Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia

A few rays of light

Roland Rich

Many political dissidents have died within the walls of Burma's notorious Insein prison, where former inmates say the thick stone walls run with water in the wet season and the wind howls through the open bars as prisoners huddle like caged animals. In 1996, sexagenarian Leo Nichols, the Anglo-Burmese acting Honorary Consul for several European countries, died within the prison complex a few months into his three-year sentence. His crime: possession of an unregistered fax machine. Perhaps, more to the point, though, was his friendship with opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. In Burma censorship and control of the media is complete. The Internet is banned and the grinding poverty imposed upon the people through isolation and authoritarianism means few own the technology which could give them access to alternative forms of information anyway.

There is a depressing theme which dominates any discussion of the state of freedom of speech in Burma, as well as in Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Mongolia: the struggle against authoritarianism in its various forms. It matters little whether the form of authoritarianism is monarchical, communist or a military dictatorship, intolerance of press freedom produces the same results. It is virtually by definition that the leadership of such countries can do no wrong, and so the crime in reporting corruption

or incompetence is therefore committed by the reporter. In such an environment, however, the voracious appetite of the public for reading or viewing material remains much the same. So, in the absence of any real news, information or analysis, the Burmese and Lao look straight past the propaganda and pour over the colour advertisements around it. The promotions for haircuts and new consumer products are as close to symbols of the outside world as you can get in these tightly controlled societies. And although several of these governments are now in their post-authoritarian phases, the current state of the media demonstrates that a culture of freedom cannot be established overnight.

While full press freedom does not exist in any of the five countries dealt with in this chapter, some are moving purposefully in that direction. Of the five, perhaps the country with the greatest degree of freedom of expression is Cambodia, probably a legacy of the period of government by the United Nations (UN) in 1992–93. The United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) endowed Cambodia with a liberal constitution and thus broke some of the shackles of a twelve-year-old orthodox communist regime. Cambodia today boasts a vibrant civil society determined to hold onto the freedoms inherited from the UN period, but it is at times a difficult battle where the weapons are not only state power but assassins' bullets. Beyond the higher principle of defending press freedom, lies another challenge—facing the problems of the low quality of reporting.

The emergence of Mongolia from seven decades of communism also illustrates some important themes. The main means of controlling the press in communist countries has always been self-censorship and in post-communist societies many journalists have found it difficult to reinvent themselves. Press freedom is clearly not achieved simply through new legislation or the tearing up of old laws. It also requires a culture of a free and responsible press and a critical mass of journalists who value and defend that culture. Mongolia no longer routinely practices state censorship yet media freedom remains stunted. The Mongolian example argues for the proposition that a culture of press freedom cannot be developed where the state has a monopoly on media ownership. The Mongolian and other examples here also demonstrate that one necessary, though clearly not a sufficient, condition of press freedom is private and

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diverse ownership of the media. In this sense Mongolia is moving in the right direction.

The Burmese generals have learned some lessons since they fooled themselves into believing that the people would vote for them. Their mentor, General Ne Win, never bothered trying to be loved. He was satisfied with being feared. Burma's problems today flow from Ne Win's autocratic rule. Like Napoleon's puppies in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Ne Win locked his military successors away from the outside world and when they emerged it was as the SLORC, an expressive acronym for the State Law and Order Restoration Council, since renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Having been rebuffed overwhelmingly in 1990 in the popular vote they thought they would win, the Burmese generals now understand their relationship to the Burmese people better. They won 10 of the 485 seats while the National League for Democracy (NLD) won 392. They refused to hand over power to NLD leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and instead, placed her under house arrest. Another response to the poll was to reassess an already repressive press policy, to ensure total domination of the mass media by the state. As we enter the Information Age, Burmese authoritarianism has no place to go other than autarky and the poverty that will inevitably accompany it.

There are also lessons to be drawn from the one-dimensional media of Brunei and Laos where there is no pretence of freedom of the press, but neither does there appear to be the public will to fight for it. Media freedom is part of a wider process of engaging the people in the government of their affairs. It cannot exist where, for reasons of apathy or resignation, the broader public is not prepared to demand and defend it. Here again the Internet is playing its role. It will allow opinions to be expressed, anonymously if necessary, and thus test the proposition that the people are content with their lot as the official media will have us all believe.

Burma

Every year Guardian Sein Win would hold his press party inviting foreign diplomats, stringers for foreign publications and a few locals. The guests would sit around discussing politics and personalities, focusing in particular on what was often grandly called the post-Ne Win era. The press parties were held in the 1980s, before SLORC had taken charge. It

was as if the group lived in a country where the press had some use for political analysis. Respect for Sein Win was the reason the group came together at all. Sein Win had been a crusading newspaperman in the 1950s, when Burma was by and large a democratic country with something approaching a free press. His association with his newspaper was such that, in a country where a small stock of unisex names is shared by a large population, the name of his paper—*The Guardian*—had come to be tacked on to his own, thus distinguishing him from the thousands of other Sein Wins in the country.

