Old Conflict, New Digital Terrain: Assessing the role of social media in the Cambodian political process

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Thesis submitted for the award of Ph.D.

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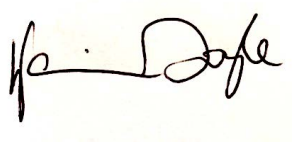
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Declaration

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Dedicated to my dear mother, Irene Doyle, who brought books into my life and the worlds they opened in my mind.

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I hope that this work helps others to understand your country a little better.

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Abstract

Kevin Doyle

Old Conflict, New Digital Terrain: Assessing the role of social media in the Cambodian political process.

This thesis examines the role of social media in Cambodia's political process, in terms of the affordances and limitations of networked digital platforms for progressive social actors and the adaptive strategies of authoritarian forces. Its purpose is to understand the use and meaning of social media for elite and everyday users in Cambodia, and the influence of such technology on the practice of politics, including at times of electoral competition. Through a qualitative research approach involving the triangulation of four research methods, including 60 in-depth interviews, a media diary-keeping exercise, a focus group discussion, and thematic analysis of 15 months of social media posts by four leading political figures, the study focuses on Cambodia's 2017 and 2018 election period to assess the character and place of social media in the political process. The findings of this research provide insight as to how senior Cambodian political figures, civil society actors, and everyday people use social media platforms, and the meaning attributed, and agency imagined, of that usage on a personal, political, and symbolic level. The study engages with the work of Pierre Bourdieu as a theoretical frame through which to investigate and interpret key themes identified in analysis of the data gathered during fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. Bourdieu's field theory and related concepts assist in understanding the persistence and replication of dominant societal and political structures in Cambodia despite substantial social and technological transformation. The research findings de-centre technology in revealing social and symbolic processes in a new information and communication environment. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of social media in terms of agentic affordances and constraints, and the centrality of community and historical context in the process of communication, mediation, and the personal strategies of individuals living under repressive regimes.

Chapter One

Situating the Research Problem

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation stems from debate in recent years regarding the liberating potential of online technology. Particularly, that social media offered affordances for democratic forces in repressive societies—a narrative that emerged in the period known as the Arab Spring (Loader and Mercea 2011; Hirst 2012; Olorunnisol and Martin 2013) from 2009 onwards and was later transposed to Cambodia in 2013 (Finsen 2015). Resurrecting a Cold War metaphor, Evgeny Morozov (2011) argues that a revisionist domino theory was reclaimed on the side of social media and democracy activists who tended to believe that with enough internet bandwidth, tweets and Facebook shares, there would be a generalized undermining of the world's authoritarian regimes, which would be followed by their eventual collapse. Mostly Western commentators revealed in such narratives a deep yearning for technology to provide answers to difficult questions facing societies and had ignored that autocratic regimes could just as quickly refashion the internet as a 'powerful tool of oppression' (2011, p. 27). The promise of digital technology affording new democratic models is not a new concept. Ruminations on a digital democracy emerged in the early 1990s (Rheingold 1993) on a wave of optimism that the horizontal nature of the internet's information and communication flows would replace the vertical, top-down structure of traditional politics. Yet, even in those early years, Rheingold, a prophet of the democratising power of computer-mediated communication, warned of the danger of 'disinformocracy' and neutralizing of 'the nature of discourse by inventing a kind of paid fake discourse' (Rheingold 1993, Chapter 10, para. 22). Cyber-utopians, according to Morozov, failed to understand that authoritarians feared digital cameras far less than they feared losing power. At the time of Morozov publishing his contrarian views, protests were rumbling to a close across the Middle East and North Africa, largely without the liberation technology zeitgeist having delivered on the anticipated triumph of democracy. Rather than disappear, narratives of technology-afforded liberation relocated to other countries, including Cambodia.

Opposition political figures and civil society groups were among the early adopters and, initially, social media was associated in Cambodia with progressive forces and the highlighting of social injustice and demands for more democratic governance (Soeung 2013; Finsen 2015). Social media allowed for the airing of public concerns that were, prior to the availability of such platforms, largely absent from Cambodia's domestic media, particularly broadcast, where a tradition of self-censorship and partisan coverage had ensured pro-government perspectives dominated (Licadho 2008; Quinn 2014). Akin to James C. Scott's (1990) description of the sudden rupture in the *cordon sanitaire* between hidden and public transcripts of resistance in authoritarian societies, a surprise election result in 2013 almost defeated Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's decades of authoritarian rule and propelled the social media narrative to the fore. The election result was so unexpected that Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox (2013) had published a conference paper just weeks in advance stating that Hun Sen's government would 'win by a landslide' and declared that though Cambodian people were free to express their displeasure with the government 'in the privacy of the voting booth… they won't' (p. 23). The authors also prematurely lamented how little had changed politically despite the investment of tens millions of dollars in educating Cambodians on the benefits of democratic processes. Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox were incorrect in judging negatively the ability of Cambodians to understand the benefits of the democratic process in 2013—when Hun Sen almost lost the election. However, they could be judged correct on how little does change in Cambodian society despite people having demonstrated their desire for more democratic transformations. The role of a 'highly-predatory state structure' (Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox, 2013, p. 3) in maintaining an authoritarian status quo should not be under-estimated, though it does not explain all, and findings in this research will demonstrate how people often acquiesce and dissimulate in authoritarian contexts.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2013 election, media commentary credited the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party's (CNRP) surprise surge in support to social media's mobilisation of a younger generation of voter. Such discourse accompanying the popularising of social media in Cambodia echoes accounts in other parts of the developing world where Western technology is attributed power to transform distant societies (Kraidy 2016). And similar to the events of the Arab Spring, what transpired in Cambodia in 2013 and the election result turned out to be a brief anomaly in the history of the country; a momentary period of regime disruption that was recognized by the political elite who adapted to the new technological conditions rather than reform socio-political relations. At first dismissive and

later increasingly cognisant of the challenges posed by new online information and communication technology (ICT), the government studied social media until ready to adopt and co-opt. By 2015, Hun Sen had pivoted from denials of possessing a Facebook account (Willemyns and Kuch 2015) to placing the social network at the centre of his personal political strategy while also devising new laws to deal with online critics (Mech 2015; Human Rights Watch 2020). By February 2018, the mid-point of this study, Hun Sen had almost 9.4 million followers of his personal Facebook page, which he employed as a primary mode of communication with Cambodia's 16 million citizens, 43 percent of whom had active Facebook accounts (We Are Social/Hootsuite 2018). Such developments mark an immense transformation in the circulation of information and communication in Cambodian society, and the practice of politics. By way of comparison, in 2012 just 16% of Cambodians had access to the internet and social media penetration was 5% (Kemp 2012).

Norén-Nilsson and Bourdier (2019) describe the period in Cambodia between 2013 and 2018 as a 'political rollercoaster' that left 'no aspect of social and political life unaffected' (p. 3). The result of the 2013 election and events afterward, the authors note, were the surface manifestation of a long questioned relationship between the state and its citizens that had been 'framed and reframed' for decades by activists in social and land rights movements. The diminished popularity of Hun Sen was laid bare in 2013 and his decades of leadership were denounced in mass street protests where previously unheard of calls for him to step down were aired in public and circulated to a growing audience on social media. This period of mass public demonstrations subsided in the first week of 2014 when security forces violently cleared a protest camp in Phnom Penh and, the following day, shot dead several protesters at the site of unrest by striking factory workers who had aligned their cause for better pay and conditions with the political opposition. What occurred with social media in Cambodia has played out in similar patterns elsewhere—where established power has adapted and adopted new technology to reinforce old regimes. Seva Gunitsky (2015) proposes four mechanisms by which social media supports autocratic resilience in regimes around the world: a.) affording regimes the ability to counter-mobilise using social media, b.) providing new channels to frame discourse supportive of the regime, c.) allowing regimes to understand audiences thorough preferences divulged online, and d.) social media providing new ways for elite coordination within a regime. Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) note that in 'third-generation controls' of cyberspace by authoritarian states, the emphasis is less on *denying* access but successfully *competing* online through a mix of disinformation and the spectacle of online support for government as

a means of projecting legitimacy through sheer digital presence. Social media has afforded authoritarian regimes new opportunities to co-opt, control, and manipulate information and communication.

