

Cambodian Youth Making Connections

Kelly Hutchinson

RMIT University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how urban Cambodian youth are creating connections and exploring the opportunities that new technology offers for their social and community development within the Khmer diaspora. It contends that these young Cambodians are using ICT to define and express themselves as both individuals and members of a distinct new cohort. This study was conducted from July-September 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia as part of the Master of Arts in Communications at RMIT University. A comparison of qualitative and quantitative data allowed this study to develop a rounded profile of young Cambodians' (aged 18-24) ICT usage habits. ICT are defined as mobile phones, SMS, the Internet, the World Wide Web and Chat. This article contends that this uptake of ICT highlights the emergence of an urban elite, a digital elite whose use of ICT is helping to define the new generation and secondly facilitate connections that build community within the Khmer diaspora.

THEORETICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Khmer Diaspora

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 families tried to reunite and the bond of family was extended to include distant relatives such as aunts and cousins. The spread of nuclear family members across the globe after the refugee exodus in the 1970s (Robinson, 1998) has meant that this basic family unit has been challenged. The diasporic experience of Cambodian refugees and the difficulties they face integrating into a third culture have been explored mostly from a social welfare perspective, in particular in Mudaly's (1999) research into young Cambodians in Melbourne, Australia. The work of Smith-Hefner (1999) explores the Khmer American experience of moral education and the role of religion in the diasporic community. There are some studies on Vietnamese culture within the diaspora in the US and Australia which also provide a point of comparison for the Cambodian situation (Cunningham & Sinclair, 1999).

One emerging function of ICT is the role it plays with diasporic people. As stated by Mitra (1997) in his study of India on the Internet, these people "recreate a sense of virtual community through a rediscovery of their commonality." This is of particular relevance for the young Cambodians surveyed who are using ICT to connect with their family and friends abroad.

The research presented in this article focuses on how and why young urban Cambodians use ICT. Research identified key attributes of 18-24 year old Cambodians: they are English speaking, technically literate, modern, motivated, highly educated, family minded, have a small close group of friends, increasingly globally conscious, hungry for knowledge and sociable. This burgeoning individuality and emerging self-awareness is a departure from the traditional characteristics of Cambodian society. It is in fact these new characteristics combined with the self-referential term the "new generation" that defines these young urban Cambodians.

ICT for Development

As a Least Developed Country, Cambodia is a prime example of the potential of ICT for development. A number of international organizations, multilateral agencies and Non-Government Organization such as the UN, World Bank, International Telecommunications Union and USAID have conducted research into the issues facing developing countries in the adoption of ICT. The conference *Public Awareness about Information Technology* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 2001) and the Opening Address by Prime Minister Hun Sen highlighted the importance of ICT to the development of Cambodia (Hun, 2001). Since this study was conducted, the Royal Government of Cambodia with the support of UNDP and APDIP in 2003-2004 has been developing a National ICT Policy which will address five key areas: human capacity, infrastructure, enterprise, policy and regulation, and content and application.

Digital Divide

Much of the literature available about ICT in a development context focuses on the digital divide. Key works identified include coverage of the following areas: the

global skills gap (Pastore, 2001), civic engagement and information poverty (Norris, 2000), and globalization and social development (Castells, 1998). This study attempts to gain some insight into a particular group of young urbanites within a developing country on, perhaps one could say, the right side of the digital divide.

The digital divide is often identified by lack of accessibility to the Internet either physically or financially. There are an estimated 130 Internet cafés in the capital Phnom Penh though most provincial capitals have limited if any Internet cafes. Siem Reap is an exception with an estimated 20 cafés. However, these mostly service tourists and not the local population. The split between urban and rural, educated and uneducated, affluent and poor illustrates how in a country that has 85% of the population living in rural areas, the gap between information rich and poor is only widening. This is partly being addressed by the Community Information Centers in provincial capitals. These CICs are an initiative of The Asia Foundation which established them in 2002 in partnership with local NGOs to promote democracy as part of the national elections. They also focus on development activities by providing free information resources for provincial communities. These centers have become an important location for rural Cambodian youth to meet and connect.

The Impact of Location

The high cost of owning a computer or having Internet access at home means that most Cambodians who wish to use ICT do so at their local Internet café. Most educational institutions in Cambodia have limited ICT facilities for students so they rely on private enterprise to meet the need. Access in Phnom Penh has become more affordable with rates dropping from U.S. \$5 an hour in 1999 to U.S. \$1 in 2002 and less than U.S. \$.50cents in 2004. Even with limited income, access is readily available with Internet cafés in Phnom Penh.