Among the regular guests was the stringer for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a skeletal old man who many years before had lost the courage to file anything but government press releases. There was also the stringer for *Agence France Presse*—a real livewire. Everybody knew that while he liked to put the French news agency on his business card, his income came from his very competent tennis coaching. Of the diplomats, one could pick out the occasional spooks, just as Sein Win no doubt recognised the operatives from the Department of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) who had come as representatives of the now tame local newspapers.

In Ne Win's Burma there was a certain level of tolerance of such facades, as long as one stuck to form and did not attempt to stray towards substance. Political censorship was standard operating procedure and it remains in daily use by his political successors.

Today there is neither freedom of the press, nor tolerance for any kind of freedom of expression in Burma. The mass media has been directly controlled by the government for nearly four decades, with the most diligent of censors focusing on the local print media, locally made films and movies, and the state-run broadcasting stations. The government does not bother too much about foreign uncensored films and satellite TV access because so few people have access to them in what is now one of the poorest countries and when few Burmese have any knowledge of foreign languages.

There are two major newspapers in Burmese—the *Kyémon* (The Mirror) and the *Myanma Alin* (The New Light of Myanmar)—and one in English under a translated name of the latter. They are published in Rangoon, with a circulation around 200,000 copies for each of the Burmese versions. All are under the supervision of the News and Periodicals Enterprise

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(NPE) of the Ministry of Information. And, all articles, news items and feature articles are prepared and selected by the NPE. The Office of the Strategic Studies (OSS), of which SPDC Secretary 1, Lt Gen Khin Nyunt, is the helmsman, prepares all articles on political and social issues. Any local writers, journalists or cartoonists wishing to preserve their independence prefer not to contribute to these newspapers, and the general public well understands their propagandistic nature. There is one evening newspaper called the *City News* run by the Yangon (Rangoon) City Development Committee (YCDC), another government organisation. The *City News* differs from the other newspapers only in that it carries film news, commodity prices, and some foreign tabloid news. It has an estimated circulation of about 35,000 copies.

In Mandalay, there are two newspapers in the Burmese language—the *Ratanabon* (the Mandalay) and the *Mandalay Daily*. The former is run by the NPE and the latter by the Mandalay City Development Committee. The *Ratanabon* is Mandalay's version of the *New Light of Myanmar* and the *Mandalay Daily* of the YCDC's *City News*. Circulation is around 30,000 for the *Ratanabon* and 20,000 for the *Mandalay Daily*. While the Ministry of Home Affairs has approved over 70 weekly magazines, only 48 actually appear, covering pop issues, sports, business, crimes, international news, cartoons, women's issues, student guides and, of course, propaganda. The best selling weekly has a circulation of some 30,000 and concentrates on cases of adultery, rape and murder, but most smaller weeklies survive with around 10,000 to 20,000 copies sold. There are also over 100 magazines produced each month. The best-selling monthly has a circulation of more than 40,000 copies but no one knows the exact number of sales because publishers prefer not to share these facts with either the revenue department or the contributors. The best-selling magazines cover astrology, mysterious events and tales of miraculous traditional remedies.

Before SPDC came to power, there were very few weeklies and the number of monthlies were just a half of the existing figures. After the takeover, the regime issued permission to publish weeklies and monthlies to its offshoots. Staff welfare committees of various government departments were given this privilege. For instance, the staff welfare association of the Ministry of Information has three publications—*International Affairs*, *Sports*, and the *Pyay Myanmar* (Burma)—and all three sell well. As a result, staff from these departments enjoy free monthly

supplies of rice, edible oil and a small amount of cash. Other committees usually give concessions to private companies and individuals to publish the magazines on their behalf. Of the 48 weeklies only 14 are privately owned—one of them is run by a daughter of SPDC Secretary 3, Lt Gen Win Myint, while the remaining 34 licences are owned by government agencies or civil service staff welfare committees. The OSS publishes two weeklies—the *International Economics News Journal* and the *Myanmar Morning Post*, the latter in Chinese. The Department of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) also publishes a couple of propaganda journals but they are the least popular of the weeklies.

Private ownership of the monthly magazines is more common, with only 20 being run by the government. However, some of the privately owned monthlies still have strong government connections and one of the best selling magazines, *Living Colour Advertisement* and *Buying Guide Magazine*, is owned by the son of SPDC Secretary 1, Lt Gen Khin Nyunt. Similarly, a group of Wa people (former insurgents along the Chinese border, with whom the government has signed a ceasefire agreement) owns another monthly magazine called *Fashion Image*, which is reportedly printed on machines in the compound of a DDSI unit. Another DDSI unit publishes a monthly propaganda magazine called *Myet Khin Thit* (*New Pasture*), but it does not sell well.

