



COMBATTING DISINFORMATION: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN CAMBODIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the current global health emergency, COVID 19 has led to an “infodemic” of disinformation. False, manipulated, or misleading content created and spread unintentionally or intentionally can put public health at risk.

According to the research *Combatting disinformation: A preliminary assessment of the information landscape in Cambodia*, which was conducted from October to December 2020, low levels of digital literacy, the proliferation of social networks to access COVID-19 information and ‘attention seeking’ are all drivers of disinformation in Cambodia.

The objective of the qualitative research was to assess the influence of information sources for spreading disinformation in Cambodia. Researchers interviewed media experts and sociologists as well as Cambodian citizens aged between 19 and 40. The research aimed to understand sources Cambodians used for accessing COVID-19 news and information, and to understand how they discern between credible and non-credible information.

There are multiple factors that increase the vulnerability of the public to disinformation. The research acknowledges a rise in social networks has facilitated the production and spread of disinformation online, with those most engaged as highly impacted, it also suggests that individuals with less access to information or less proficient online are likely to be largely affected by disinformation, inferring rural areas are more at risk.

Government sources of information on COVID-19 in Cambodia remain highly trusted across all age groups. However, notable is the way in which the research highlights the complexity of identifying a trusted information source. The source [the person sharing it] can be pivotal in gaining trust (people tend to accept the information more readily from someone they admire), however at the same time influential individuals can act as super spreaders of disinformation.

Important points are identified about the diversity of disinformation spreaders, from influencers to pseudo news sites that are fueled by financial incentives. A shared sentiment from the research was that some individuals enjoy attracting attention online and would exaggerate news to get likes or shares. All this is facilitated by social media algorithms. Furthermore, the proliferation of mis and disinformation, particularly on social media platforms has appeared to demonstrate that trust in reliable sources (‘professional media entities’) has eroded.

Instant messaging applications such as Facebook Messenger and Telegram have gained traction for receiving news, particularly links to articles or voice messages on COVID-19 related content, however question marks remain over the influence of closed groups on the spread of disinformation but are identified as increasingly important.

The research suggests that young people are well placed to address and counter disinformation because of their online presence and proficiency. Further research to understand how to leverage young people as a “force multiplier” in addressing disinformation is a recommendation from this report.

Fact-checking initiatives and content moderation or curation have been the two most popular “remedies” for disinformation. This research highlights though that there is a need to understand populations’ consumptions and behaviours on disinformation through a segmented lens instead of assuming the general population will react and engage with disinformation in the same way.

A common thread across participant contributions was the need for fostering greater media and information literacy overall in combatting disinformation, and with this in mind to explore further the unique role young people have in being able to address disinformation.

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation; false, manipulated or misleading content, created and spread unintentionally or intentionally, and which can cause potential harm to peace, human rights and sustainable development.

Disinformation can have serious direct consequences by driving misconceptions about key societal issues and be exploited to feed wider narratives. Likewise, innovations such as bots and deep fake videos are becoming increasingly sophisticated thus requiring a range of multifaceted responses¹.

Globally, we are now confronted by a new wave of disinformation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing outbreak has seen a slew of disinformation, from the origins of the virus to a range of speculative cures. Named, the “disinfodemic”, this type of disinformation not only poses risks to public health but also poses a danger to socio-political polarization², and coupled with poor digital literacy can widen social divides.

Despite pre-existing initiatives to combat disinformation in Cambodia, limited literature and evidence exists to coordinate an appropriate institutional response. As such, UNDP conducted a study from October to December 2020 to assess the information landscape in Cambodia to understand the influence of information sources amplifying COVID-19 disinformation. This research briefing details the findings from this study and concludes by highlighting current limitations and proposes recommendations for future research.

1. T.Colley, F.Granelli and J.Althuis. Disinformation’s Societal Impact: Britain, Covid, And Beyond (2020)

2. <https://en.unesco.org/news/cambodia-embarks-online-campaign-fight-disinformation>



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research aims to contribute to the understanding of the information landscape in Cambodia, and broadly seeks to meet the following objectives;

- ❑ Understand what types of information sources Cambodians consume
- ❑ Harness insights on themes of disinformation during COVID-19
- ❑ Identify key stakeholders in mitigating disinformation
- ❑ Understand how Cambodians discern between credible and non-credible information

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a broad range of qualitative techniques, intended to give indications about the target respondents. The research aimed to identify influence of information sharing platforms and how everyday citizens discern between credible and non-credible sources. Qualitative research such as FGD were best placed to meet this objective. It enabled a meaningful measure to disinformation around COVID-19, as opposed to a big data collection which would have potentially measured the volume and types of disinformation across social media sites in Cambodia. However, given the small sample size the results are not generalizable to the wider Cambodian population. Likewise, findings cannot be quantified due to the small sample size.

