key challenges facing journalists in performing and safeguarding their journalistic ethnics. In addition, it seeks to assess the perspective and challenges of journalists, and those who work in the field of media and press freedom, when reporting sensitive issues. Moreover, it seeks to understand their perception and concern

regarding the professionalism and the implication of fake news on media and journalism. The study also explores the experience and challenges of journalists who report during and cover the novel Covid-19. Building on these dimensions, the recommendations are produced for advocacy and policy intervention in order to enhance freedom of press and media in the Kingdom.

3 Methodology

This research study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. A number of existing laws, regulation, reports, and media scholarships were reviewed and consulted as a part of qualitative method in order to build the foundation of media landscape in Cambodia from 2019 to 2020. The literature then was incorporated and used for the design and development of quantitative methods which was employed in the form of an Online Survey (OS) in order to build a stronger research finding based on the numerical findings. This method designed to target 100 respondents from 26 news

outlets and institutions in media disciplines across Cambodia.

The OS were carried-out from the 3rd of November 2020 to the 3rd of December 2020, and records a total of 107 respondents. The survey only targets citizen journalists, journalists, public officials, researchers and academia, and staff members of CSOs who work in the field of and familiar with media and journalism. Their answers have formed the foundation of qualitative and quantitative analyses and recommendations of this paper.

4 Limitation of This Paper

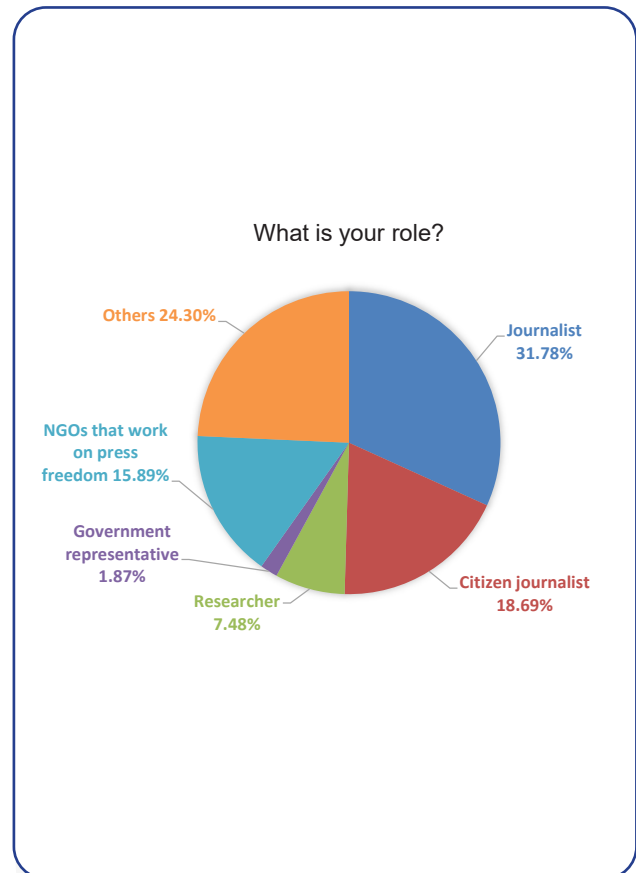
This research study only centre on the challenges of journalists and those who work in the media discipline prior to and in 2020. Although there is array of engagement with targeted respondents in the forms of online survey, there are research dimensions which are not able to explore by the research team. Despite significant effort to reach out to female journalists, their participation in this online survey remains relatively low compare to their male counterparts. These are the limitation of this paper.

For future research paper, it is recommended to include other dimension of research areas like institutional arrangement and leadership of media and journalist management body, training curriculum and resources available to journalists and media practitioners. It is also important to assess public understanding and opinion on media and journalism in the Kingdom.