Narratives of social media spurring protest movements and supporting more participatory democracy have in recent times shifted from a reversal (Morozov 2011; Tufecki 2014) to full-blown retreat (Moore 2018; Pomerantsev 2015, 2019). At the start of this research in 2016 the annual Freedom House report on global internet access noted that internet freedom had declined worldwide for the sixth consecutive year as governments increasingly targeted users of social media and other communication apps. Nevertheless, Freedom House remained confident the internet was 'an indispensable tool for promoting social justice and political liberty' and for 'citizens worldwide to fight for their rights' and demand accountability. Three years later, at the close of this research, the same Freedom House report (Shahbaz and Funk 2019) spoke of the 'crisis of social media' and lamented that 'what was once a liberating technology had become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation.' Authoritarian governments globally, particularly China and Russia, had dimmed 'the prospects for technology to deliver greater human rights', according to Freedom House, and the future of internet freedom was now dependent on finding a 'fix' for digitally networked platforms, particularly as new emerging technologies, such as fifth generation mobile phones, advanced biometrics and artificial intelligence offered 'new opportunities for human development' and, conversely, new challenges for human rights. There is a persistence evident here in the decades-old narrative and iterations of Ithiel de Sola Pool's 'technologies of freedom' (1983) where new possibilities for human and societal transformation are made possible by ever-more advanced technologies of communication. Social media requires repair, we are told, to ensure the twin projects of the internet and freedom continue. What that 'freedom' constitutes, however, requires deeper scrutiny as the Freedom House report also acknowledges the practice of Silicon Valley firms in the unregulated harvesting and selling of user data and the role of governments, including the US, its military, and private companies in developing and exporting advanced equipment for online surveillance. The threats posed by authoritarian states and digital surveillance are apparent. However, digital surveillance capitalism as a business model appears to be an accepted practice (Fuchs 2014) where firms such as Google and Facebook leverage the inadequacy of legal regulation over online space and exploit user data and privacy with appeals to the imperatives of innovation and technological progress (Zuboff 2019, p. 104).

Still, a danger exists in surrendering to the pessimism of the authoritarian affordances of social media as both the utopian and dystopian positions regarding the affordances of social media platforms eventually become opposites on the same spectrum, and at each extreme the argument becomes technologically deterministic (Smith and Marx 1994). To mitigate against a 'one-sided diagnosis' on either the cyber-utopia or cyber-dystopia (Goode 2005, p. 110) sides of the social media debate, this research employed a qualitative methodology that endeavoured to understand the socially constructed meanings of social media use in Cambodia. It will be demonstrated in this research how social media as an information and communication technology afforded and limited; how social media acquired meaning in its adoption and application by agents and, therein, both technology and society were mutually co-constituted in the process. The process of mediation (Couldry 2008; Livingstone 2009; Dahlgren and Alvares 2013) recognises this ongoing and fluid process of media production, circulation, interpretation, re-interpretation, appropriation, and the dynamic interaction of media, self, and society where 'no single component assumes priority but that they are all involved' (Siapera 2018, p. 15). Thus, this research explores how social media in Cambodia's political process can only be understood in relation to the character of the society in which individual users and the technology is situated.

1.2 Introducing the research questions

This study stemmed from an unease with popular narratives that emerged in the aftermath of Cambodia's 2013 election where the unexpected result for the political opposition led to answers being sought in technology (Greenwood 2013; Finsen 2015). Visions of the technological affordances of social media platforms advancing democracy in Cambodia resonated with popular international media narratives at that time and, is so doing, denigrated the agency of Cambodians. Having spent more than 30 years involved with Cambodia, including almost 20 years living in the country and working as a journalist, I was drawn to conduct this study to assess whether a new information and communication technology could be determining in terms of social and political processes, and to understand the democratic affordances (and limitations) of social media within a repressive political culture. An opportunity to address such questions presented when Cambodia hosted elections in 2017 and 2018. Within a 14-month period, two national elections—local elections and a general

election—were scheduled. Thus, this study was formulated to test the following research questions:

RQ.1. What role has social media played in Cambodia's political process? To answer this question, this study analysed how influential social media users, including senior officials in Hun Sen's ruling party, opposition parties, civil society actors, as well as everyday people used social media and what meanings they imputed to such usage. To deepen understanding of the affordances and limitation of social media for both elite and everyday users, a subsidiary question was scrutinised:

RQ.1a. How had Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling party responded to the challenges posed by a new ICT? Here the study was concerned with the nature and character of the government's response to social media. By analysing their response, this study sought to identify the manifest and symbolic methods of co-opting and control employed—and their effectiveness. Five years after the 2013 election, the final research question to be posed:

RQ.1b. How influential was social media in the 2018 national election? In posing this question, the study addresses the importance of social media for the political preferences of everyday people. Whereas a popular media narrative positioned social media on the side of democratic forces in 2013, by 2018 social media platforms were aligned in media narratives on the side of Hun Sen. This study illuminates the personal decision-making of research participants regarding voting and social media usage in the context of social and political forces at play in 2018. Before proceeding further, it is important to address the character of political competition in Cambodia, and to define key concepts used in this study, such as social media, user, and affordance.

1.3 The Cambodian context: Politics as war

Cambodia's claim to being a nominal multi-party democracy, as the Constitution asserts, is owed largely to the holding of elections every five years. Elections in Cambodia, however, provide what Sullivan (2016) describes as a 'democratic façade' and adhere to Schedler's (2002) description of a 'desultory mix of freedoms and controls' (p. 43) that characterise the electoral autocracies of Southeast Asia; voting neither succumbs to crass repression nor is it an

expression of democratic principles. Rather, elections are engineered to ensure that incumbents retain their grip on power, often by finding ways to manufacture the failure of the political opposition through legal methods that exclude, marginalise, divide, and fragment (ibid.).

Cambodian democracy has been qualified with such prefixes as nascent, fledgling, tottering, and failed. Morgenbesser (2018) highlights the range of classifications and notes that Cambodia had been described as, alternatively, a 'limited multi-party regime, civilian dictatorship, electoral autocracy, and party-based regime' (p. 192). Critiquing the limitations of such classifications, Morgenbesser proposes a further formulation: 'a party-personalist regime/dictatorship'. Springer (2010, 2015) defines Cambodia in terms of a neo-authoritarian neoliberal regime of accumulation, and Norén-Nilsson (2018) usefully employs the term competitive electoral authoritarianism owing to the holding of regular elections. David Chandler (1996, 2016) describes politics in Cambodia, traditionally, as a 'brutally contested, zero-sum game' where 'winners have been expected to take all and losers have been expected to collapse, change sides, or disappear' (2016, p. xiii). The roots of Hun Sen's rise to political power are founded in the Khmer Rouge movement that seized control of the country from 1975-1979 and implemented a radical social experiment, inspired by the Maoist revolution in China, that left millions dead. The leadership of Hun Sen's ruling party mostly hailed from rural backgrounds and their first introduction to politics was under the authoritarian Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the 1950s and 1960s, then with the Khmer Rouge (Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox 2013, p. 23). Politics in Cambodia, the authors note, has not been about appealing to voters but of conscripting 'followers' into patronage networks in a competition for power. In the 1990s, Hughes (2002) notes that political parties preferred 'civil war identities and strategies' instead of dealing with the concerns of the people they were elected to represent (p. 167). Hun Sen was a military commander with the Khmer Rouge before joining Vietnamese forces to topple Pol Pot in 1979. The president of the National Assembly, Heng Samrin, was also a Khmer Rouge commander and Chea Sim, the ruling party's late president, and until his death in 2015 President of the Cambodian Senate, was also a Khmer Rouge cadre serving in the eastern military zone with both Hun Sen and Heng Samrin (Gottesman 2004, Norén-Nilsson 2016). Politics and war continue to echo in Hun Sen's official title, *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo*, which translates roughly as 'Greatest Commander-in-Chief and Powerful' (Ben and Peter 2016). Defining the exact character of the political process that prevails in Cambodia has many iterations though there is agreement on the authoritarian nature of national leadership. Thus, the work of Michel Foucault (1995, 2003) assists in understanding the character of