The Printers and Publishers Registration Law enacted by the Ne Win's Revolutionary Council in 1962 still applies to the print media. According to this law, publication of any kind of written material without official knowledge and approval is forbidden. It is also illegal to own an unregistered printing machine of any kind including cyclostyling machines, computer printers, photocopiers, modems and fax machines. It was under this law that Leo Nichols, was sentenced to jail. *The New Light of Myanmar* dismissed the ensuing diplomatic protests simply by describing Nichols as 'a bad hat' (Reuters 1996).

General Ne Win also introduced the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) in the mid 1970s on the pretext of ensuring correct Burmese spellings (Khin Maung Win 1999). However, within a few years it had become the censoring agency. Although it is under the General Administration Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the director of the board has been an army officer from DDSI since the mid 1980s. There are no specific or clear-cut guidelines for censorship, and the process is indiscriminate,

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depending on the prevailing political situation. All printed material other than the daily newspapers, which are published by the government, has to be submitted to the PSB.

Control of journalists is another method of stifling freedom of expression. Since the junta took over, at least 14 Burmese journalists have been sent to jail (www.freemedia.at). Two have died in prison and seven journalists, all members of the NLD, remain in Burma's jails. One of them, San San Nweh has been held in Rangoon's Insein prison since August 1994. On 6 October, 1994, under Article 5 of the country's emergency laws, a court whose proceedings took place in the prison, sentenced her to seven years in jail for 'spreading information prejudicial to the state'. Among other charges, she was accused of taking part in a video report by two French journalists in April 1993. Like the other six jailed journalists, she is being held in extremely poor conditions and is reported to have been ill-treated. Win Tin, editor of the daily *Hanthawadi* and deputy chairman of the Burmese Writers' Association, who was sentenced to a ten-year jail sentence in 1989, spent several months in a cage usually used for dogs.

Political criticism is not tolerated, nor are complaints about the activities of government departments, not even genuine consumer complaints with no overt political motive. Publishers, writers and journalists understand well these two golden rules and generally abide by them. Even so, the PSB is ever watchful and intervenes when it thinks necessary to direct publishers to omit or amend material which may be regarded as sensitive by the senior leadership, for example when a story contains characters whose names are identical to those of senior military figures—a not uncommon occurrence.

The PSB also monitors material closely for symbolic or hidden messages. Stories, including those with religious or cultural themes, with vague or ambiguous messages are not approved. No slang is allowed, no matter how widespread their use. Consumer complaints and criticisms of the private sector are sometimes permitted if the business concerned is not connected with the military leadership or their family members.

Government propaganda is compulsorily included in all publications and, since March 1999, weeklies owned by staff welfare committees have to reproduce from the government daily newspapers at least one article or a cartoon attacking Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party. All weekly magazines are from time to time also directed to include articles on matters

‘of contemporary interest’, for example denying rumours which are implicitly critical of the government or which the government is concerned could lead to unrest.

The obligation to include government propaganda is a particularly difficult requirement for publishers given the rather pathetic and puerile content of the official vitriol directed at Aung San Suu Kyi. The News and Periodicals Enterprise (NPE) is apparently so smug about the articles attacking the NLD that it had two compilations published in 1998 (News and Periodicals Enterprise, October 1998 and December 1998—all quotes are *sic*). Aung San Suu Kyi is variously described as ‘the unrivalled world-renown political stunt democracy princess’ (Pauksa 1998), ‘an animal with a long tale that has been placed on the throne’ (Sithu Nyein Aye 1998) and as ‘an axe-handle engaged in subversive acts to give trouble to Myanmar’ (Maung Kya Ban 1998). She is often referred to as ‘the wife of a White’ (Pauksa 1998) and in a bizarre denunciation she is addressed in the second person as follows: ‘...you are extremely hot or do you take pleasure scorching others as you are the one who possesses intense heat’ (Than Eint Hmu 1998).

Her crimes are numerous, often concerning her ‘doing paid jobs as assigned by the British and the US’ (Bamathi Khin Aung 1998), or along the lines of ‘the democracy miss champion of peace goes roving to the West bloc embassies and diplomatic mission heads residences having meals at mealtimes and tea at teatime’ (Maung Saw Tun 1998). One ingenious accusation concerns the many awards she has received including the Nobel Peace Prize which carries one million dollars. Daw Suu Kyi’s critics argued ‘that woman did not declare such amount of foreign currency, nor did she pay income tax and bring even a penny into Myanmar’ (U Mingala 1998).