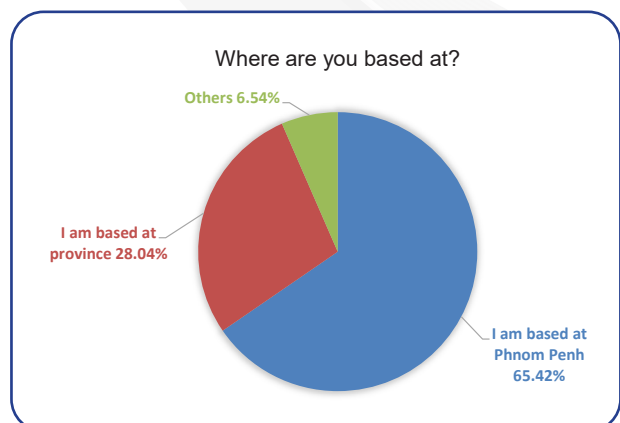
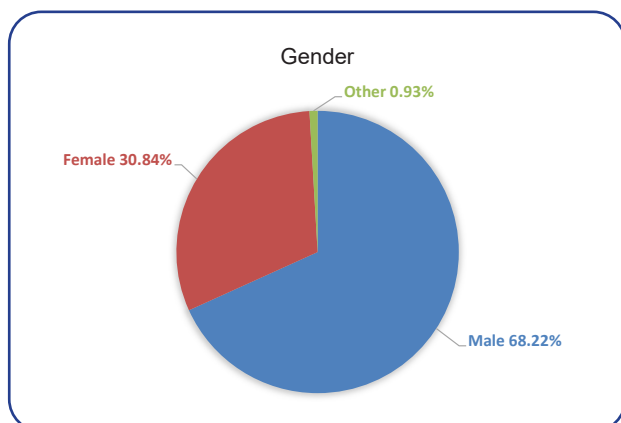
5 Respondents' Demographic

The respondents' demographic is more diverse compares to the respondents' demographic of the study in 2017. The study records 31.78% of respondents who identify themselves as journalists, followed by 18.69% of citizen journalists, 15.89% as CSO staff members, 7.48% as researchers, 1.87% as public officials, and 24.30% as others. The 'others' here mostly refer to those who do not fall into the defined profession, but they can be a human rights defenders or lawyers who have been working to promote press freedom and independent media in the Kingdom. Building on this data analysis, we can assume that there is a growing numbers of citizen journalists which somehow reflects the growing role of citizens in the field of media and journalism compares to five years ago. This perhaps because the growing of resources and effort invested by some institutions, including the accessibility of the public to smart phones and Internet.

Among the total respondents, 65.42% of them are based in Phnom Penh, downs from 83% of survey demographics which was conducted in 2017 (CCIM, 2017, p. 3). The respondents at provinces, however, increases to 28.04% compares to just 17% of province-based respondents in 2017 (CCIM, 2017, p. 3), followed by 6.54% of respondents who identified themselves from



other areas. Surprisingly, the percentage of female respondents drop to just 30.84% compares to 36% of female respondents in the survey 2017. The male respondents, on the other hand, increases to 68.22% compares to just 64% in 2017. The remaining 0.93% respondents have identified themselves from other genders.



6 Research Finding

Challenges faced by journalists, if not address, will continue to pose significant implications on the strengthening and enhancing of independent media in Cambodia. Arguably, it will also undermine the effort of the Royal Government of Cambodia to decentralization and good governance when members of journalist feel threatened when

reporting sensitive issues. The data from the report in 2017 noted 18% of respondents felt threatened by prosecutions and legal threats (CCIM, 2017, p. 13). When journalists can report sensitive issues without afraid of repercussions, it will contribute to the strengthening of public accountability and transparency of government organisations in the Kingdom.

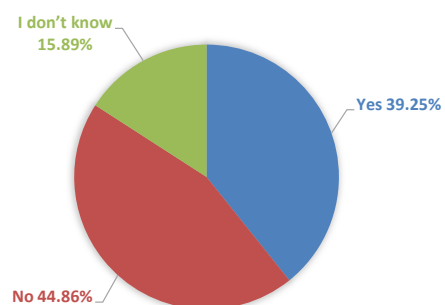
6.1 The Lack of Scientific Knowledge

While covering news in the battle fields or reporting from the refugee camps are considered the challenging assignments, the novel Covid-19 pandemic has brought members of journalist into a new height of challenge. Journalists from the around the world are facing the same degree of challenges: the lack of scientific knowledge and the difficulty of identifying scientific truth concerning the Covid-19. A research elsewhere notes that the lacked of science journalists or professionals who are capable at evaluating preliminary research results or assessing reputation of scientific experts have created the epistemic uncertainty at the beginning of the Covid-19 (Daube & Ruhrmann, 2020; Stollorz, 2020).

