



Research Brief
**Online Freedom
of Expression and
Political Engagement
in Cambodia**

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Research Brief : **Perceptions of Online Freedom of Expression & Political Engagement**

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Commissioned by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Internet penetration in Cambodia is increasing at a rapid rate, with the percentage of Cambodians accessing the Internet climbing by 42.7% in 2014. Today's penetration rate reaches roughly 25% of the population or 3.8 million people, up from just 2.7 million in 2013. In response to this growing population of Internet users and to address government concerns surrounding citizens' unfettered access to information online, in 2014 the Cambodian government proposed a number of measures to monitor and control the Internet. Efforts to control and monitor online activity include a widely criticized (and now officially scrapped) draft Cybercrime Law, announcement of plans to install surveillance equipment in the Kingdom's Internet service providers, and the creation of Cyber War Teams to monitor the web — particularly social media — for postings the government deems to be misinformation.

However, current conversations about Internet rights and Internet control in Cambodia are constrained by a distinct lack of data surrounding Cambodians' online behavior as well as their perceptions of the applications and limitations of the Internet in their daily lives, politics and society.

This research project aimed to address this shortage of information by seeking the opinions of Cambodian Internet users on key issues in order to facilitate more informed debate on the future of the Internet in Cambodia. Using a three-form planned missing data design, 895 Cambodian smartphone users were surveyed via their smartphones.

This research brief provides information gleaned from a research study commissioned by the Cambodia Center for Independent Media (CCIM).

KEY FINDINGS

- 77.7% of respondents reported that their smartphone was their preferred device for accessing the Internet.
- Cambodians find the Internet to be useful for personal, professional, and civic interests, with around 75% of respondents agreeing that the Internet makes their job easier, helps in their educational studies, and allows them to locate news and information not available elsewhere.
- Shopping and online bill pay are not common activities in Cambodia. Only about one-third of respondents reported e-commerce activities.
- The majority of Cambodian Internet users (62.7%) feel 'very' or 'somewhat' free to express their opinions online without fear of repercussions.
- Of respondents who said they were 'somewhat' or 'very' fearful of repercussions

for engaging in free expression online, the majority were concerned by legal threats (65.6%), but physical harassment (36.8%), and threats to economic well-being (30.6%) were also reported.

- Government efforts to monitor online activity could have a crippling effect on online free expression, with the majority of users (88.4%) saying they would not feel free to engage in free expression if such efforts were enacted.
- Currently, the majority of respondents (62.7%) feel ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ free to express their opinions online without fear of repercussions.
- All but four survey respondents reported having a Facebook account. Moreover, more than 4 out of 5 Cambodian Internet users check their Facebook account several times a day.

IMPLICATIONS

There is a need for more conversation and education about Internet rights, surveillance, privacy, and other issues commonly addressed in Internet legislation.

While survey respondents overwhelmingly opposed government monitoring and controls of the Internet, respondents expressed little to no knowledge of surveillance techniques. Respondents strongly supported free expression online while at the same time supporting restrictions on content they view as immoral. There is need for deeper discussion of Internet rights and reasonable limitations in order to find a consensus for the Cambodian context.

All respondents felt a relatively high sense of freedom of expression online, and this sense did not differ in statistically significant amounts among Internet users who were well read on the topic of government efforts to monitor and control the Internet and those who have never read news articles on the topic. This suggests a need for a deeper and more independent review of the subject in the country’s Khmer-language news media, with an emphasis on including a wide range of voices in the discussion, including viewpoints from technical, security and human rights experts.

Cambodian development partners need to prioritize Internet approaches to development, especially those geared toward youth.

The prevalence of youth survey respondents, and their embrace of ICT, such as smartphones, present possibilities for Cambodian development and human rights enforcement that have only recently begun to be explored.

There is a need for international development partners and local Cambodian partners to work together to ensure these new technologies are used to increase the effectiveness and relevance of local development efforts.

There is a need for widespread media literacy education specifically related to Internet-based media.

Though the majority of survey respondents reported using the Internet to access news and information, some participants expressed distrust of all information they read on the Internet. Media literacy education, if incorporated into public school curriculum as currently under discussion, will help students understand the difference between online rumors and online news while also instilling critical thinking skills related to information found online.

A mobile-first or mobile-friendly approach to web development is critical for Cambodian Internet audiences.

In order to reach the broadest audience possible, businesses and NGOs in the Cambodian market should ensure their websites and electronic services are easily accessible on mobile devices. Economically, this means there is tremendous opportunity for growth in mobile applications and e-commerce in the country. The low percentage of respondents who report using the Internet to shop, pay bills, or manage their finances online, despite availability of online financial services through local banks, suggests that Cambodian Internet users may lack confidence in the security of their financial information online.

Online freedom of expression needs to be protected by Cambodian law.

As with offline speech, online expression of opinions is protected under international law as a basic human right. While the majority of Cambodians feel free to express themselves online, it is notable that some users are still ‘somewhat’ (14.3%) or even ‘very’ (1.6%) fearful of repercussions for their online expression. The RGC should take steps to recognize and ensure protection of the right to online free expression, perhaps as part of existing constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression or otherwise as part of Internet legislation, such as the draft Great Charter for Cambodian Internet Freedom.

The Royal Government of Cambodia should make concerted efforts to increase the amount of public information available online.

As Internet penetration continues to rise and Cambodians increasingly turn to the Internet for information on laws, policies, and political parties, the government should take steps to make public information available online. The RGC should consider incorporating an online public information disclosure requirement into the Access to Information Law currently being drafted.

CONCLUSION

Cambodian citizens cannot play an active role in society if they are not properly informed about it. However, governmental accountability and transparency are crucial to Cambodian citizens. Most of Cambodia's mobile Internet users feel that the Internet is a mechanism to improve their personal, and professional lives, as well as their civic duties. Only an open and unmonitored Internet will allow citizens to express themselves freely and use the Internet as tool to stay informed about the world, their nation, and their culture.

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To see the full research data analysis visit www.ccimcambodia.org/reports