The criticisms of Aung San Suu Kyi are complemented by incessant criticism of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA) foreign broadcasts to Burma. In one, the views of the generals on certain issues becomes quite clear. ‘Myanmars clearly know that democracy, human rights, freedom of the Press and free flow of news of the Western media are only lies and conspiracies to give trouble to Myanmar with evil intention’ (Thadindauk Thetsay 1998).

This is virtually the only sort of political commentary available to Burmese readers. There is no regular underground press in the print media.

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Unlawful organisations such as the Rangoon University Students' Union or the Young Monks' Union occasionally distribute photocopied leaflets, but possession of these is illegal and most people are reluctant to risk being seen reading them, given the severity of punishments for minor political 'crimes'. Political leaflets and newspapers printed in other countries are smuggled into Burma from time to time and their contents spread by word of mouth.

Although there is no Burmese *samizdat*, some unlawful publications do appear, including student guides, which are widely available and 'adult' literature, which is less so. A few foreign publications are available in supermarkets and bookstores and the major hotels generally have copies of daily newspapers from Singapore and the *International Herald Tribune*, but with contentious articles, such as the fall of Soeharto, clipped out. It is possible to subscribe to *Asiaweek* or *Reader's Digest* but subscribers are not allowed to receive them until PSB has removed any article deemed to be sensitive. The readership of English-language publications is quite low, around 2,500 copies in a country of nearly 50 million people.

The government controls the two television stations and one radio station. The Myanmar Television and Radio Department (MTRD) of the Ministry of Information runs one television station and the radio station, while the Public Relations and Psychological Warfare Department of the army runs the *Myawaddy* channel on television. Both organisations make their own programming decisions and approve all advertisements before putting them on air. MTRD tends to be the more conservative and businesses prefer to deal with the *Myawaddy* channel. *Myawaddy* also attracts a wider viewing audience, partly because it shows Taiwanese soap operas and movies. Approximately 10 per cent of the population own a television set and has access to local stations.

All radios are required by law to be registered but in practice this is widely ignored since cheap Chinese-made short wave radios began to flood the market in the 1990s. Costing about 2,500 kyats (about US\$12), they run reasonably well with 6 to 9 different short wave bands. Many people listen to Burmese-language radio programs broadcast by foreign stations. The BBC, VOA and RFA and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), based in Norway and run by exiled dissidents, are the most popular among Burmese listeners. Japanese NHK and the All India Radio also

have Burmese-language programs but do not attract a wide audience. While actual figures are impossible to obtain, a rough estimate would be that about ten per cent of the population listens to foreign short-wave broadcasts.

Satellite television is expensive and thus not widespread and, even among those who own receivers, many are hampered by the language barrier and end up watching mainly music and action movie programs. They are therefore of little interest to the government and its censors.

Burma's economic deterioration has seen a decline in the number of domestic motion pictures produced from over 60 a year in the 1970s to only 19 in 1998, while about 20 video movies are produced each month. Burmese movies are generally of low quality, both technically and artistically. While some filmmakers claim this is due to censorship, the reality is that soap operas, action movies, and comedies sell better. Many foreign movies, American, Chinese (Hong Kong) and Indian in particular, are available from video shops and remain uncensored, probably because of the comparatively few people with the money to buy them.

On the other hand, the music industry is closely scrutinised because cassette players are more widely owned. Prior to recording, a singer or a producer is obliged to submit the lyrics to PSB for scrutiny and official approval. Upon completion of recording, several copies of sample tapes together with the approved copy of lyrics must be resubmitted to PSB to check the singer's compliance. Advertisements for the album and even album covers require PSB's approval.

It is not surprising in a country where the regime insists on controlling all mass media that the Internet is not available. The military government understands that it would have difficulty controlling Internet material on the Internet and so the most sensible tactic from its perspective is to ban it. Unlike other governments who would be concerned to forgo the economic advantages of the Internet, SPDC is not uncomfortable with notions of autarky and seems prepared to accept the poverty that, inevitably, will accompany it.

Links to many sites about Burma including the Internet edition of the *New Light of Myanmar* may be accessed through the Burma Project on the Open Society web page at www.soros.org/.

Laos

A recent conversation reported as taking place between a diplomat and an editor of a Lao newspaper focused on how the newspaper could be made more readable and relevant to its readers, while not trespassing on forbidden ground. The diplomat suggested road accidents and the plight of the victims as a worthy subject. The editor recoiled in horror. 'Impossible', he explained, 'because children of one of the nation's leaders might have caused an accident and it could thus not risk being reported'.

The Lao media remains mired in its communist origins. There is certainly no freedom of the press and the public seems largely willing to accept the version of the news the authorities wish to present. While the content and tone of the media continues to be closely regulated by the ruling communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the industry is nevertheless cautiously seeking to reflect the sentiments and concerns of society, thereby hesitantly drifting away from its political *raison d'être* as a mere conduit for official ideology.