The data of this research paper reinforces above finding. It somehow reflects the same challenges

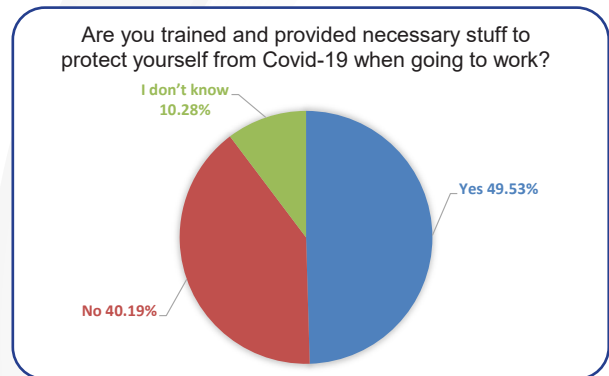
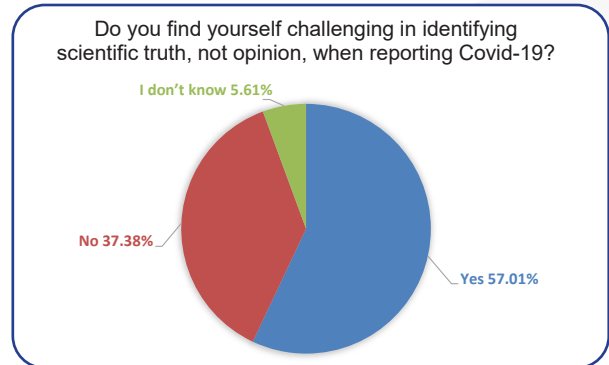
faced by journalists in Cambodia who have covered the novel Covid-19. The data from the survey suggests that 39.25% of respondents have experienced challenges reporting Covid-19. A few respondents say they have difficulties asking for clarification and confirmation from health officials. Few of respondents say they were asked to look on a Facebook page of the Ministry of Health instead.

Have you experienced challenges reporting Covid-19?



“The survey records 57.01% of respondents who say they find themselves challenging in identifying scientific trust, not opinion, when reporting novel Covid-19.”

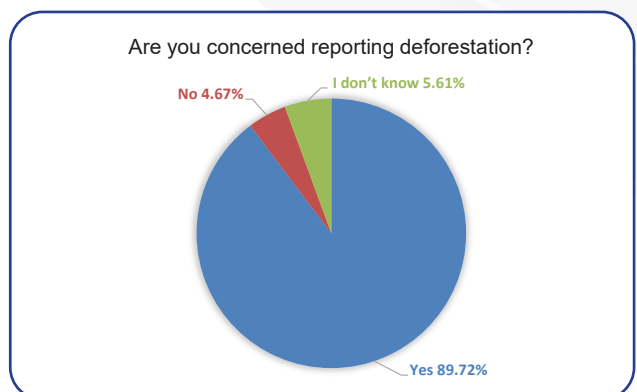
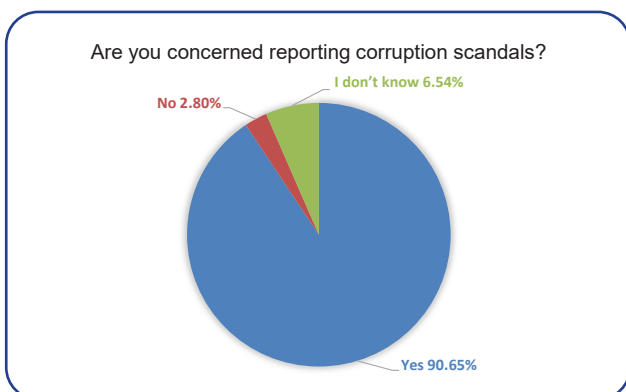
Another challenge for journalists who cover Covid-19 is the lack of scientific knowledge and experts to assess truth. The survey records 57.01% of total respondents who say they find themselves challenging in identifying scientific trust, not opinion, when reporting novel Covid-19. And 49.53% of respondents say they are trained and provided necessary stuff to protect themselves when going to cover the novel Covid-19. Building on these, we can conclude that challenges faced by journalists rang from experts and knowledge in identifying scientific facts to the lack of training and necessary stuff to protect themselves when performing their work. These need to be reviewed as it can certainly pose significant implication on public understanding and respond to this virus and the future pandemic outbreak.



