Media Reconstruction and Archiving on Cambodian Facebook

Margaret Jack

Cornell University Department
of Information Science
Ithaca, New York
mcj46@cornell.edu

Abstract

This study will investigate how Cambodian young people are using social media to share, view, and archive historical media (such as film and music) from the pre-Khmer Rouge era. During the Khmer Rouge, most Cambodian artists were killed and libraries were largely destroyed. Today there is a grassroots effort to restore and archive media that was lost, primarily using the Facebook platform. I will investigate this phenomenon using a mixed methods approach, integrating archival research of historical media with an ethnography of contemporary technology coworking spaces in Phnom Penh. This study contributes to emerging discourse asking how and in what ways we see computing emerge in postcolonial and post-conflict countries. It also builds on work exploring the links between memory, media, and trauma and the changing role of the archive with the emergence of new Internet media.

Author Keywords

media; memory; trauma; postcolonial; post-conflict; archives; ethnography

ACM Classification Keywords

H.m. [Information systems]; Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Recent work in human-computer interaction asks how and in what ways we see computing emerge in marginalized settings, such as postcolonial and post-

conflict countries [2]. In this project, I will investigate how the global phenomenon of Facebook is taking a specific form in the setting of Cambodia, exploring ways that Cambodian actors are re-imagining and re-inventing Facebook in unexpected and innovative ways. During the Khmer Rouge period, approximately 25% of the Cambodian population was killed (~1.7 million of the population of 8-9 million), including almost all intellectual and cultural figures. Today Cambodia is a World Bank designated low-income country and the country's recovery has been slow and remains partial. A goal of the regime was also to destroy art, media and libraries created before the regime. Today, 65% of Khmer (i.e., Cambodian) people are under the age of 30, were born after the Pol Pot period and experienced the waning of civil war over the past fifteen years [6]. Cambodians are also rapidly adopting digital tools; Internet penetration (via computer or Internet-enabled mobile phones) grew from 7% [7] to 45% [8] between 2013 and 2017. Yet the traumatic history of war is still present in their everyday lives. Contemporary Cambodia is straddling two contradictory narratives: in the first, the Khmer Rouge regime and ensuing years of conflict annihilated the country's culture irreparably; and, in the second, Khmer youth culture represents a 'renaissance' in the country's cultural production [4]. Some Khmer technology production and art encapsulates this tension by innovating through reconstruction: by materially rebuilding lost media, Khmer young people are building new futures.

This research project will investigate the dual nature of innovation in Cambodia as both building futures and reconstruction of the past through a mixed ethnographic and historical project based in the capitol, Phnom Penh. This study will address three primary research questions: (1) How does Khmer media and technology exhibit continuity and change thematically and materially between the 'golden age' of cultural production in the post-independence and pre-Khmer Rouge era in the 1950s and 1960s through today? (2) How do current Khmer artists and technologists integrate Khmer memory, history, and heritage into the process of innovation and future-building? (3) How do national experiences of trauma interact with transnational discourses on innovation in the Khmer artist and technology communities in Phnom Penh?

I have conducted three preliminary fieldwork trips during my PhD (in January 2015 and 2016, and June-August 2016) to study the introduction of new digital tools and the development of large information infrastructures in Cambodia. Earlier research focused on the use of IT in the health sector (especially for the vaccine cold chain, diagnostic machines and the repair of computationally-dependent medical equipment) and the use of new online tools in domestic shops. During these research trips, I did extensive formal and informal interviewing and participant observation in the grassroots technology community in Phnom Penh, in domestic shops, and in the government and NGO sectors. I first starting working in Cambodia in a professional role with the Clinton Health Access Initiative before starting my PhD (in January-July 2014). I am currently a Foreign Language Area Studies fellow (studying Khmer) and member of the Southeast Asian program at Cornell.