Location of use is a key factor in shaping usage habits. Most research in computer-mediated communication and virtual communities as discussed by Jones (1998), Mitra (1997) and Kim (2000) has presumed it is a solo act in the privacy of the home and is more focused on chat and online group activities. In Cambodia, high costs relative to income means that the most common access points are in public Internet cafés. Of the young Cambodian's surveyed, more than two-thirds most often use the Internet in a public café. The second most frequent access point was at university. Both locations are communal spaces, which are not conducive to privacy. As such, this has to be considered when evaluating what this age group seeks on the Internet.

Another issue associated with the impact of location relates to the location of friends and family that young Cambodians communicate with abroad. A comparison of the locations of friends versus family may reflect the patterns of migration. Of the countries where young Cambodians' families live, there is a dominance of western countries such as the USA, Australia and Canada. This reflects the refugee migration and family resettlement as a result of the civil war during the 1970s and 1980s. The predominance of friends in Asian locations could represent the recent increase in temporary migration for study or work within the region. This leads to the next area of discussion of how ICT are connecting Cambodians within the Khmer diaspora.

DEFINING THE NEW GENERATION

In Cambodia the new generation has a different worldview compared to their parents due to the evolution of the political landscape from tyranny to democracy. Thirty years of civil war and most significantly the Khmer Rouge regime has had a massive toll on Cambodia. Cambodian society has suffered in terms of lives and physical infrastructure, but of particular relevance here is the resultant lack of human resource development. They are the children of the killing fields, yet they only know it second hand from their parent's stories.

As children born in a post-conflict development context, stability allows young Cambodians today to have more freedom of expression and opportunities for education and employment than previous generations. This is evident in the capitol Phnom Penh more than in the provinces, where traditional life continues with an agrarian culture and the majority of the population living on subsistence levels. How this new generation manifests itself in Cambodia and identifies within the Khmer diaspora is creating a new definition of community.

In particular, how and why young Cambodians use ICT was the core tenet to this study. Not only are ICT a new means of peer communication, their adoption indicates a more profound shift in interpersonal relations. Although this move towards individualized communication is a departure from traditional cultural practice what is of interest is how this combines with the global factor of the Khmer diaspora to create a truly unique connectivity within the community.

Interestingly, the take up of this new technology in Cambodia is in accordance with similar adoption rates of urban centers in other developing countries within Asia. Thailand and Malaysia both have an active and expanding youth market. Another similarity of these Asian markets is the growing digital divide between urban and rural (Rao, 2001).

4 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/cambodian-youth-making-connections/11353

Related Content

On the Student Internet Activity via Both Virtual Simulations and Remote Laboratory for Scientific Education

Mikhail I. Mazuritskiy and Sultan B. Dabagov (2022). *International Journal of Smart Education and Urban Society* (pp. 1-14).

www.irma-international.org/article/on-the-student-internet-activity-via-both-virtual-simulations-and-remote-laboratory-for-scientific-education/300735

Qualitative Analysis for Visual Attention of Students by Using the Technology of ICT

Muhammad Farhan, Muhammad Salar Haider, N. Z. Jhanjhi, Rana Muhammad Amir Latif and Muhammad Yasir Bilal (2021). *ICT Solutions for Improving Smart Communities in Asia* (pp. 1-26).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/qualitative-analysis-for-visual-attention-of-students-by-using-the-technology-of-ict/272448

Using Google Cardboard Compatible HMDs and Spherical Videos for Teaching History to High School Students

Emmanuel Fokides, Eleni Polydorou and Panos Mazarakis (2020). *International Journal of Smart Education and Urban Society* (pp. 18-34).

www.irma-international.org/article/using-google-cardboard-compatible-hmds-and-spherical-videos-for-teaching-history-to-high-school-students/263812

Application of Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process for Evaluation of Ankara-Izmir High-Speed Train Project

Ömer Faruk Efe (2021). *AI-Based Services for Smart Cities and Urban Infrastructure* (pp. 258-276).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/application-of-fuzzy-analytic-hierarchy-process-for-evaluation-of-ankara-izmir-high-speed-train-project/264784

Automation of Street Light of Adarsh Gram With Manual Intervention and Automatic Luminosity Control With Traffic Flow

Rahul Kumar Singh, Anju Bala and Pratibha Verma (2023). *Smart Village Infrastructure and Sustainable Rural Communities* (pp. 228-247).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/automation-of-street-light-of-adarsh-gram-with-manual-intervention-and-automatic-luminosity-control-with-traffic-flow/324970