competition for political power in contemporary Cambodia, particularly as Foucault problematised the strategic arrangements and practice of war as a model for the development of political cultures. Rather than accept the 'ideal genesis of the state' (Foucault 2003, p. 265) as conveyed through historical discourses that favoured the juridical-philosophical and law as the natural manifestation of legitimate power, Foucault argues that state power should be studied as relations of force that intersect, negate, conflict and refer to one another. When political systems and civil society had emerged out of the mud and blood of battlefields, Foucault proposed that politics becomes the continuation of war and not its cessation in the modern state. Foucault's proposal inverts Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's (1780-1831) reflection on the political nature of conflict. For Clausewitz, 'war is merely a continuation of policy by other means' (Clausewitz 1976, p. 87). For Foucault, politics is often the continuation of warfare not its erasure; military institutions and war being the 'historical principle' that animates politics in society (Foucault 2003, p. 18); where the foundation of states are the project of both jurists and soldiers: 'not only the men of the courts, but also the men of the camps' (Foucault 1995, p. 169). Interesting to note that Mao Tse-Tsung, an early supporter of the Khmer Rouge (Mertha 2014), pre-empted Foucault's reworking of Clausewitz by several decades when he stated in 1936 that politics was not the cessation of war, but its transformation: 'Politics is war without bloodshed' (Adie 1972, p. 1). Reflecting on the post-9/11 attacks period, the so-called 'war on terror', and the permanence of security provisions to 'impose' peace, Dillon and Neal (2008) note the contradictions within normative understandings of contemporary life where war is supposed to inhabit a place on the margins of society, where modern political subjectivity and civil society, for the most part, is built on the premise of the absence of war and the ascendance of peace. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, there was a return of war discourse to the centre of society, and the concomitant eroding of the 'moral, legal and political high ground of purportedly liberal states' who engaged in a paradoxical process of 'destroying liberty in order to save it' (Neal 2008, pp. 60-61). Mishra (2018) writes of the synergy between 'military humanists' and a global rights agenda that provided moral and intellectual argument for armed interventions in support of rights and free-market-based democracy enforced by the US military. With national sovereignty being no longer inviolate in the post-9/11 period, one comes to appreciate Foucault's proposition of war as a 'grid of intelligibility' by which to understand the discourse of power and politics in states (Ibid. p. 225). As Dillon argues, peace thus becomes 'the extension of war through the discourse of security' (2008, p. 176). By the end of his *Society Must be Defended* (2003) lecture series at Collége De France in Paris between 1975-76,

Foucault found that war as a model by which to understand contemporary political power was not a proposition that he could address with either a simple yes or no answer (Bertani and Fontana 2003, p. 282). It is in the fallibility of Foucault, however, where Dillon and Neal (2008) see value. As the authors note, Foucault's problematisations, historical excavations, elisions, contradictions, and his many reversals, should encourage the researcher to think 'both with and against' Foucault, and to not consider his thoughts a closed totality. Foucault leaves room for the researcher to do their own work, to re-engage with, and reconfigure, the original question. Thus, rather than conceive of a political system in terms of war ending and party politics beginning, this study proposes that a form of warfare has continued in and through politics and peace in Cambodia. Foucault's formulation of politics as the extension of war resonates in the persistence, over decades, of serious human rights abuses by state authorities in Cambodia, political killings and intimidation of critics and opponents (Human Rights Watch World Report 2017; Amnesty International Report 2019). Addressing the 'intimate war and slow violence' visited on women land rights protesters in Cambodia, Katherine Brickell (2020) describes the weaponisation of law (lawfare) in 'marginalising and disciplining certain bodies' and the 'continuums and rearticulations of violence from the Khmer Rouge period' to contemporary times where 'the absence of war does not mean peace' in Cambodia (p. 195).

The ruling party's electoral strategy over decades has been to use the military to instil a 'climate of fear' among the electorate, according to Hughes (2015), including both 'individual strategies of intimidation' as well as strategies aimed at promoting 'a sense of collective threat' among the population (p. 11). Following the June 2017 local election, when the opposition won 44% of the vote and the ruling party 51%, Hun Sen appeared in military uniform and declared publicly that it may be necessary to eliminate 100 to 200 of his critics to protect peace (Tan 2017). As the July 2018 national election approached, Hun Sen warned that challenge to his power could provoke a return to civil war. Similarly, a politics-as-war discourse was transposed to the terrain of information and communication technology when a national cyber 'war' security team was established to target individuals and groups using social media in support of the political opposition (Paviour and Sek 2017). Thus, Foucault's proposition of politics as the extension of war assists in understanding the continued presence of political violence in Cambodia, the manifestation of war discourse on social media, and the conceptualisation of social media as a new digital terrain on which to fight old conflicts.

1.4 Operational definitions: Social media users and affordances

Social media is commonly understood as a general term for networked digital platforms that allow the creation of personal profiles and sharing of user-generated content—text, photos, videos, and hyperlinks—with others, both privately and publicly (boyd 2011). Though technology provides the infrastructure for interaction, this study concurs that social media platforms are founded on networked sociability and are sites of self-presentation and identity negotiation (Papacharissi 2011). Social networking and social media platforms comprise affordances that can be appropriated, negotiated, deployed, and re-deployed; it is a technology that is both 'socially shaped and socially shaping' (Papacharissi 2011, p. 306). Developing this theme, boyd (2011) describes social networks as a genre specific to social media and of the networked publics that emerge. Networked publics are publics much like other types of publics, but they are publics that are structured in terms of bounded technological spaces where emergent communities of people, practices and networking technology interact. Technological affordances and social processes co-habit within networking technology. The affordances of social networking technologies involve amplifying, recording and disseminating information, which do not result in determining social practice, but 'can destabilize core assumptions people make when engaging in social life' (boyd 2011, p. 46). Social media technology is not simply technological, but also, and importantly, it is a symbolic process. In this study, 'social media' and 'social networking' are used interchangeably as terms to describe the platforms used by research participants during the research period, which was almost exclusively the Facebook platform. Similarly addressing the social dimension of the technological, Nagy and Neff (2015) Davis and Chouinard (2016) and Evans, Pearce, Vitak and Treem (2017) note the need for clarity regarding the term affordance in the field of communication scholarship, which they define as multifaceted and relational in terms of an artefact (technology) and the subject/agent, which may enable or constrain particular outcomes in particular contexts. Common understandings of affordance, Davis and Chouinard note, situate the concept within a false binary of artefacts either affording or not affording (presence or absence) which lapses into determinism by failing to recognise the variability of diverse subjects and circumstances. Nagy and Neff (2015) propose a further layer of complexity in arguing for consideration of the 'imagined affordance' of technology in that an artefact's affordances involve the imagination of its designers and users and is, therefore, 'a process that is simultaneously material and perceptual'. Thus, understandings of affordances must be cognisant of the 'construction, mediation and materialisation of power and social relationships' both within the artefact and

society (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p. 4). Affordances assume form and meaning through the interplay of subject, artefact, and socio-structural environments, which ensures there is never uniformity or separation from context. Affordance, as a conceptual frame, assists understanding the dynamics of relations between agents and artefacts, and the 'interplay' between agents, material artefacts, and the imagination.