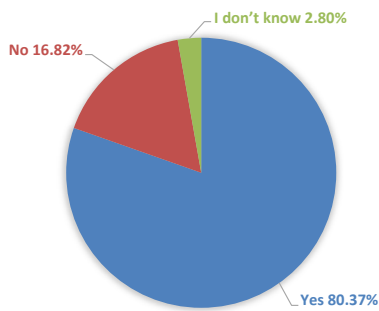
6.2 Freedom of Press Remains in Limbo

News report on sensitive issues remains the primary concern among members of journalist in the Kingdom. The data from this study records that 90.65% of respondents say they are concerned reporting corruption scandals, followed by 89.72% of respondents who are concern writing about deforestation. Surprisingly, only 85.05% of respondents say they are concerned reporting natural resources

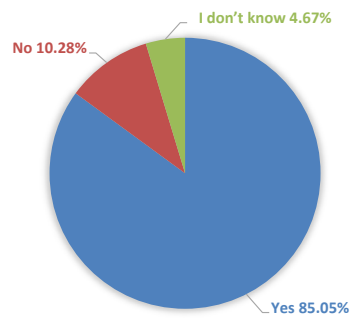
exploitation. The figure remains relatively stable when it comes to reporting political issues which accounts for 85.05% of total respondents. The figure drops to 80.37% of respondents who express concern when covering human rights abuses. The least concern on sensitive issues are impunity cases which only 74.77% of respondents say they are concerned reporting it.



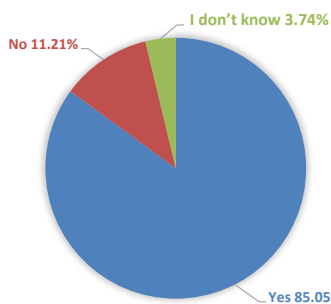
Are you concerned reporting human rights abuses?



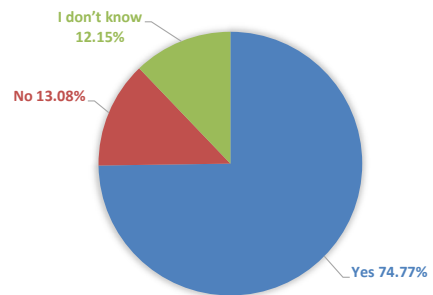
Are you concerned reporting political issues?



Are you concerned reporting natural resources exploitation?



Are you concerned reporting impunity cases?

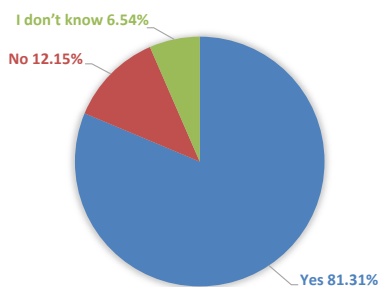


“The survey reports that 81.31% of respondents say they have experienced self-censorship because of the current political environment.”

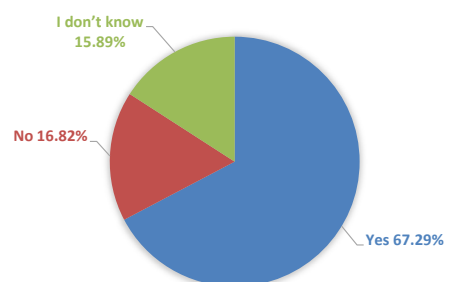
The self-censorship among members of journalists resulting from law and regulations is also threatening the independent media in 2020. The survey reports 81.31% of respondents say they have experienced self-censorship because of the current political environment. And 67.29%

of respondents also say they have experienced self-censorship because of defamation law. It is also important to note that 65.42% of the total respondents say they have experienced self-censorship because of security concern.

Have you experienced self-censorship with current political environment?



Have you experienced self-censorship because of defamation law?

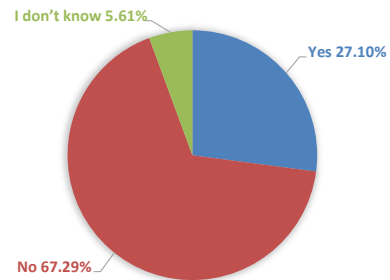


6.3 Threats and the Lack of Support

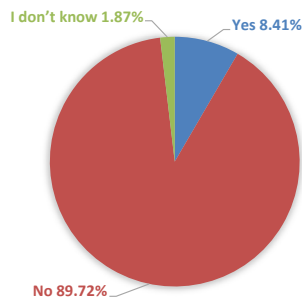
“Only 21.50% of respondents say they have access to psychological consultation support either provided by their workplace or other organisations.”

The training and essential services that are available to journalists remain relatively limited. This may pose certain implications for journalists to effectively perform their work. The survey finds that 27.10% of respondents say they have experienced legal harassment, followed by 8.41% of respondents who have experienced physical assaults, all are resulting from their work. The data from the survey also finds that 57.94% of respondents say they have experienced psychological threats resulting from their work.