At first glance, Laos appears to have a healthy print media environment—along with the *Vientiane Times* and its French-language cousin *Le Renovateur*, there are a host of Lao-language papers. The major daily publications are *Pasason* (The People), *Viengchan Mai* (The New Vientiane), and *Khao San Pathet Lao* (Lao Nation's News Brief). Endorsed as the 'official voice of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party', *Pasason* is presented to the public as the pre-eminent information organ. Articles and editorials unreservedly reinforce and promote government policy. With its attention fixed firmly on domestic events, international coverage in *Pasason* tends to be an afterthought, with overseas stories normally sourced from Laos' fraternal neighbours, Vietnam and China. The Sunday edition of the paper seeks to offer lighter fare with politics giving way to sport, society and entertainment. In acting as the official mouthpiece of the Party, *Pasason* is supported by a raft of other publications—each of the LPRP's mass organisations (the Youth Union, Women's Union and Federation of Trade Unions) produces a monthly publication, with weekly newspapers published by the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Interior. *Pasason's* ideological responsibilities also colour its presentation. Over the past two years, the paper has substantially reduced the volume of advertising for fear that

its ideological message was becoming overwhelmed by trading notices and classifieds. This perceived conflict hints at the LPRP's deeper challenge: to maintain its political relevance in an increasingly market-oriented and open society.

Viengchan Mai's open-door approach to advertising has been central to its emergence as Laos' most popular paper. The paper's centrespread of classifieds selling haircuts, motorbikes, and construction materials is its major drawcard. In addition, *Viengchan Mai* offers a number of other features less prevalent in Party publications—a greater diversity of articles, more international news, short fictional stories, and special interest pieces. Producing a similar kind of product for readers in Laos' capital city are a number of other newspapers—such as the weekly publication *Viengchan Toolakith-Sangkom* (Vientiane Business and Social)—all of which seek to offer a richer diet of information whilst fulfilling their political dues to the Party.

Vientiane Times, however, has sought to push the boundaries of acceptability by cautiously reflecting community feelings on a range of politically sensitive issues—anger at the state of Vientiane's roads, concern over the slow response times of police, and frustration at the inviolability of the military from proper financial and legal scrutiny. These English-language articles have not been reprinted in the Lao-language press.

In the electronic media, the Lao population is served by three television stations—National Television, Channel Three (a former joint venture with a Thai company which has since been taken over by the Lao government), and Channel Five which shows a blend of French-language and Lao programs. Two radio stations also exist. Lao radio and television services are of minor significance however, because of the similarities of language: Lao viewers receive more entertaining and informative programs broadcast from Thailand. Along the Mekong Valley, where 75 per cent of the Lao population is located, households have switched *en masse* to signals from northeastern Thailand. In a survey of Vientiane society undertaken by Australian academic Grant Evans in 1998, 94 per cent of respondents indicated that they had tuned in to Thai television during the past week; significantly, 51 per cent of this group indicated that their motive was to view news and current affairs thereby pointing to widespread dissatisfaction with Lao news services (survey published by the Lao Institute for Cultural Relations but not yet distributed).

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The advent of the Internet—another threat to the Party’s ability to control information—has naturally raised alarm bells within official circles. After several years of cautious consideration, the government finally issued its Internet Decree in 1997. It divided authority for the Internet between four government ministries. In this highly confused environment, the Ministry of Information and Culture seized the initiative and struck a joint venture deal with a Philippines-registered company to become Laos’ first Internet service provider. In an intriguing bureaucratic tussle, the Communications Ministry has hit back by establishing a rival provider, and ominously holds the potential authority to starve its competitor of trunk lines. In the meantime, efforts have also been made to block sites considered either politically or morally undesirable for Lao users.

By the end of 1998, political hard-liners opposed to the arrival of the Internet in Laos could claim to have been vindicated when an ‘unauthorised’ *Vientiane Times* web page appeared, put up by overseas Lao in the United States. The page draws on the hardcopy version of the paper but is complemented by additional commentary which occasionally levels stinging criticism at authorities. Efforts by the Lao government to disclaim the site including prominent denunciations in the printed version have, of course, simply drawn greater attention to it. The unauthorised *Vientiane Times* web page may be viewed at www.vientianetimes.com/.

Mongolia

The bloodless ‘Democratic Revolution’ of 1990 with its massive popular demonstrations against the communist system resulted in a wide open stable door to a free press—but initially the journalist horses refused to bolt. In the state television station MRTV, for example, almost everything continued as before. MRTV operated sedately in the distant rear of the free press pack, persisting in its historical, life-long role as mouthpiece of the government—still resolutely communist. The old guard was in control of Mongolian broadcasting and the election of the reformed communists in the 1992 elections seemed to vindicate its inertia.