The term media 'user' and media 'use' is applied in this research as a means to define people in their relationship with media and their repertoires of usage. The suitability of this term is founded in Picone's (2017) argument that media 'user' permits addressing people 'in relation to media in their capacity as people performing a whole range of practices through a whole range of devices and sources' (p. 381). In the singular, media user accounts for media use at an individual level and in the plural, media users, extends to the 'sense of collectivity' more familiar to audiences, while also includes consumption and production capacities. As Picone argues, 'media users' situates 'people in relation to media' and prevents the 'analytical collapse' of production and use in terms such as a 'produsage' (Bruns 2008). In this study, social media users are viewed as 'actors of meaning making' who through selection and interpretation give meaning to devices, practices, and content in context and 'on their own grounds' (Picone 2017). Media 'use' and 'user' does not, however, imply empowerment, as not everyone can take full advantage of media to the same extent. *Social media user*, therefore, acknowledges both autonomy and the constraints of power in terms of media systems and political structures, which prevents mistaking 'increased user activity for increased participation' while also recognising the opportunity for 'individual nuances within the collective' (Ibid., p. 387).

1.5 Structure of the study and outline of chapters

The impetus for this study was to assess dominant narratives that invested technology with the power to determine social processes and political outcomes. Though no contemporaneous empirical evidence supported such assertions, social media was invested with a commanding role in the election outcome in 2013 (Greenwood 2013; Finsen 2015) when the opposition CNRP came close to defeating Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and ending his 34-years of power and political hegemony. To address the intellectual roots of the relationship between society and technology, and narratives vaunting technology's role in societal

transformations, Chapter 2 presents an overview of some of the main theoretical debates on the issue of technological determinism as it pertains to society, the development and adoption of certain technologies, and the socially-constructed meaning invested in technology, particularly in terms of the almost mythical qualities and prognostications regarding technology's ability to transform society. Examples are presented to highlight the recurrence and resilience of the theme of 'technological revolution' spurring societal transformation despite history demonstrating that societies and fundamental social relations and structure have remained largely resistant to the promised changes envisioned in each new revolt. Opposing sides in the technological determinism debate are revisited through the theories of Marshall McLuhan and the more recent work of Vincent Mosco in terms of the mythologising of mundane technological artefacts, which move from the sublime to the banal once the next sublime technology is adopted.

Myths are not just the stories that societies tell themselves, they are also foundational and motivational narratives to action, according to David Nye (1994, 2006) who situates American capitalism and sublime technologies historically as a means to understand the continuities of mythos and technology in the present day. Such a view is valuable for understanding the transfer of mythical narratives to other peoples and countries, with different technologies at different times, and the histories that have shaped understanding of the role of social media in political and social developments in Cambodia. Chapter 2 also addresses the relationship between media technology and democracy, and theories regarding media development and democracy in the developing world, particularly as the relationship was envisaged in the 1960s from a US-centric position, and which echoes a perspective that continues with regard to US-owned and operated social media platforms. As will be shown, media technology in the 1960s were conceptualized in terms of positive 'effects' amid the penetration of mass communication technology into the developing world. More communication infrastructure was believed to lead to increased levels of education, growing knowledge, bigger economies, and more open societies (Pye 1963; Lerner 1963). More media does not, however, automatically equate with more democracy either in the developing world of the 1960s nor in contemporary times where marketing and product branding strategies now infuse the mediation of politics and political communication (Savigny and Temple 2010; Scammell 2015). Indicators show that, in fact, democracy is in retreat globally (Plattner 2015), and at the same time information and communication technology has never been more ubiquitous. Reflection in Chapter 2 on the so-called social media revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa from 2009 onward offers

valuable points of reference and comparison with similar events in Cambodia during the national election in 2013 and the 2017/18 election period when the closure of political and social space occurred in tandem with increased access and use of networked digital platforms. Nagy and Neff's (2015) imagined affordance offers valuable conceptual ground for understanding this contradiction, which is a key theme to emerge in this study.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu and field theory is introduced in Chapter 3 as the theoretical lens with which to analyse the role of social media in Cambodia's political process. Bourdieu argues that structures of power structure, but agents also influence societal structures in the acquired disposition of their habitus and the positions they assume within fields (social, economic, political, cultural) and their accumulation of symbolic capital. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus, fields, symbolic capital, illusio and doxa,* and *the hysteresis effect* are critiqued and applied to the data findings as a means to elucidate meaning and understanding of social media use and practice in society from a theoretical basis. Debate regarding the Habermasian public sphere (1989) is also engaged with in Chapter 3 as in recent years social media has been proposed as a potential extension of Habermas' project.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology and design of this study and arguments for, and the value of, qualitative methods as a means to research social media and the personal and societal dynamics within which such technology is embedded in Cambodian society. Scholars such as Van Dijck (2009), Mosco (2014), Hermida (2015), Fuchs (2017a) argue for qualitative methods as a means to delve more deeply into the relationship between society and social media technology in order to arrive at nuanced understanding of motives and relations of power. Examples of the application of thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013) as a qualitative analytical approach to the study of social media are also presented in this chapter. Ethical issues are addressed related to the conduct of cross-cultural research in developing countries. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1995) not only demarcates this difficult ethical terrain but, when studied closely, proposes a solution for Western researchers in telling the stories and maintaining the dignity of Others without Other-ing. The four methods of data collection employed in this research—in-depth interviewing, media diary keeping, a focus group discussion, and the analysis of the public Facebook posts of four political figures—are presented in terms of their suitability for the investigation and analysis of social media activity and social media platforms as sites of social and political process in Cambodia.

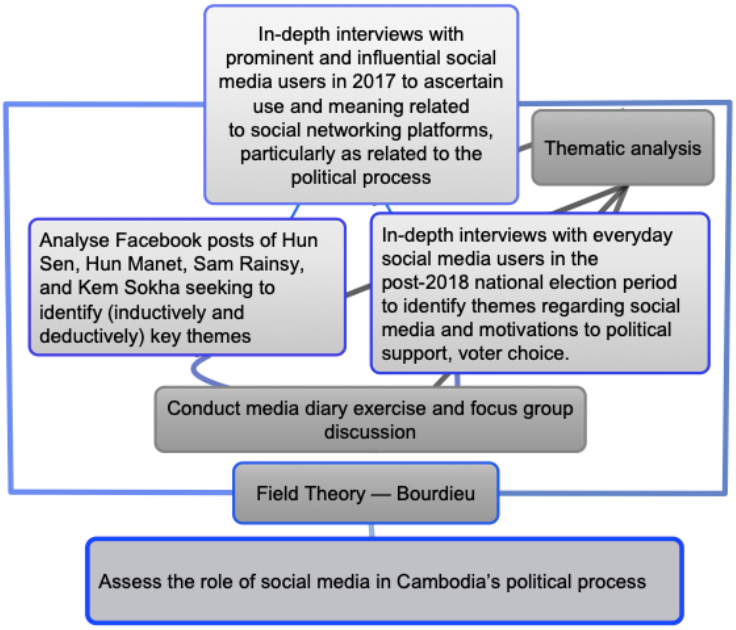


Figure 1. Conceptual map of research design involving four qualitative methods: in-depth interviews in two phases (2017/18), media diary exercise, a focus group discussion, and the analysis of posts on the Facebook pages of four political figures.

Chapter 5 presents findings from fieldwork conducted in 2017 with a preliminary analysis of the key themes informed from a Bourdieusian perspective. In-depth interviews conducted with 32 influential and prominent people on social media are presented in three categories of interest: a.) Hun Sen's ruling party and pro-government perspectives b.) The perspectives of opposition political parties: CNRP and Grass Roots Democracy Party, and c.) civil society perspectives, including activists, union officials, academics, political analysts, non-governmental organisations, journalists, and social media commentators. Themes inductively identified included, the *personalisation of politics, surveillance* and the threat of *sanction,* a *performance of authenticity,* the *imagined affordances* of social media*, symbolic capital accumulation*, and *gift-giving*, among others. Findings in this chapter and the themes that emerged provided the foundation for insights regarding how social media was understood and applied in the field of power—and defined as 'the sites in which power operates' (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002, p. 86)—government, politics, the media, economy, etc.,—and which configures relations and practices within other fields.