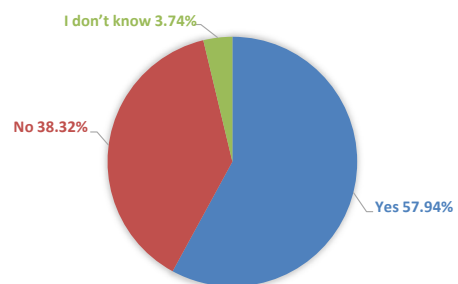
Have you experienced legal harassment resulting from your work?



Have you experienced physical assaults resulting from your work?



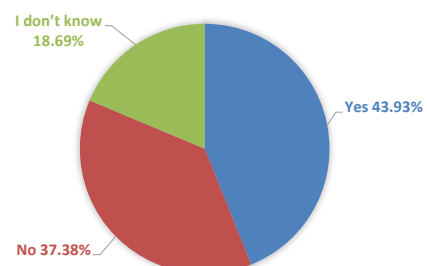
Have you experienced psychological threats resulting from your work?



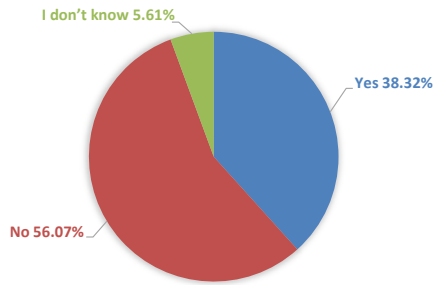
Though this statistical evidence presents a grave concern regarding the well-being and safety of journalists, a number of support and training available to them remain unresponsive. It is only 43.93% of respondents say they are provided legal support by either their workplace or other organisations. The figure drops a bit lower when it comes to any available training to minimize potential physical assaults against journalists which only 38.32% of respondents say they have received such training. Despite a large proportion of respondents, approximately 57.94%, who say they have experienced psychological threats, surprisingly only 21.50% of respondents say they have access to psychological consultation support

either provided by their workplace or other organisations. These reflect the loophole in media and journalism discipline in Cambodia which need to be reviewed in the timely manner in order to ensure that necessary supports are in place for journalists and media practitioners.

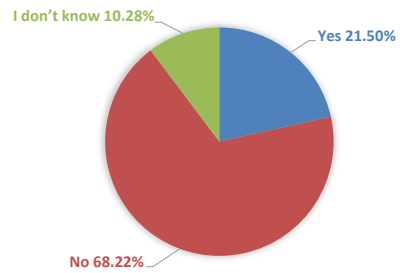
Is there any legal support, either provided by your workplace or other organizations, available for you?



Is there any training provided to you to minimize potential physical assaults resulting from your work?

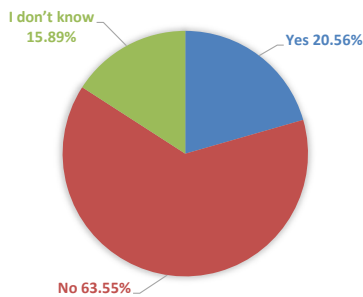


Is there any psychological consultant support, either provided by your workplace or other organizations, available for you?

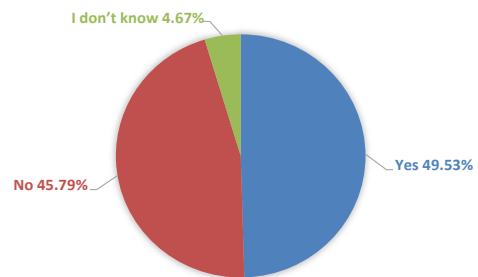


6.4 Criticism and Discrimination against Journalists

Have you experienced discrimination against your gender at work?

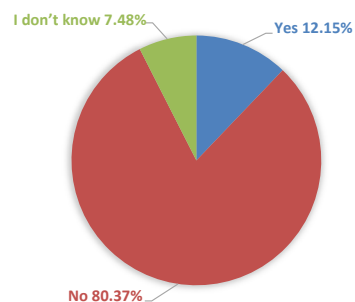


Have you experienced criticism of performing your job from your family members?



The data emerged from this study presents a disturbing picture: journalists have faced criticism and discrimination both at work and at home. The survey records 12.15% of the total respondents who say they have experienced sexual harassment at work, followed by 49.53% of respondents who have faced criticism from their family members for performing this work. The survey also records 20.56% of respondents who have experienced discrimination against their gender at work. These have further contributed to the challenges faced by journalists in an already deteriorated field of profession.

Have you experienced sexual harassment at work or when performing your job?



6.5 Fake News and Public Discourse

“Fake news poses significant threats to media and journalism, and how citizens are informed and talk back to their elected representatives.”