Desk Review

A thorough desk review was conducted to understand pertinent contextual information relevant to the Cambodian landscape. Information was used to help inform the design of the research guides to be used in subsequent phases of the study, and to identify gaps in knowledge to be further examined. Responses to disinformation from other countries were also explored, to provide insights on how Cambodia can learn and implement successful initiatives.

Expert Interviews

Five professionals in the field of either media or sociology/psychology were interviewed in order to better understand their perception of the information landscape and the threat of disinformation, providing a grounding of local knowledge to complement the existing desk research. Firsthand experiences were used to validate the findings from the desk review.

Social Listening

The third phase of the study used a social listening tool called Netbase to monitor and analyze content across social media platforms. Facebook was predominantly used to extract data due to its popularity within the Khmer social landscape³.

3. It should be noted that owing to the variations in spelling of some Khmer words, search yielded low results in some instances, and manual analysis of the data was conducted.

Focus Group Discussions

Six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted online amongst the general public to provide a holistic overview of the topic area, providing a deep dive into different information sources. The sample included both females and males (approximately 50/50) and were segmented by socio-economic class (A and up, and BCDE), age (those between 19 and 24 and 25 and 40)⁴, and by region – Phnom Penh, urban Battambang and urban Prey Veng. Urban locations were selected based upon geographical and demographic diversity as well as higher levels of online accessibility given that the FGD were held online due to COVID-19 in person meeting restrictions.

Mobile Media Diaries

Mobile diaries concluded the study and were conducted over a period of three days with younger participants from the focused group discussions (FGDs). Each day, participants were given tasks related to the sources and types of information they access. This included, sending links, pictures and videos of different types of information they have interacted with during that day with a series of follow-up questions. Diaries were completed individually to ensure confidentiality and ease of use.

4. ABCDE socio-economic classification consists of 8 groups, A (highest), B, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2 & E (lowest), developed by Nielsen Admosphere.

FINDINGS

What are some of the factors that make the public vulnerable to disinformation?

1. Not everyone is impacted equally by disinformation. Age group, gender, socioeconomic background, all matter

Facebook dominates in urban areas and according to media experts, it continues to be the most popular source of information amongst urban Cambodians. Survey participants also referred to Facebook as their most used platform for information.

Young people have a unique role in the spread of disinformation. Media experts believe that teenagers or young adults are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, owing to their prolific activity in the online space and greater exposure to a breadth of sources. This is far greater than previous generations and providing young people with greater exposure to a breadth of information sources. For younger survey participants, in the instances where they come across nearly all their information online, they are more likely to not only strongly believe that piece of information, but more likely to widely disseminate within their networks.

Additionally, the research indicated the following variations in how other audiences consumed disinformation:

- Those with less access to information or who are less proficient online are likely to be highly influenced by disinformation.
- Observations from media experts highlights those individuals of a higher socio-economic class are better able to verify the information they view online, owing to their presumed higher level of education.
- Most younger survey participants believe that older people are more susceptible to disinformation, citing they are more “gullible” and “emotional”.
- Research findings highlighted the opinions of citizens with specific reference to the ‘opportunism’ and ‘attention seeking’ characteristics of disinformation. There is a shared sentiment that other Individuals enjoy attracting attention online and would exaggerate news to get likes or shares.
- Survey participants observed that there are pages on Facebook that will be created as a “news” page and would share credible news stories but would later change to a business page once the number of followers has increased. Certain businesses were also found to exaggerate news stories in order to increase the sale of their products, for example reporting a higher number of COVID-19 cases in order to sell more masks, or at a higher price.

2. Social media algorithms contribute to an easier spread of disinformation in Cambodia.

Despite high social media penetration, most survey participants stated they will only proactively seek out news if it is deemed ‘very important’, for example something related to COVID-19. Current affairs were not a priority, particularly for younger people who were more interested in utilizing social media to source new job opportunities. Experts acknowledged that social media algorithms are instrumental in the prevalence and uptake of disinformation i.e. If people are not actively searching for news, their feed will likely be filled with content tailored to their interests, such as jobs, entertainment, and shopping.

The research from media experts suggests that many Cambodians do not take the necessary actions to validate online information, in addition survey participants noted that they do not go out of their way to verify information, and when they see news which seems to be ‘fake’, they do not report or comment on it. The only action taken at an individual level was to report specific pages to Facebook.

What (or who) are considered trusted information sources?