Observers watched the polling stations again in 1996—the second free elections for national parliament—as families dressed in their Sunday best rolled up to cast their votes in a turnout close to 95 per cent of the electorate. To many people’s surprise, the vote produced the first non-communist

government of Mongolia since 1921. The changes, which began with the people power movement of 1990, would now be accelerated, particularly through the privatisation of state-owned companies and the encouragement of competition.

These days there are more than 500 registered newspapers in Mongolia. Back in the 1980s all publications were owned by the State, but by 1998 a transition was underway and most newspapers became privately owned and operated. It was only from 1 April 1999 that the newspapers with the biggest circulation were placed 'on the market'. The country's very first regular publication, called *Capital News*, was printed in pre-communist Mongolia in 1913 but the first national newspaper was not published until 1924 when Soviet communism was the dominant influence. It was called *Unen* (Truth) and was a replica of the Soviet party paper, *Pravda*. *Unen* was generally understood to be a means of advancing party views and policies and was never considered an accurate news source. During the 1980s *Unen* sold 180,000 copies. Over the past few years interest in *Unen* has waned and in 1997 it changed its name to *Unen Uu?* ('Is It True?') as part of an unsuccessful readership push. Now, circulation is down to less than 10,000.

The newspaper with the largest readership is the daily, government-owned *Ardyn Erkh* (People's Right). Like its main competitors, *Zasgyn Gazryn Medee* (Government News) and the privately owned *Onoodor* (Today), the daily is a broadsheet and rarely more than eight pages. *Ardyn Erkh* was established in 1990 after a communist journalist defected from *Unen* and started the official publication. Both *Ardyn Erkh* and *Zasgyn Gazryn Medee* are scheduled for privatisation by the end of 1999 and legislation requires that 40 per cent of ownership will be offered to employees with the remainder auctioned.

Mongolia's first English-language publication, established in 1991, is *The Mongol Messenger*, owned and run by the government news agency, *Montsame*. Initially it was seen as a method of attracting foreign investment, but with an increasing number of foreigners living in Mongolia it has become a vital information source and a sound generator of advertising revenue. Its increased advertising content and considerable potential will make it a sought after publication when the time comes to privatise.

Other popular publications include the weekly *Ulaanbaatar* which is controlled by the Mayor's office; *Nugel Buyan* (Sin and Virtue) which is

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owned by the Police Department; *Haluun Khonjil* (Hot Blanket) published twice a month and privately owned; *Khuumun Bicheg* (Human Scripture) published by *Montsame* in traditional Mongolian script; and *Il Tovchoo* (Open Chronicle) which is a very popular privately owned weekly. The privately owned and scandalous weekly newspaper *Seruuleg* (Alarm) has also increased in popularity and circulation now stands at more than 25,000.

In addition to the State television stations (three in total) there are two privately run stations—one by a local entrepreneur and the other by an American Christian concern. The government-owned radio and television networks will not be privatised until the Law of Public Service Broadcasting is finalised. The erratic Mongolian television network, Channel 25, is owned by former Communist rebel Baldorj, whose growing media empire also includes the *Onoodor* newspaper, *Jaag* Radio and the city's second English weekly, the *UB Post*. Since 1995, there has been access to international satellite networks such as CNN, Star TV and Moscow TV.

Before 1989, the Ideology Department of the ruling Communist Party (Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party [MPRP]) issued guidelines for editorial policy. There was also a Censorship Bureau which examined and at times rejected publications before they went to press. The bureau was abolished in 1990 and the editors were given censorship control tempered by a list of 200 subjects to avoid. Ironically, it was after the MPRP was ousted from office and the Democratic Coalition came to power that the new government made moves to halt the publication of *The Mongol Messenger* because a particular front page was 'an international embarrassment'. The paper continued to be printed thanks to the journalistic principles of the news agency director who ignored the party directive.

Since 1994 the number of publications (including erotica) sold openly and seemingly without censorship, has increased and publishers basically print what they want when they want. As in so many countries where journalistic freedom has followed a period of authoritarian rule, however, the journalists have not been sufficiently responsible and there is a pressing need to improve journalistic ethics.

Journalists tend to belong either to the Mongolian Free Democratic Journalists Association or the Mongolian Journalists Union, but they both seem to spend more time opposing each other than pursuing issues of ethics, standards and workers' rights. Early on in Mongolia's transition

to a market economy, the Danish Government funded the development of the Press Institute of Mongolia. This has had positive effects on journalistic ethics in both the electronic and print media. The Institute also offered an alternative publishing house and since its inception the production quality of many newspapers has improved.

Officially, all foreign correspondents are supposed to register with the Ministry of External Relations and all foreigners entering the country for a period of more than 30 days must also register with the police.