In the age of social media and the 24-hour media cycle – often run by a partisan media mainstream – the social realities of the general public could be easily shaped and manipulated. Overwhelmingly, people are overloaded with news and information, but shows little interest in the contents (Brian McNair, 2017). Consequently, their opinions and political orientation are being shaped and manipulated. In this sense, a practical example of internet users’ experience is their encounter with fake news and falsehood online contents. Images and headlines, in the context of fake news, are designed to attract users’ attention (Mould, 2019) that typify the theory of public manipulation (Brian McNair, 2017). The growing of fake news will not undermine how journalism is regulated, but the publics may also lost their trust on news content, particularly journalism (Cherilyn & Julie, 2018).

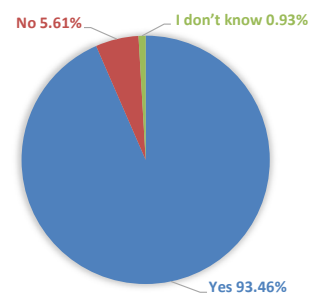
Fake news can influence public discourse and their political orientation. It has significant influence on public opinion and can makes the public dislike the government or the opposition (Levendusky, 2013). Differing from the objective journalism which tries to offer no opinion, but only conveys facts (Schudson, 2001) partisan media is opinionated, lacks objectivity, and imposes a political narrative in reporting (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Indeed, it endorses one group and attacks another (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Selectively, it presents one side with convincing arguments (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) and choose stories to construct narrative (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

This practice poses significant threats to media and journalism, and how citizens are informed and talk back to their elected representatives. Principally, a mature democracy is made possible by informed and educated electorates who have their voice heard (Sampson, 1996), and it is the media that accommodates the existence of that electorate (McNair, 2000). And when citizens avoid the news or being manipulated by fake news, their rights of civic participation and engagement will be undermined.

Do you find it difficult to identify between reliable and fake news?



Do you think that fake news is undermining public trust on media and journalism?



Cambodian people are not immune to fake news and disinformation. The growing of Internet coverage and accessibility to smart phones have provided Cambodians significant opportunity to access news from several sources other than the state-run and media channels that are owned by and affiliated with the ruling party. A research elsewhere notes that a large proportion of households in Cambodia own televisions and up to 99% of the population have access to mobile phones (Eng & Hughes, 2017). These have provided Cambodians a commodity to exercise their rights to information and expression. But this have also presented the opportunity for fake news entrepreneur.

There is significant concern among respondents regarding fake news and its potential impact on media and journalism in Cambodia. This perhaps resulted from the growing of fake news and public understanding in the country. A report elsewhere notes that in September 2020 alone, the Fake News Monitoring Committee of the Ministry of Information have documented 145 cases of fake news (Dara, 2020). Despite the nature and the definition of these cases remain vague, we can assume that there is growing concern of fake news and disinformation in the Kingdom. The data from the survey indicates that 62.62% of the total respondents say they find it difficult in identifying between reliable and fake news. And 93.46% of respondents think that fake news is undermining public trust on media and journalism.

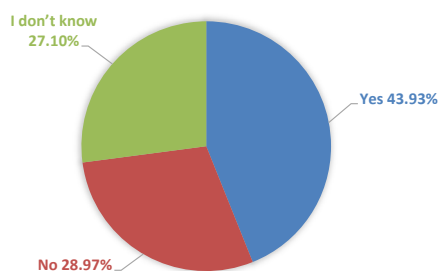
6.6 Journalistic Ethics and Knowledge

“The survey records 43.93% of total respondents who agree that journalists have uphold their journalistic ethics at work.”

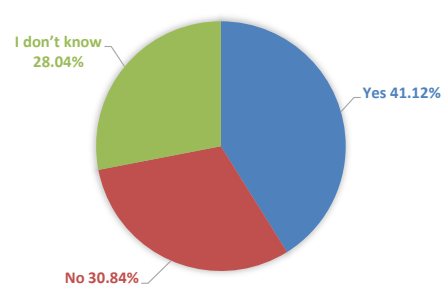
Despite some challenges, there are improvement in terms of professionalism among journalists. The survey in 2017 reported that 85% of respondents think that journalists in Cambodia do not conduct themselves with sufficient professionalism (CCIM, 2017, p. 12). The data from this research study, however, presents an improvement in terms of

the expertise and the practice of journalistic ethics among journalists in Cambodia. The survey records 43.93% of respondents agree that journalists have uphold their journalistic ethics at work. And 41.12% of the total respondents think that journalists possess the knowledge and expertise to professionally perform their work.

