

## Cambodian journalists struggle to engage public in trial process

Written by

Tuesday, 27 January 2009 03:51

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According to a [recent survey](#) , 85 percent of Cambodians reported having little or no knowledge of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal last September.

While this isn't surprising, given the complexity of the process, if the tribunal remains an enigma to the majority of Cambodians, it will not have fulfilled one of its most important objectives.

As a journalist, I try to disseminate and analyze information about the court in as comprehensible a manner as possible. But as an English speaker, my influence is limited. It is Khmer language journalists who are truly in a position to inform and educate Cambodian audiences.

Which is why I sat in on a course for Cambodian journalists facilitated by former *New York Times* foreign correspondent

[Barbara Crossette](#)

. With the backing of the Independent Journalism Foundation in New York, she has held a series of courses in Phnom Penh aimed at helping provincial journalists understand the court and make contact with key tribunal officials. After the most recent course in December, she was generous enough to answer several questions by email about the challenges Cambodian journalists face in covering the court for a general audience.

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EL: You mention that provincial reporters have had trouble getting a hold of court officials. What are the reasons you have heard for this? Is it just a question of geographic distance, or do they also encounter difficulty trying to contact officials by phone and email?

BC: Provincial reporters are, first of all, not around Phnom Penh so they are not in the mix when tribunal developments get discussed informally. And they feel that because they are not personally known to court spokespeople they have a hard time getting attention -- especially since they have to communicate by phone and cannot just show up at the court. Language is another problem, of course. They have to rely on finding a Khmer speaker, and court spokesman Reach Sambath is often way overstretched. Part of the point of the two sessions on the court that the Independent Journalism Foundation conducted -- two weeks in January and a week in December -- were to break down some of these barriers, or perceptions of barriers. I found that court officials themselves, and NGOs monitoring the court, were very open to contact, and handed out business cards freely. Again, those who can speak English would benefit most. There is a reluctance to use the Internet, by the way, on the assumption that you have to read English. Court documents do appear in Khmer, of course.

EL: From your perspective, what are some of the ethical challenges Cambodian journalists must confront in covering the tribunal? (I believe you had mentioned that many older reporters seem to have trouble understanding due process, since this is not common in the national court system. Presumption of innocence, I assume, would also be a relatively foreign concept).

BC: Cambodians, except for some who have lived abroad in Western countries, have no concept of free trials, presumed innocence and court procedures. They don't always have the patience to hear out experts, either. The feeling is that all these folks in the dock are guilty, so what's the delay?

EL: Given the highly bureaucratic nature of the tribunal -- and its slow pace -- how can journalists keep readers engaged in this historical process?

BC: Keeping readers interested requires real imagination. But it isn't the journalists alone who are responsible. The toughest job can be getting past editors who aren't interested. That's true of journalists anywhere.

EL: What court-related issues did the journalists say their readers are most interested in?

BC: Almost exclusively victims rights and compensation. I've been told by court officials and NGOs that once many people hear there will be no reparations, they lose whatever interest they had. Life is tough in rural Cambodia, and for a while this looked like a goose that lays golden eggs. DC-Cam's work in the villages has done a lot to try to overcome this, but journalists say the feeling is still out there.

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*Picture: Journalists participate in Crossette's most recent course at the Royal University of*