3. The source [the person sharing it] of news, matters more in some cases than the content itself.

Offline credibility can help with how information shared online is received (and vice-versa). For example, commune chiefs / traditional or religious leaders within communities can be super-spreaders, as they are trusted arbiters of information among their constituents. So, if they take a piece of false information from online (deliberately or not) and share it with followers (offline), people will be much more inclined to believe it because of their standing in society. Media experts commented that influential individuals can act as super spreaders of disinformation by sharing with their followers who tend to accept the information more readily from someone they admire.

Secondly, one of the primary drivers of disinformation creation is the financial incentive— The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) estimates that disinformation sites generate more than a quarter billion dollars per year in ad revenues⁵. Many bloggers and influencers depend on followers to earn money and they believe fake and sensational news attracts followers. Research findings reference ‘opportunism’ and ‘attention seeking’ characteristics of disinformation and there is a shared sentiment amongst survey participants that some individuals enjoy attracting attention online and would exaggerate news to get likes or shares.

Thirdly, the proliferation of mis and disinformation, particularly on social media platforms has appeared to demonstrate that trust in reliable sources (‘professional media entities’) has eroded.

For information and news related to COVID-19, social listening trends highlighted the importance of news channels which are routinely accessed through Facebook. Yet respondents questioned whether information is being withheld by such entities and undermined their confidence in these publications. According to survey participants, they reported feeling skeptical of the factual accuracy of content on these sites.

Transparency of ownership and labelling of online news sites would be one way for the public to discern their news sources.

5. Ad-funded COVID-19 Disinformation: Money, Brands, and Tech. <https://disinformationindex.org/research/>

4. Trusted sources of COVID-19 information in Cambodia were mainly Government sources.

Social media listening and analysis was conducted through Netbase with findings revealing that the most popular COVID-19 related posts come from the Government and other institutions, with the Ministry of Health and World Health Organisation being the most visited. Additionally, listening and analysis also found that the most shared COVID-19 related link was the Ministry of Information app.

5. Increasingly, there are high levels of trust in information shared via chat apps such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger and Telegram.

Instant messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and Telegram are increasingly popular across all the survey participants in this research for receiving news, as well as links to articles. Voice messages between friends and family are also increasingly common, the precise source of the information shared is often unknown, with some senders claiming the voice messages are that of government officials or authorities; however, this cannot always be verified. With increasing popularity in voice notes, and with these getting shared amongst social bubbles, identifying useful processes to verify information sources could be an interesting area to explore further.

Given the small sample for this study, further research is required on the influence of closed groups such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Line and WhatsApp on the spread of disinformation. Not many studies in Cambodia yet allow us to determine the impact of disinformation shared via these groups and identify appropriate solutions.

Are people responding to disinformation?

6. There seems to be a need for better categories and definitions around disinformation in Cambodia.

Since sharing false information is associated with a criminal offence in Cambodia and arrests have been made in relation to COVID-19, survey participants mentioned that they would not comment or share any items associated to high profile arrests of individuals related to Government defined 'fake news' or when they see 'fake news', they just block the page instead of commenting on it or sharing it.

Many survey participants perceive fake news to be "exaggerated news" meaning that there is still some semblance of truth to it, but it is blown out of proportion to draw attention. Yet there is a difference between exaggeration, bias and fake news, and a difference between someone who purposefully creates disinformation and someone who shares it, with different repercussions or each. This is an important distinction for designing a programme response to disinformation and to understand how people respond to it.

Young people are well placed to address and counter disinformation because of their online presence and proficiency. Further research to understand how to leverage young people as a "force multiplier" in addressing mis and dis information is essential for any programme response.

FURTHER AREAS OF INTEREST ON COVID-19 DISINFORMATION

The research highlights there is a need to understand populations' consumptions and behaviours on disinformation through a segmented lens (rural vs urban; young vs old; educated vs uneducated; perhaps even male vs female), instead of assuming the general population will react and engage with disinformation in the same way. By understanding how different types of audiences evaluate information, stakeholders keen to address disinformation can begin to identify effective strategies and interventions to encourage audiences to consume and critically evaluate information better.

A common thread across participant contributions was the need for fostering greater media and information literacy overall. Identify trusted arbiters of information and to target them with digital/civic literacy that will allow them to better assess the information they receive before sharing; with a potential multiplier effect (e.g if a religious leader speaking to their congregation or health practitioner speaking to their patients).

It is essential to understand the role of young people and social media influencers as a “force multiplier” in addressing and spreading mis and dis information.

We should continue to map and monitor the information landscape with regards to COVID-19 mis and disinformation and this could include expanding current understanding of how citizens living in provincial areas receive and process information.



United Nations Development Programme
53 Pasteur Street, Beung Keng Kong I, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

www.kh.undp.org