Currently there are over 20 Internet cafes in Ulaanbaatar, with no restrictions on access. The casual user can access the Internet at any of the cafes for less than US\$2 an hour (the average family income is around US\$20 a week). International information is freely available from anywhere in the world. There are no apparent electronic fences. Domestic information is available on the daily independent update on the net, from the many newspapers and from radio and television stations. There seems little real possibility of controlling the competing flow of information via independent and foreign media, or the Internet. The state of the freedom of the press in Mongolia seems nearer the opposite end of the spectrum from that ten years ago; all that is needed, it seems, may be a better observance of the code of ethics by the journalists themselves.

Media websites

Mongolian National News Agency, www.mol.mn/montsame/

Mongolia Online 2000, www.mol.mn/

Mongolian Government State Property Committee (SPC),
www.spc.gov.mn/

Mongolian Ministry of External Relations, www.mol.mn/mer/

Brunei

In the tiny kingdom of Brunei, the authorities control the content of the local television and newspapers and reporting and programming is bland and matter of fact. There is no editorial page in the papers and little comment on government press statements or policies. A readers' letter page introduced in 1997 is a very popular vehicle for voicing discontent on a number of local issues. The family of Foreign Minister Prince Mohamed owns the major English-language paper, the *Borneo Bulletin*,

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and staff understand the limits of what they can and can't report. Local television is state owned and features significant religious content.

A new daily English-language paper, *News Express*, commenced publication in Brunei in time for the Southeast Asian Games in August 1999. The paper initially concentrated mainly on the Games and it is not clear if it will challenge the *Borneo Bulletin*. Singapore and Malaysian papers are also available.

Satellite dishes are permitted and for a small fee viewers can access *Kristal TV* which is a cabled local version of Star TV. Australian Television is available and viewers can subscribe to the Malaysian TV service ASTRO. Some overseas publications are not allowed in the country and others are stopped from time to time if they have an article that the local authorities consider offensive. Some women's magazines have bare skin blacked out to meet local Islamic sensitivities. *Kristal* censors MTV, the music channel, because of immodest dress and perhaps because of the lyrics of some songs. The Internet appears to be free of interference.

There is legislation covering visiting journalists, but those few who go to Bandar Seri Begawan tend to do so without necessarily letting the relevant authorities know.

Cambodia

Did the Prime Minister's wife have the Prime Minister's movie star girlfriend murdered in the hail of assassin's bullets on 6 July 1999? This is the question Cambodian newspapers are daring to ask after the accusation was first leveled at Bun Rany, wife of Hun Sen, by a French weekly news magazine, *L'Express* (Louyot 1999). The death of Piseth Pilika had touched a nerve in a Cambodian society inured by decades of war, genocide, communism and uncertainty. Cambodia's most popular movie star, a beautiful young woman, had been shot dead in broad daylight and, naturally, the press reported fully. But the test for the Cambodia press was whether it would also report the allegations of the Prime Minister's wife's involvement. To their credit, many newspapers did. The issue could no longer be ignored. Mrs Bun Rany claimed to have been libelled and said she would sue the French magazine. The issue was in the public domain, the press had done its job. It is unthinkable that Hun Sen in the communist era before the UN intervention would ever have allowed such

an accusation to be published anywhere in Cambodia. But with Cambodia groping towards multi-party democracy, the Prime Minister no longer has total power to direct the media.

Descriptions of Cambodia's press are usually paraphrased with a paradox: 'vigorous but not professional' or 'free but not responsible'. Freedom of the press is, indeed, a complicated and paradoxical issue in Cambodia; as in so many other areas of public life, the relatively recent imposition of multi-party democracy sits uncomfortably with the leadership's autocratic instincts. The media as it now exists in Cambodia, essentially began with the UNTAC regime in 1992–93. The regime attempted by means of military demobilisation, law reform and democratic elections, to bring democracy to Cambodia. The legal regime introduced by UNTAC included a constitution guaranteeing that 'Khmer citizens shall have freedom of expression, press, publication and assembly'.

The response was the emergence of a huge number of new newspapers and bulletins, the vast majority in the Khmer language, but several written in English, French and even Japanese. From the beginning, most of these publications were affiliated with political parties and used their new-found media freedom to write biased and often slanderous stories about their rivals and to publish aggressive opinion pieces about the issues of the day. Deeply scarred by the destruction of all media during the Khmer Rouge era of 1975–79 and followed by the restrictions of an old-style communist regime for 12 years thereafter, Cambodia lacked capable journalists and any tradition of a free and responsible press.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, the free press flourished with little interference during the UNTAC period. Following the election of a fragile coalition and the departure of the UN administrators, however, the situation deteriorated rapidly. In 1994, the media was rocked by the murder of two newspaper editors and one journalist, as well as a grenade attack on the office of one newspaper that injured five, including two staff members. All of the publications involved were anti-Cambodian People's Party (CPP)—the junior, but powerful, partner in the coalition government. There have been sporadic attacks on journalists and editors every year since by unknown assailants invariably following criticism of the government or government officials in the newspapers involved. Murders of editors critical of the regime in 1996 and 1998 point to the fact that the ultimate form of censorship remains in use in Cambodia.