Chapter 6 presents findings from fieldwork conducted in 2018, including 28 in-depth interviews with everyday people who used social media, including members of the civil

service, garment factory workers, students, farmers, people working in small business, private enterprise, and members of the Buddhist monkhood. Themes that emerged from the interviews were both inductively and deductively identified, including the *fear and opportunity* associated with social media usage, the value of social media for affording *access* to *trusted and credible* sources of news and information, the *Faustian* bargain involved with using social media, and the *performance of self* on digital platforms. Also presented in this chapter are findings and preliminary analysis of a media diary exercise involving 32 participants, and a six-person focus group discussion.

In Chapter 7, findings from a thematic analysis of public posts to the Facebook pages of four leading political figures: Prime Minister Hun Sen, his son and heir-apparent Hun Manet, and opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, are presented. New themes were inductively identified, such as the '*political celebritisation'* (Ekman and Widholm 2017) evident in posts to Hun Manet's Facebook, as well as deductively, such as the presence of themes of *peace, stability or war* in posts by Hun Sen —themes also referenced by interviewees in 2017 and 2018. Findings from the four qualitative methods presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 provide the conceptual basis for the meta-analysis contained in Chapter 8.

In Chapter 8, themes and concepts identified in the data findings chapters are triangulated (Flick 2018) in the process of developing a meta-analysis understanding of how social media users, both elite and everyday, used social networking platforms in Cambodia; the meanings associated with such use, and how social media may have informed on political decision-making in the 2018 national election. Meta-themes are presented and their efficacy as 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu) is proposed as a means to explain the logic of social media practice in Cambodia for research participants. Meta-themes that were identified, including *the practice of active silence, illusory agency*, and the *potentiality-in-waiting* of increasing *civic awareness* facilitated by social media, are elucidated as a means to capture the social and personal dynamics involved in social media usage, and what that may mean for Cambodia's political process.

This thesis is brought to a conclusion in Chapter 9 with a synopsis of the findings presented, a revisiting and answering of the research questions originally proposed, the limitations of the enquiry addressed, and possible further areas of investigation offered as a means of extending the insights of this current study. A contemplation on future developments in Cambodia in terms of an increasingly civically aware population is also proffered. Such reflection is

important domestically as Hun Sen prepares to transfer power in a succession process to his son, Hun Manet, and also regionally, as ever newer communication technologies are developed, adopted, and invested with hopes and desires.

Chapter Two

Situating the Research in Literature

2.1 Introduction

Debate concerning technological determinism has persisted for so long in the science and technology community that Cherlet (2014) refers to the issue as 'old fashioned', noting that many scholars had already dismissed the concept as reductive. Nevertheless, the issue of technology's causal relationship with society returned to the fore during uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa region from 2009 onward when social media platforms were heralded as instruments of social change (Mejias 2010) in what became known as the Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube revolutions (Lotan et. al. 2011; Iskander 2011; Norris 2012). Commentators and scholars such as Sullivan (2009), Castells (2010, 2012), and Shirky (2009, 2011) had attributed to social media the power to remake societies while critics such as Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2011) derided the proposed liberating potential of social media. Both positions, according to Mejias, were engaged in a degree of technological determinism by, on the one hand, 'embellishing the agency of technology, the other by diminishing it'. The truth of technology's liberational and incarcerating potential, as Mejias proposes, was always 'somewhere in between' (2010, p. 4). In light of the evolving use and popularity of social media platforms and continuing debate regarding the role of digital media in societal and political developments, there is continuing relevance in revisiting the issue of technological determinism as people have invested hope and desire in the power of new technologies to transform societies (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2016). Such hopes were invested in social media as it gained popularity in Cambodia. This literature review is intended to assist in understanding why societies maintain and recycle belief in the quasi-mythical, transformative power of technology when history is testimony to the limitations of technology to change the basic conditions of life for the world's majority—socially, economically, and politically. In this chapter, discussion will address the technological determinism debate; how social media as an agentic technology capable of social and political transformations emerged during the period known as the Arab Spring, and the emergence of a similar narrative in Cambodia where social media was invested with the power to challenge autocratic rule.

2.2 Techno-social systems and sublime technologies

Naming social movements after social media platforms, it could be argued, finds faint echo in the words of Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964, 1967), a 1960s visionary of technological determinism who famously declared: 'the medium is the message'. New media, according to McLuhan, become extensions of the human central nervous system, limbs, and senses. Thus, a radio becomes an extension of the ear, television an extension of sight. New media technologies alter the sense-ratio between touch, sight, smell, sound, and mental faculties in terms of ideas and emotions. McLuhan focused on the technological impact of the medium on human perception and alterations in human conceptions of space and time, which had imploded, he argues. He also rebuffed the importance of the ideological deconstruction of the media 'message'. Societies are bound in a constant flow of media, according to McLuhan, and just as print, typography and books had reorganized social relations in earlier times in terms of standardised conceptions of individual and national identities, so too had electronic media in terms of contemporary spatiality, temporality, knowledge, and opinion:

> For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs (McLuhan 1964, p. 8).

Cultural materialists such as Raymond Williams (1974) criticised McLuhan's deterministic 'isolating theory of "the media"' (p. 127) for ignoring symbols and meaning—the message in the media—through which societies communicate and construct meaning and reality. McLuhan's technologically 'euphoric' pronouncements, critics charged, had overlooked political and economic relations in communication technology, particularly as they related to global capitalism and power relations in the so-called 'global village' (Lister et. al., 2009). Yet, McLuhan's theories have gained renewed interest with the growth of the internet and digital media technologies (Stevenson 1995; Coupland 2010; Levinson 1999, 2000), particularly McLuhan's ideas regarding medium, space and time, and new media's role in shaping 'intersubjective social relations' (Lister et. al., p. 80). As Stevenson notes: 'While technical media do not determine cultural meaning, as McLuhan implies, they do play some role in helping to form the life-world relations characteristic of modernity' (1995, p. 127). In the broader debate regarding the relationship between society and technology, technological determinism views technology as 'constituting a power or force of its own' where 'it determines rather than serves' and, in the process, changes in technology are seen as

determinant of changes in society (Scharff and Dusek 2014, p. 426). However, while there has been great change in communication technologies and society as McLuhan predicted, there have also been continuities in societies despite their promised transformative affordances. In the field of communication, new technologies have initially been heralded as 'revolutions' ushering in great changes (Yzer and Southwell 2008): from the printing press to telegraph, telephone to radio, television to internet. Yet, the quality of being revolutionary is not a condition of the technology itself, but of what society chooses to do with technology (White 1962). White offered the historical advances in mounted warfare as an example. The modest stirrup, White notes, was considered to have allowed a new form of horseback combat, which gave rise to mounted cavalry that strengthened the power of knights as a class and, ultimately, led to the rise of feudal society in Western Europe. The stirrup's genesis role in feudal society is often alluded to as classic technological determinism, though White allowed for more nuanced understanding of the relationship between society and invention in proposing that technology alone does not decide the revolution that may or may not proceed:

> A new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter. The acceptance or rejection of an invention, or the extent to which its implications are realized if it is accepted, depends quite as much upon the condition of a society, and upon the imagination of its leaders, as upon the nature of the technological item itself (White 1962, p. 28).