Do you think journalists have uphold their professionalism at work?



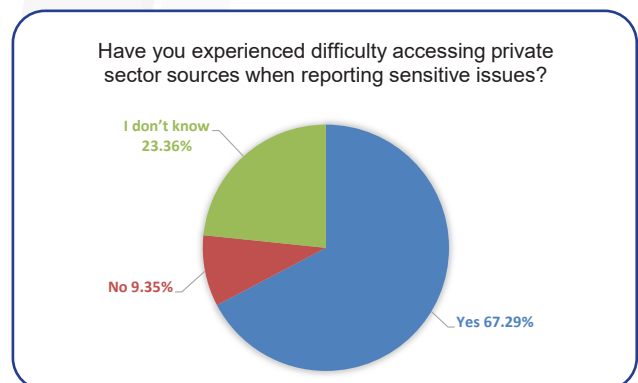
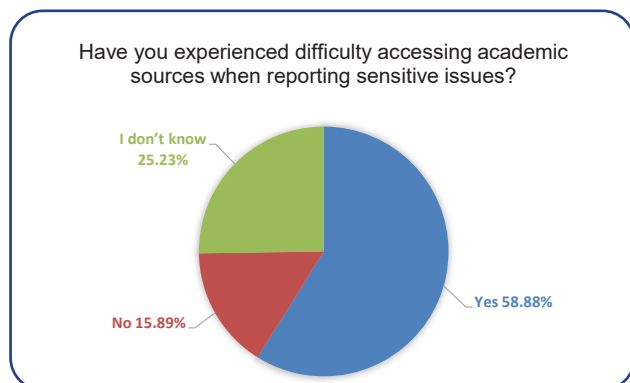
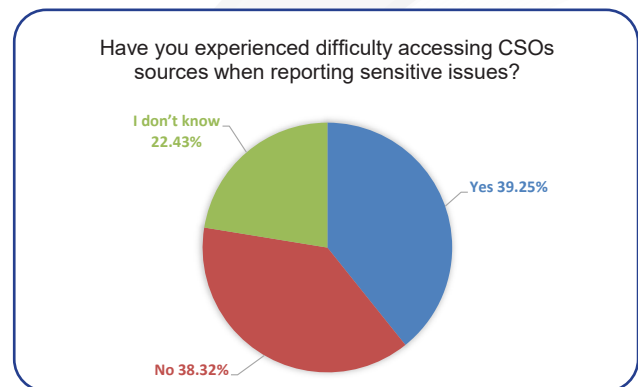
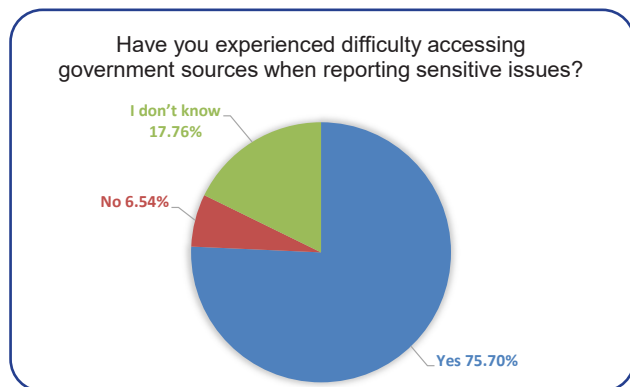
Do you think journalists have the knowledge and expertise to professionally perform their work?



6.7 Difficulty of Accessing Sources

The other challenges faced by journalists are accessing to critical sources when reporting on sensitive issues. When asked how difficult they have faced when accessing sources, about 75.70% of respondents say they have experienced difficulty accessing government sources. The figure drops to 67.29% when it

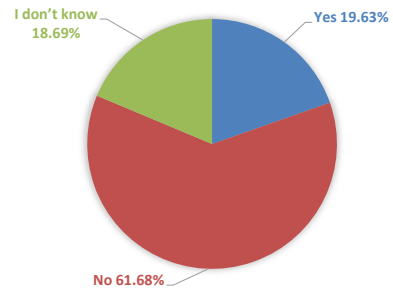
comes to accessing sources within private sectors. Surprisingly, 58.88% of the total respondents also report that they have experienced difficulty accessing academia. And 39.25% of the total respondents say they have experienced difficulty accessing sources within CSOs.