Losing control

In addition, the CPP-dominated government, a descendant of the previous Communist leadership, exercised ever-tighter control over the Cambodian press. Cambodia's 1995 Law on the Regime of the Press reiterated the constitution's guarantee of press freedom, but allowed the Ministry of Information to take action against the press for a range of offences, including the broad power to suspend publications for printing 'any information that may cause harm to national security or political stability'. Ostensibly under the authority of this law, many newspapers have been threatened with closure and several shut down or suspended, for the publication or broadcast of material deemed 'inappropriate', usually because it was critical of the political leadership or the King.

In early 1998 the Ministry of Information suspended several newspapers on the grounds that they had insulted national leaders and threatened national security. The Ministry ordered the seizure of all copies of these newspapers and banned companies from printing the publications. The six opposition newspapers, *Samleng Samapheap*, *Antarakum*, *Kummit Kaun Khmer*, *Proyuth*, *Neak Tosu* and *Kolvoth Angkor*, had criticised Co-Premier Hun Sen.

Following elections and the formation of a new coalition government in late 1998, suppression of the Cambodian press relaxed along with the general political atmosphere. The new Minister for Information, representing the junior coalition party (FUNCINPEC), stated his intention to allow press freedom and improve the quality of the press, saying 'my duty is not to close down newspapers, but to guide them the right way'. This guidance has translated into a new and vigorously pursued concern to preserve Khmer culture by attempting to ban foreign words and foreign influences from the Khmer media.

Cambodian newspapers in 1999 remain consumed with politics and crime. They are notable mostly for the poor quality of reporting, short on fact but expansive on aggressively stated opinion, and for the increasingly violent, often colour, photographs of murder and accident victims routinely gracing the front pages. Almost all the Cambodian newspapers have proven unable to move beyond their political biases, and the reason for this is, at least in part, economic. With over 200 newspapers registered with the Ministry of Information (of which 30 or so publish at least weekly) and a paucity of paid advertising to go around, most rely on wealthy patrons, with various political allegiances and agendas, to stay in business.

One newspaper trainee recently told a foreign analyst that 'the industry we work in is not journalism, it's politics'.

Moreover, despite the return of political stability, the ruling party and its ideas about controlling information largely remain in place. Journalists admit that they still work within an enduring climate of fear, such that investigative journalism and stories reflecting badly on those in power are often self-censored. The 1995 Press Law still awaits amendment, and the Ministry of Information's attempts to draft media regulations clarifying its powers over the press have been met with criticism.

It was to the great credit of the fortnightly English-language *Phnom Penh Post* that it produced a series of articles in mid 1999 on corruption in Cambodia. The articles criticised the government's approach and called for tighter legislation. That these articles seemed to be accepted as a legitimate part of national debate on the issue speaks well for the growing tolerance of the diversity of political opinion in Cambodia.

The electronic media is a slightly different phenomenon. It is tightly government controlled, with the ruling CPP controlling all six of Cambodia's local television stations and eleven of its twelve radio stations (the twelfth, owned by an outspoken government critic, was shut down for several months for 'irresponsible broadcasting' during 1998–99). A small number of stations previously controlled by other parties were lost to CPP during the political upheaval of 1997.

Coverage of news and politics in the electronic media is minimal with news-reports tending to focus on the public activities of political leaders. Speeches and press conferences by the Prime Minister are frequently broadcast on all channels concurrently during prime time.

During the 1998 election, freedom of the electronic media emerged as a significant issue for opposition political parties and human rights groups. The United Nations Centre for Human Rights in Cambodia published several reports criticising the lack of access for other parties to the electronic media, and the blatant bias in reporting on political issues (United Nations 1998a, 1998b). One example often noted is that the return of ousted Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh from self-exile in early 1998 was the top story on CNN's worldwide coverage of the day, but failed to be even mentioned on any of Cambodia's local stations. The bias problem was only partly resolved by the late-passage of special provisions allowing airtime to all parties during the designated campaign period.

Losing control

In the post-election environment the electronic media does not play a particularly significant political role. It continues to broadcast *karaoke* and movies rather than news and politics. There appears to be no move to reform what news and political coverage exists. Opposition parties and human rights groups are already preparing to fight the same battles for the airwaves in the 2000 local-level election campaign as they did in 1998.

Media websites

Cambodian Internet Service Provider, www.cambodian.com/

Phnom Penh Daily, www.phnompenhdaily.com/

National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia,
www.cambodian-parliament.org/

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