Accordingly, the condition of society was germane to the impact of the printing press. Commonly understood to have propelled the Reformation through the production of pamphlets denouncing the excesses of the Roman Catholic church, within Europe the printing press was an 'agent of change', according to Eisenstein (1979), as the invention of movable type heralded the end of Europe's 'cultural and intellectual parochialism' (Ruud 1981). Printing, however, had developed in China some 500 years prior to its emergence in Europe, and it did so without discernible impact on Chinese society. The differing experience with printing in China and Europe, as Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 44) astutely notes, was that the emergence of printing required capitalism, and the associated elements of mass production, distribution, and profit, which placed the technology firmly in the midst of a social revolution that was already underway in Europe. In contrast to the revolutionary, Kuhn (1970) describes the nature and speed of scientific revolution among scientists as being of more mundane, human characteristics, which he likened to the occurrence of a 'switch in visual gestalt' where the familiar is seen in a new and different light and 'what were ducks in the scientist's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards' (Kuhn 1970, p. 111). Therefore, if discovery proceeds at

a pace more sedentary than revolutionary, and if transformation requires specific societal conditions and, importantly, the imaginations of leadership, explanation emerges as to why, despite the promises of technological invention, societies are notable more for their continuities in maintaining the most fundamental characteristics of economic, social and political arrangements. Lightman, Sarewitz and Desser (2003) address such themes in proposing that the development of 'science and technology *is* determined by human decisions' (p. 3). However, in a world built by science and technology, decisions about the course science and technology should take are 'constrained by past decisions'. Thus, a society's technologies are 'an outward manifestation of inner histories' (Ibid.). Mosco (2004) is similarly instructive in proposing that societies suffer from a near wilful 'amnesia' toward technological development and the unkept 'promises made about earlier technologies' (p. 140). Sparks (2014) provides examples of the failed promises of technologies in the field of international development, such as the promise of hybrid strains of rice empowering poor farmers and satellite technology extending and democratising educational access in developing countries. However, in the case of hybrid rice, introduction entrenched the wealth of already rich farmers and satellites extended the reach of entertainment more so than universal education. Technology, Winston (1998) argues, is subject to the "law" of suppression of radical potential that ensures delays of diffusion of technological innovation to allow absorption of new innovations within existing social and economic structures, which protects 'essential formations' such as business entities and other institutions from radical shocks. Similarly, Winston's concept of 'supervening social necessities' (p. 6) explains the propelling of new technologies from ideation to workshop and production, and the momentum in doing so being based on both the perception of societal need as well as actual changes in the objective needs of society. As needs are a human concern based on economic and political considerations, supervening social necessity determines what technological inventions are rejected in the prototype stage and what is accepted. Thus, conceptualisation of socially-determined needs and the suppression of radical potential often ensures 'the continuation, despite the bombardment of technology, of all the institutions of our culture in forms subject to alteration but not revolutionary change' (1998, p. 13). Winston's argument remains prescient in the context of the valorising in some sectors of disruptive innovation—and critiqued by Curran et. al. (2016)—in that the 'law' of suppressed radical potential also holds that disruption wrought by technology is experienced in the majority by labour and not those who control the means of production.

That dominant social formations remain impervious to the promises of each new technological revolution turns our focus to the politics of technology. Curran et al. (2016) argue that technologies are never neutral owing to being necessarily imbued with the values and economic imperatives of the corporate culture within which they are invested, developed, designed and introduced into society. Questions of technology and personal agency also go beyond who controls the means of technological production. For example, Ellul (1980) proposes that technology has developed an autonomy from society and is capable of radically altering that to which it is applied, yet not being altered in the process. Ellul argues that powerful technologies within states necessitate ever-greater powers within states. Pessimistically, Ellul contends that humanity has accepted the legitimacy of technology as a self-evident truth and, as such, has come to believe in it as a 'supreme object' (Scharff and Dusek 2014, p. 439). The reification of technology, the forgetting by humans that they are authors of their own world, has been achieved by the legitimation of technology through advertising in mass consumer society, according to Ellul. One sees similarities in Marcuse's (1964) description of a dystopian suburban landscape where technology serves, entertains, and makes life comfortable to the point that the prevailing forms of social control operate through 'reason'; where technology is seen to benefit all and apparent contradictions seem irrational and improbable, which, according to Marcuse, reduced people 'to unimaginative cogs in the machine of the state' (Nye 2006, pp. 28-29). Marcuse's description of technological advances and contented 'unfreedom' has been criticized, as was Ellul, on the grounds of undue techno-pessimism and for speculative 'extra-empirical' description of a singular, causal technology/society relationship (Scharff and Dusek 2014, p. 244). Similarly, challenging the determinism in the assertion by Karl Marx (Shaw 1979) that the steam-mill tied society to industrial capitalism as the hand-mill had tied people to feudal society, Heilbroner (1967) argues that while machines do make history, they do not make all human history. Offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between technology and society, Heilbroner employs the concept of 'soft' determinism in that technology's determining power is mitigated by cultural factors such as invention and innovation. Human factors pave the way for technological advances, which amount to a reflection of social influences on technology. Analysing the 'socially constructed character' of technological invention, Bijker (2002, p. 274) notes that technology requires a level of deep social analysis which technological determinism would seek to refute in its belief that technology is a scientific fact, is 'nature', and, as such, is beyond human intervention, choice, and decision-making (p. 281). Bijker's conceptualisation of the 'closure' of technological diffusion is illuminating in that it shows how a social group's meanings can become dominant,

particularly regarding ‘exemplary artefacts’ (technologies) that become ‘obdurate’ due to investments by relevant social groups in their value, application, and symbolism. Closure of diffusion in a technology occurs when the scientific community reaches consensus regarding a technical innovation and, after which, it becomes ‘very difficult to envisage the world as it existed before closure’ (p. 217). Critiquing the continuum of thought from Ellul’s ‘hard’ determinism where a ‘supreme object’ is propelled by its own logic to Heilbroner’s ‘soft’ determinism and the social construction of technology driving social change, Smith and Marx (1996) align with Winston (1998) in arguing that both hard and soft positions fail to acknowledge the deeper contexts in which technology and society are embedded. Both hard and soft determinism only serve to ‘relocate the origin’ of power, and in both positions belief in technology to transform lives and drive history remains accepted as a self-evident truth. The ‘mini fables’ (1996 p. *x*) of technology and society, Smith and Marx argue, recount the positive consequences of technology rather than the contradictions of technology’s origin and ensuing social costs: pollution, environmental destruction, economic exploitation.

Similarly, Green (2002) wrote of a mythologising of technology that situates the technological artefact outside society and, echoing to the arguments of Winston (1998), Smith and Marx (1996), obscures the social, economic and political interests involved in the development and diffusion of technology in the marketplace. Green views socially progressive attributes of technology as largely incidental when technologies, by their design and logic, are an expression of ‘the priorities of those who champion them’, particularly their financial investors, the armed forces, corporate elites, and governments. ‘Neither technology nor culture are neutral – both reflect people and society, the power of different social groups and the outcomes of competing priorities’ (Green 2002, p. 5). Thus, social media technology may increase a sense of connectedness, a sense of increased choice and personal freedom. However, as Fenton argues, global capitalism and ‘hyper-commercialism configures social media platforms’ and, therefore, there is little inherent to social media that contributes to more participatory forms of democracy (2016, p. 197). Challenging both the technological determination of society and the social construction of technology, Winner (1980) argues for recognition that technological artefacts embody politics and the need for a theory of technological politics by which to understand socio-technical systems and, importantly, the ‘adaptation of human ends to technical means’ (1980, p. 123). Technology requires critical scrutiny as people have made sweeping changes to their lives to accommodate new innovations and where ‘scarcely a new invention comes along that someone does not proclaim it the salvation of a free society’ (Winner 1980, p. 122).

Thus, the question follows: If technologies 'have politics' (Winner 1980), do particular technologies embody a certain political character: democratic or authoritarian? (Mumford 1964).

Fuchs (2014, 2017) argues that the internet is a techno-social system embodying a distinct political character—capitalism—and web-based technologies, such as social media, are social facts that exist within societal relations of domination and resistance in the global capitalist system. Social media, according to Fuchs, must be analysed and understood in terms of the economic basis of platforms, their ownership structures, and their potentialities and limits within the dominant political economy, which is owned and controlled by corporate interests whose ultimate aim is to control access and commodify audiences and their attention. What is currently understood as social media, is owned by corporations whose imperative is to capture, harvest, and commodify user data for profit on a level comparable with colonialism, as Couldry and Mejias (2018) argue—'data colonialism, which appropriates life as raw material' (p. 3). As an expression of capitalist enterprise, Fuchs argues persuasively that social media, by its ownership structure, algorithmic logic, and profit focus, replicates existing social relations of exploitation and domination: 'Social media, the Internet, and all other media – are contradictory because we live in a contradictory society. As a consequence, their effects are actually contradictory' (Fuchs 2017, p. 100).