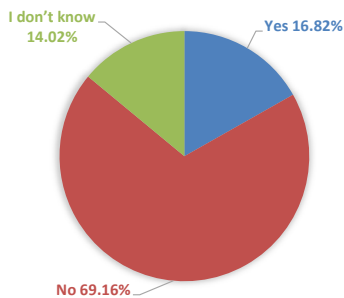
7 Respondents' Perspective on Independent Media

Respondents' perspectives on media landscape in Cambodia are varied. About 61.68% of the total respondents think that government's law and regulation does not present an opportunity for a greater press freedom in the Kingdom. When it comes to the obligation of the government, only 16.82% of the total respondents think that the government has performed its duty to enhance and safeguard press freedom in Cambodia. And only 16.82% of the total respondents think that the press freedom in Cambodia is on the right path.

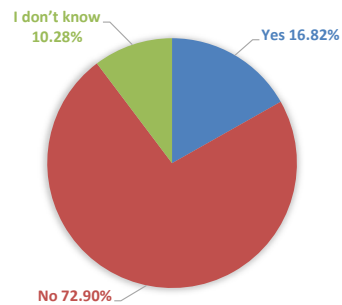
Do you think government's law and regulation present an opportunity for a greater press freedom?



Do you think the government has performed its duty to enhance and safeguard press freedom?



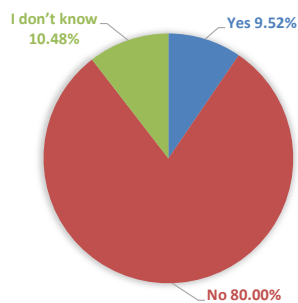
Do you think the press freedom in Cambodia is on the right path?



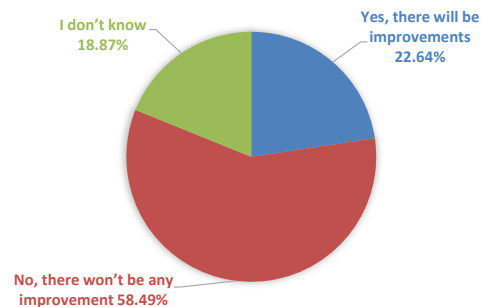
The data from the survey also indicates 9.52% of the total respondents think that the press freedom in 2020 is better than the one in 2019.

Surprisingly, 22.64% of the total respondents are optimistic that the press freedom in 2021 will be better off compared to the one in 2020.

Do you think that the press freedom in 2020 is better than the press freedom in 2019?



Do you think that the press freedom in 2021 will be better than the press freedom in 2020?



8 Recommendation

The matter of independent media, for the case of Cambodia, is closely linked to political and civic liberty in the country. Arguably one can look at dimensions and provide different recommendation on how it should be framed and safeguarded. Building on literature review and data analysis of this research paper, it is recommended that:

Government and the National Assembly

- ▶ Access to Information Law is adopted by the government and the National Assembly in order to ensure that information of both government and private organization are disclosed to and available to the public. This will demonstrate to voters and the development partners that the government of Cambodia is committed to transparency and rights to information. It will also allow members of journalist to better perform their work and avoid repercussion.
- ▶ The government and the National Assembly consider to review existing law and regulation (e.g., defamation law) in order to ensure that members of journalists can freely and independently perform their work without fearing of repercussion.

Civil Society Organizations and the Donor Community

- ▶ CSOs focus its strategic position on and ensure that resources are proportionally allocated to citizen journalists who have proven a growing role in promoting press freedom and good governance in Cambodia through their engagement in news creation and dissemination.
- ▶ CSOs and government organisations work together, in the constructive and holistic approach, to enhance rights to information and independent media. This can be done through join training, research studies, and evidence-based advocacy.
- ▶ CSOs continue its work in the form of supplementary, other than substitute, to produce public outreach materials and train journalists, including the public, on how to differentiate between trustworthy and fake news.
- ▶ The donor community designs grant and subgrants that take into account the risk and contemporary challenges face by journalists. Those include, but not limited to, training and consultation services on physical, digital, and psychological threats, including scientific reporting.

Journalists and Media Organizations

- ▶ News outlets and media organisations need to ensure self-sufficiency in order to maintain its neutrality and independent. This can be done through the re-structuring of its business portfolio and investing in innovative technological platform other than depending on the traditional media.
- ▶ Journalists, practitioners and media organisations need to maintain and uphold their journalistic ethics in order to increase their role in the height of growing fake news in the Kingdom. This can be done through the objective journalism, avoid opinionated content, which can contribute to the strengthening of role and responsibility of journalism in the country.

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