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Speech to be given by Chea Sotheacheath,
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I am here to speak about the role that the media plays and the role that the media should play in the creation and development of national identity.

Because I am a print journalist, I will focus my speech mostly on print journalism. And because I am a journalist, I will offer you the opinions of people I have spoken with, rather than my own opinions. Us journalists are not supposed to have opinions when we work, so I will try my best not to offer any.

Many of the reporters that I spoke with suggested that the issue is black and white. They said that the media should do its job and cover stories. News should be objective. News should not affect or be affected by the national identity. I could end the speech here, but that might be a little too easy and the speech might be a little bit short.

Journalists should not have opinions. We are supposed to have facts, and occasionally hunches. In preparing for this speech I had a hunch that I should talk to some other people, people who know the issues well. To start with, I decided to talk with someone who could identify the Cambodian national identity. So I went and talked to Cambodia's Minister of Culture, Nouth Nareng.

He said that national identity in Cambodia is a complex issue. That was not the answer that I wanted to hear. I was hoping for a simple answer, but work is never so easy.

"The national identity is the transmission of each generation's legacy to the next," he said.

Well, that is all good and fine, but what does that mean in Cambodia where the legacy is so mixed up as a result of recent history. I asked him to be more concrete. He said that symbols might be a good place to start. He suggested that the snake is the animal that best represents Cambodia. It can live in the water or on land, and it can change itself according to its surroundings and its needs. The crocodile and the dragon are also powerful symbols, and the same applies to them, he told me.

The Minister told me that the Cambodian national identity comes from a number of things: history, daily life, the land, a moral code, an artistic code and climate. It is how we eat rice, how we work the fields (we cultivate sugar cane for example). It is how we domesticate animals and use our boats. It is the way we wear clothes, such as the "Krama" (a checkered scarf). The national

identity can be found in traditional clothes, which tend to be shiny and sleek. Our songs also help define us. They are fluid and shrill, and contain many solitary voices. There is also the distinct movements of our dances, which focus movement and attention on our hands and feet, which often move in spiral forms (like the snake).

The sum of our history combines with our present and our cultural heritage to form the national identity. Every regime leaves a mark on it. "They all have left glorious or shameful monuments," he said.

He also told me that the moral identity of Cambodia "was left in ruins for 20 years. We are in the process of putting it back together piece by piece. It isn't easy," he said.

In the end, the Minister of Culture told me, our national identity is the "creation of a common voice." He said it is the outer skin that the people of the country create. It is the merger of tradition with modern life."

So, what is this "outer skin" of national identity for?

The Minister of Culture told me that a firm sense of national identity can do two important things. It can help people to resist the challenges of the new world as they continue with their traditional views of themselves and their country. Or, it can help them to integrate the new world into their daily lives in a healthier way. In short, he explained that consumerism must be balanced by pagoda life, teachers, the wisdom of elders.

I also asked him about the challenges that the national identity faces from the media and modern communications?

He pointed out that the national identity has faced a whole lot of difficulties during my life. There was the decade of strife and destruction in the 1970s, and then the involvement of Vietnam, and its cultural legacy in the 1980s. The Cambodian national identity has faced some real challenges. While few of them had anything to do with the media then, more recently they have.

The media changed with the arrival of the massive United Nations involvement in 1991. Untac brought changed the Cambodian media and the way we saw ourselves in many ways. Suddenly there was a massive external force in the country. It had an enormous effect on the national identity. Untac brought its own independent radio and television. All the other stations were controlled by different political factions. Untac offered what was called objective broadcasting, without any partisan political bias, although it was obviously marked by the people who broadcast it.

Untac was influenced by France, the US, Peru, Bolivia, Central Africa, and countless other countries.

The Minister of Culture said that Untac was "very well done," but he noted that it introduced lifestyles that Cambodia was not necessarily ready for.

The media assault on the national identity continued after the 1993 elections. Foreign media became more common. Much of the new media no longer had the goal of creating a space for political debate--although some did. Much of it was dedicated to making money or bringing consumer values to Cambodia.

Now we have Thailand's ABC which broadcasts Thai values into Cambodia. Other channels are broadcasting other values that are also affecting the way Cambodians view themselves and each other.

Violent television shows are common. They are in Chinese and Thai. The Minister of Culture said to me, "If ever there was a country that has seen enough violence of its own, it is Cambodia. We have already seen enough violence, we need other things, things that will pacify. Every time you turn on the television there is another Chinese TV show. Cambodia is not ready for such violent content as it aims to attain social rehabilitation."

While the provinces have had some success in resisting the attack on Cambodia's cultural identity, the capital is having less success. In the cities, it is not rare to see a monk on a motor scooter smoking cigarettes, wearing an American baseball hat and carrying a suitcase.

Maybe this is because most of the media is centered in Phnom Penh. While Cambodia's seven radio stations and four television stations reach most of the country, the printed press is centered in Phnom Penh. The media is centered in the capital for the obvious reasons: communications with many provinces are limited.