Prior to social media, early iterations of the internet were promoted as a means to promote global understanding and cross-cultural dialogue (Barlow 1996; Rheingold 1993). The networked nature of the net gave rise to theories of its potential to promote more participatory politics and democratic ideals. Buoyed by optimism in the early internet's socio-political potential, Ayres (1999) argued that international processes emerging from globalisation, such as unpopular trade pacts, could spur networked global protest movements and activism. Transnational action, according to Ayres, did not require spatial or temporal presence as an 'Internet-connected activist can attend to the "virtual barricades" from a bedside table on a small island in the South Pacific' (1999, p. 138). The inherent weakness of online activism, however, was that it was not based on evidence, but on inferences regarding technology's application, according to Curran et. al. (2016). Online activism was limited by barriers to access in the developing world, divided along linguistic lines, and susceptible to the pull of nationalisms over the internationalism of a connected world. Yet, the exceptionalism of being online persisted and persists as a narrative to this day.

Exploring cyber culture narratives of the web's exceptionality in the early 1990s, Stevenson (2016) sought to determine what led to belief in the web as an exceptional technology when in fact it consisted of 'relatively mundane technological objects'. Analysing themes in the cyber culture magazines *Mondo 2000* and *Wired*, Stevenson found that both publications employed romanticism and constructed rhetorical narratives of the new in opposition to old technology. The magazines consecrated particular actors and products where the most valued cultural capital was 'knowledge of the new', and though the web had failed to deliver on its utopian promises, it was constructed as an exceptional technology and continues to be reconstructed as an exceptional technology ever since (p. 1089). Digital technology and the virtual geography of cyberspace are the latest 'technologies of the sublime' and the leading myths of the Information Age, according to Mosco (2004), who recognises continuities between old and new media and the persistence of the old in the new in terms of deepening the reach of capitalism and the commodification of audiences. Thus, one should consider the influence of chronocentrism (Fowles 1974) on conceptions of technology—the belief that the current period in which one lives is more significant than all others that have passed; where cognitive appreciation of the present elevates the importance of contemporary times to such a degree that the 'immensity of the deception goes unnoticed' (p. 65). This is akin to Latour's (1993) description of modern society as the march of 'Attila, in whose footsteps no grass grows back' (p. 68) and Standage's chronocentricity as 'the egotism that one's own generation is poised on the very cusp of history' (1998, p. 199). Hence, as Mosco notes, the popular addition of an 'age' for each new technological development: To the present time, societies have passed through an age of steam, electricity, nuclear fuel, the computer age, and the information age. As each new technology is adopted, and the new age re-named, the technology just as quickly becomes commonplace—the transition from a 'sublime' to a 'banal' state similar to the redundancy of the 'hyperbole or mythologies that accompany' each new media era (Mosco 2009, p. 122). A sense of the 'sublime' spurred American society's enthusiasm for large feats of technological achievement during the nineteenth century and a wonderment with technology has persisted, according to Nye (1994) who posits that 'sublime technologies' remain a 'defining ideal' in American society and, concomitantly, technological development is intimately associated with the advance of democracy. As Nye notes: 'Ultimately, the constant is not the technological object *per se,* it is the continual redeployment of the sublime itself, as a preferred American trope' (1994, p. xiv). As the majority of world's leading internet technology firms are 'predominantly based on a US and Californian model of capitalism' (Fuchs 2016, p. 18), it could be argued that deterministic narratives regarding the emancipatory

and democratising power of social media fits comfortably with the trope of sublime technology, and what Barbrook and Cameron (2015) describe as the 'California Ideology'—a combination of 'the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies' in creating a future digital utopia where 'everybody will be both hip and rich' (p. 12). Such points resonate with Papacharissi and Yuan's (2011) argument that the extolling of new media technology in terms of potentialities for democracy and social advancement are consistent with a Western canon of social enquiry which is itself shaped by capitalism and neoliberalism. To penetrate further the persistence of narratives of sublime technologies it is valuable to consider Mosco's (2004) proposal that 'myth naturalises its narrative and raises it to the level of a near impregnable fortress unassailable by ordinary mortals' (p. 30). Myth energises and offers transcendence, according to Mosco, which may explain why the long heritage of the mythos of transformative technology remains transcendent in Western society.

In Greek mythology, according to Barney (2000), the punishment of Prometheus by Zeus for stealing fire and bequeathing it to mankind was a symbol of 'the technological spirit of the modern age' (p. 6). Along with fire, Prometheus also provided mankind with technē (craft) and 'taught them every skill they know' (Fowler 1957). As technē is the antecedent of modern day technology, the Promethean gift of technique with the spark of fire not only led humanity to civilization but also 'made him into a free being as well' (Schadewaldt 2014, p. 30). The defiant Prometheus challenging the Gods offered the mythological prototype for Goethe's Doctor Faustus (van der laan 2007) and Faust's similar 'audacity, knowledge and disobedience'; his will to God-like powers over society and nature that embodied the voice of Renaissance and Reformation Europe. Faust's embrace of magic (science and technology) to transform society through his pact with Mephistopheles symbolises, according to Berman (1988), the 'tragedy of development' as Faust attempts to 'bring material, technical and spiritual resources together, and transform them into new structures of social life' (p. 74). The Promethean myth and tale of Faust embody the utopian wonderment of society toward technology and the dystopian fears of technological power unleashed within society. Exploring myth as a means 'to see in a miraculously discontinuous world persistent practices by which that world is sedimented and held together', Carey (1988) describes the 'twin delusions' of technology and myth, and narratives of a 'neo-technic utopia' as promoting further technological illusion when what was most needed, was to 'demythologize the rhetoric of the electronic sublime' (p. 15). Neither the promise of steam power nor electricity transformed society into mechanical and electromagnetic utopias, according to Carey, and technological developments had led also to

the social depredations of industrialisation, including environmental degradation, urbanisation, slums, and more contemporaneously the threat of climate change. Thus, we return to Mosco's 'historical amnesia' as 'one generation after another has renewed the belief that, whatever was said about earlier technologies, the latest one will fulfil a radical and revolutionary promise' (2004, p. 8).

Belief that digital media represented a new age, an 'end of' break with previous media technologies is a motif of cyber-culture which, according to Bolter and Grusin (2000), elides the remediating of older forms of media within new media. The concept of 'remediation' proposes that preceding media forms such as painting, photography, radio, television, and video are never truly effaced in new digital platforms and a 'new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged and unacknowledged ways' (2000, p. 47). What is transformed in remediation, however, is the economic imperatives of new media, which find their own economic place by usurping or supplementing what the market already provides and 'convincing consumers that the new medium improves on the experience of the older ones' (Ibid., p. 68). Notwithstanding the failure of the internet to deliver on the participatory promises of early web visionaries, the affordances of online technology remained, until recently, framed in popular culture in terms of a pioneering 'Edenic phase' and 'celebratory chronicles of technology and progress' (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012, p. 35). Thus, what is *imagined* of technology may assume even greater importance than their materiality. As Carpentier (2011) argues, media artefacts are firmly embedded in social practices. Through the process of social construction, media technologies can be, and are, remediated, re-articulated and repositioned against dominant definitions and their affordances are open to redefinition. The affordances of a media technology are never removed from the process of social construction, thus Carpentier's 'oscillation of media technology between contingency and rigidity' (pp. 273-274) speaks to the debate regarding the affordances of technologies to 'enable and constrain'. Engaging with the concept of technological affordances thus offers a conceptual language that moves discussion in this research from the broad debate on technological determinism to focused discussion on the social and technical characteristics of social media and its social meaning and use—both imagined and experienced—by research participants in Cambodia.