Based on this preliminary fieldwork, I hypothesize that contemporary digital media (particularly digital video production and social media use) exhibit significant continuities with older forms of cultural media production (like film production). In the post-independence period (1953-1970), gazing back to ancient Cambodian history helped to build a national identity during the first period of autonomy after nearly a century of colonialism. Contemporary Cambodian media, too, integrates history to draw on past cultural heritage but also uses and reconstructs history to have a record of and heal from the trauma of the Pol Pot era and ensuing civil war.

I further hypothesize that reconstruction of memory is an important part of Khmer innovation. Reconstruction as innovation takes many forms; for example, the

reconstruction of images from the past in films like the *Missing Picture*, refurbishing broken donated computer equipment, building a Unicode font based on an earlier generation's handwriting, and re-imagining pre-war city space through computer animation techniques. I hypothesize that Cambodians build visions for the future of their country through their creative projects; the ways that Khmer youth use remnants of the past are strategically tied to certain hoped-for values of the future.

Finally, I hypothesize that designing technology in this way connects Cambodian artists and technologists to a global community while maintaining cultural specificity. Hegemonic global discourse on innovation is undoubtedly influential in Khmer creative and technical communities. Procuring and using foreign hardware (smartphones, video cameras, and computers) forces Cambodian innovators to interact with international agents and design principles. Some Cambodian youth, however, see these transnational influences as a part of the legacy of colonialism and exploitation from global capitalism. I hypothesize that innovating through reconstruction is a way that Cambodian designers and artists can opt-in to (what often appear to them) exciting and generative global communities while also maintaining a form of defiant independence.

This project will answer these questions through an archival analysis of the remaining and reconstructed historical Cambodian media from before, during and after the Khmer Rouge period and an ethnographic study of Phnom Penh's grassroots innovation and startup community. I will analyze historical media at a variety of archives in Phnom Penh, including the National Archive, the Bophana Center, and Documentation Center of Cambodia. The Bophana Center will be a particularly useful resource; started by a Khmer-French refugee named Rithy Panh in 2006, the purpose of the center is to collect, digitize, and restore historical media. This media preserve the cultural heritage of Cambodia and connect Khmer youth both to the country's creative traditions and its history of trauma. I will spend the first part of my research viewing and tracing themes in content and changes in materiality in these sources (during the summer of 2017).

In the second part of my research, I will conduct an ethnographic project observing the technical practices of individuals and businesses in Phnom Penh, focusing particularly on their social media archiving and digital video production. I will build on a partnership with Smallworld, a Cambodia-based startup community and tech coworking space. The Smallworld organizing team mentors and offers free workshops to young technology developers. This affiliation will help me to expand my network of technology developers which I have established in my fieldwork since 2014.

As part of this ethnographic project, I will interview social media content producers. In these interviews I will explore how the use of Facebook for storing and distributing historical media is tied to limited server and physical storage space in the archives, cinemas, and libraries of Cambodia. I will study how the distributed nature of Facebook makes it more convenient for Cambodian young people to store and view historical media. I will also investigate, however, the displacement of existing archives, libraries, and cinemas by Facebook and concerns about the long-term viability of Facebook as the keeper of national memory. This methodological approach builds on earlier ethnographies of the Internet which describe the varied ways that people interact with the Internet, demonstrating its context specificity and interpretive flexibility [1, 5].

This study contributes to emerging work in HCI, international development, anthropology, and science studies which asks how and in what ways we see computing emerge in postcolonial and post-conflict

countries. This study will also build on scholarship regarding the relationship between memory, Internet media, and trauma. This study will describe the multiplicities of "innovation" in the world and open up scholarship to new global voices that are often excluded from too-typically Western stories of heroic invention. This study will have practical import for technology-related development initiatives (often under the 'ICTD' or 'HCI4D' monikers) gaining popularity in Cambodia and other developing countries. A better understanding of grassroots innovation will help development agencies understand and build upon local efforts, improving outcomes in these projects.

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