The Minister of Culture also told me that the influence of Thailand is increasing, which might be caused, in part, by the media. Close cultural and historic links between Thailand and Cambodia facilitate make it easier for the media to pass along cultural change to a generation of Cambodians.

Young people now wear different clothes, use beauty products, and especially makeup, that was rare before. Consumer culture is replacing parts of traditional culture. This is especially poignant in a country where currency and personal ownership was prohibited only 17 years ago.

Now we also have pornographic films in a country that previously had none.

Additionally, the traditional clothing often seen in the 1960s is generally reserved for ceremonies now. When the clothes changed, an important part of the national identity was lost, according to the Cultural Minister.

Even the language may come under attack as English--the language of Asean--becomes more common. Chinese is also becoming more prevalent, while French may become less important.

Even the food has changed. We use many spices now that we never used before. Spices used in Thailand are becoming more prevalent.

With all this in mind I decided to speak with some media experts, perhaps the best one to refer to here is the Minister of Information Ieng Mouly. I thought that speaking to him might bring some of the key issues facing Cambodia's into this hazy discussion of culture. I thought that he could highlight some of the battles that are going on within the media, and between the media and the government, battles that are essentially over press freedoms and, ultimately, the national identity.

He said that the printed press may not be as powerful as we believe, noting that about 100,000 people read the newspaper on a regular basis in a country of 10 million.

He said that media access is going to play a key issue in the coming years, especially because there is no Untac to guarantee that Cambodia's multitude of political parties have access to the air waves. He said that a broadcasting law and an election law must be passed to give political parties television access, like in the Untac period. We will see if that actually occurs.

The question of whether political parties outside of the fragile governing coalition will be able to mount their own radio stations is one being asked all throughout the government. The Minister promised that access will be "like during Untac." He said that every party will have access to the media, but many people do not think that the choice is entirely his. Many people question whether the Ministry of Information is under pressure from parts of the government coalition, which could prevent it from being like Untac. The Minister of Information said that it is not his fault if his Ministry is not objective.

"We have to recognize that people have worked [at the Ministry of Information] for a long time. I don't know if they are

all members of the Cambodian People's Party, but some of them have worked here since 1979 [when the CPP came to power]. Sometimes they are more receptive to [their old bosses] than to us, who come from the outside. It is not a policy, but it is a practice," he said.

Some electoral experts say that a neutral radio, television and printed press can help make the coming elections more fair by allowing a variety of viewpoints to be offered and by allowing solutions to be discussed. A war of ideas is better than a war of words, they say. Skirmishes between members of the two government coalitions in the city of Battambang last weekend only underscore the importance of dialogue over bullets.

The Information Minister also said, "Cambodia must enjoy freedom of the press, opinion and association. But I am concerned that we just returned from war, from a time of social disintegration. We need to rebuild, to unite our forces to live [better] and then enjoy that right. What we are concerned about is how to strengthen national unity, how to build it up. We want every member of society, including journalists to understand that. They can use their rights to contribute to the effort of rebuilding the country. So there are degrees, there are steps that every Cambodian has to follow. We can talk about everything because we have the right and the freedom to do that. But if you just look at the interests of the people, the interests of the nation, we must set our priorities," he said.

"If we compare our country to Western countries, we must have the same rights as Western countries like France, the United States and Australia, but the problem is that we are in the process of rebuilding the institutions that support all those rights. In those countries, they have had those institution for several hundred years. But I am optimistic, I think that time will help our people to understand that before we reach the final objective, we have to restrain ourselves. Everyone, including the people in the government, the media and the elderly people [must be involved]. Until we completely build all the needed institutions," he added.

He continued, "Look back to the past and then make comparisons, to look at what we have now compared to what we had before. And you can see the progress and the failures. It seems there is some progress."

He also said that Cambodia must do everything it can to remain united. "If we fall into that trap that Cambodians have to fight together, I think the people will suffer. We have to do everything not to go back to the past and then try to move

forward little by little. I am optimistic that we can move forward," he said.

He noted that journalistic standards, if followed, would address many of the concerns about the positive and negative influences that the media can have over the people. He suggested that a lack of training is what can be most destructive in the Cambodian situation.

"Journalistic professionalism is very important; looking at two or more sides of a story. We have to exclude rumor and innuendo, and avoid incitement to violence. We have to be tolerant," he said.

"Cambodian society must strengthen institutions so that people can gradually use their rights and freedoms. The press has to use their self-censorship. If you fulfill your responsibility, we will reach a better society. If journalists offer balanced coverage of any story, there will be no problem. As Buddhists, we must be responsible. Some articles may incite people to violence. First they will have to do self-censorship. Cambodia's press law says that lies allow the authorities to establish law and order," he said.

On the one hand, the Minister is saying that there should be freedom of the press, but on the other hand he is saying that Cambodia is not necessarily ready for it. In short, he is saying that Cambodia is not culturally ready for it.

Again, I want to reiterate that these are not the opinions of a journalist, but rather of the people that I interviewed. Thank you.