2.3 Social media as techno-social systems with 'imagined affordances'

Though social media often continues to be framed in the deterministic language of impacts and effects (Moore 2018; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017), this research argues for the concept of affordance as a means to better understood social media usage as embedded in competing historical, socio-economic and political interests in Cambodian society. The affordances of technology for a scholar of design (Norman 2013) or computer science may be different, ontologically and epistemologically, from an understanding of affordance employed in the field of communication. As noted in Chapter 1, Nagy and Neff (2015) Davis and Chouinard (2016) and Evans, Pearce, Vitak and Treem (2016) view affordances as multifaceted and relational in terms of technologies and people, which may have unexpected outcomes in different contexts. Nagy and Neff propose that technological artefacts are not just material features, and their affordances not just attributes. Artefacts also embody the immaterial. Both material and immaterial affordances contain the possibility of action—encouraging and constraining—resulting from human and non-human interaction in a non-determining manner. Tufecki (2017) refers to technological affordance as actions a given technology facilitates, makes possible, encourages or restrains, and for which the outcomes are never uniform or determined. Proposing a third space between determinism and constructivism, Tufecki argues that technologies modify the landscape on which social interaction occur and through different designed 'efficiencies and potencies', technology may adjust power and leverage among agents who make active choices in the ways they invest in and interact with technology, or not. Nodding to the technological determinism debate, Tufecki proffers that technology does not need to be declared unimportant in order to acknowledge the centrality of human agency. Distilling Tufecki's argument, technology alters the 'spatial and temporal architecture of society' (2017, p. 129), though technology rarely produces genuinely new behaviour. Instead, technology modifies the terrain on which behaviour unfolds, and culture is part of that terrain.

Similarly, Bucher and Helmond (2018) note that the concept of affordances is multivalent in terms of allowing focus on a specific technology and function, or analysis of the dynamics of communicative practices and social interactions. Methodologically, this dynamic application of the concept allows for a focus on both high-level affordances of a conceptual, social nature, and a lower level feature-specific affordance. And as Majachrzak et. al. (2013, p. 47) address, the decision as to 'where to draw the technical and social boundaries when studying affordances' is a question dependent on the goals of the researcher. Siapera (2018) addresses

the technical, social, and political affordances of new media in terms of modality, interactivity, navigability, and agency, as well as the influence of 'local' factors, such as economics, socio-cultural, and political conditions. Siapera's position allows focus on what affordances create and the actions made possible socially and politically, as well as the context in which technology is situated. New media provide new and increased opportunities for political participation in terms of a continuous, ongoing civic engagement. However, as Siapera observes, 'political involvement is not a function of new media and technologies, but a function of able and interested citizens' (p. 63). Echoing Siapera, this study posits that social media has engendered a growing civic awareness among everyday Cambodians through affording access to new forms of news and information, which is a form of discursive, personal engagement with 'the political' in an authoritarian context, which is not explicitly engaged on the level of 'politics' proper—concepts which will be addressed more fully in Chapter 3. As Siapera notes: 'It seems that it is not politics as such that is democratized by mobile media in the hands of citizens, but its mediation. In other words…the ways in which we acquire information and form opinions about politics, can be seen as democratized' (2018, p. 174).

Users conform and also create new norms of interaction and self-presentation on social media, what Tufecki refers to as affordances of identity and reputation, themes which danah boyd (2011) and Zizi Papacharissi (2011, 2013, 2015) address in their work on social media affordances and affective social practices—where social dynamics are expressed through digital technology and their affordances. In the case of this study, an affordance of social media in Cambodia was evident in the transformative power of feeling one had a 'voice' in a repressive political environment, or the ability to share self-generated or remediated news and information when self-censorship limited citizen expression. However, the affordances of social media are not 'Thor's hammer' (Tufecki 2017, p. 225) only to be wielded by the pure of heart. Repressive governments, such as in Cambodia, also mobilise the same affordances as tools of autocratic stability (Gunitsky 2015). Taking issue with social media being magically imbued with a '"fetish" of collective action', Gerbaudo (2012, p. 8) notes that mobilisation of individuals and groups is not simply explainable by the 'material affordances of technologies'. Mobilisation requires consideration of the meanings, identities and narratives examined and shared by the users of such technologies. Thus, Gerbaudo identifies an important distinction between the 'tactical affordances' of social media for collective human action and the symbolic construction of meaning expressed through emotion and identity, and the 'sense of togetherness' afforded by social media as 'instruments of an emotional narration' (p. 162).

Papacharissi's 'affective publics' (2015) similarly focuses on the expression of sentiment through the connective affordances of social media technology, and the role of affect in political mobilisation. As a concept that bridges the expanse between theories of realism and social constructivism and of structure and agency, Selwyn (2012) argues that the notion of affordance places the social researcher in a position to ask questions of social practice and technology; how humans and technologies actually act and interact, in real time, and in empirical, observable terms. Preventing discussion of technology and society devolving into essentialist positions, affordance as a concept is a means to understand—symbolically and materially—social media as process and artefact, allowing consideration of how people make sense of the technologies they engage with, and the different experiences afforded (McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015) through technology—enabling and constraining, imagined and experienced. Thus, central to this study is Nagy and Neff's (2015) concept of the 'imagined affordance' of technology, which involves the imagination of an artefact's user and possibly more so than its designer. As Nagy and Neff note, any exploration of affordance must include the beliefs of users, whether or not they are true or right, as the imagined involves the material, the mediated, and the emotional aspects of technological artefacts as experienced by people. Thus, the material and the imagined are central to the use and understanding of social media.

The case is made in this study that it is not only necessary to defy the gravitational pull of technological determinism, but also to be wary of the social construction of technology, which as Latour (2005) proposes errs in framing the invention of the steam engine as being little more than the 'mere reflection of English capitalism' (p. 84). Technology does not determine what occurs in society and neither is society completely autonomous of technology, both are mutually constitutive (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999) and engaged in a relational, unpredictable and non-determining reciprocal process. In this way, the concept of affordances provides a basis for discussing the uses of social media technology and the meaning of such usage, which also involves the imagination. The following sections in this chapter address theories of media development, democracy, social media's role in political marketing, politicians self-branding, and the persistence of discourse regarding the liberational potential of social media technology.

2.4 Media technologies, democracy, and political marketing

In a classic text on communication and modernisation, Pye (1963) sets out a formula for the central role of mass communication in social transformation and political and economic development. Following close to the dominant paradigm model (McQuail 2010) of information and communication technology popularised in the 1960s, mass media communication is envisaged as 'a magic multiplier for development' (Rogers 1976, p. 226) in less developed countries (Schramm 1979; Turnstall 1977). Pye writes of the gap between Western nations and the world's 'village-based masses' in 'transitional societies' and of media technology in terms of a stimulus-response process where increased information and communication from developed metropolises disseminated down and outward to the impoverished periphery ushers in rapid cultural change, societal transformations, economic liberalisation and political enlightenment. Exposure to Western models of communication and information technology would largely accomplish grand societal transformations:

> At both the domestic and the international levels the process of modernization depends upon people receiving new messages, new pictures and images of what life can be, and learning new responses to new stimuli (Pye 1963, p. 9).

According to Pye, the future prospects of developing nations rested on new channels of information and communication, the 'acceptance of new content' and managing the 'disruptive' process at work in mass communication technologies as they reshaped (or preserved) certain societal structures, meanings, and forms (p. 20). In the same collection of essays, Lerner (1963, p. 350) proposes public communication as key to spurring both short-term 'psychic mobility' within individuals and longer-term socialization that would, within a generation, produce a more engaged democratic polity. Pye and Lerner's stimulus-response media models of almost 60 years ago might still fit comfortably with recent prognostications of the potential of social media to transform authoritarian societies. New information and communication technology, by mere introduction, does not assure a particular outcome, however. Societies adopt and adapt to new ICTs and changes to the structure of societies are rarely unilinear, and more 'evolutionary than revolutionary' (Livingstone 2010, p. 124). As argued by Raboy and Dagenais (1992), media 'constitute a contested terrain in the struggle surrounding the conceptualization, definitions, and transformation of society and democracy in different parts of the world (1992, p. 5). Media entities based on commercial business models are inherently paradoxical in their simultaneous pursuit of profit from the sale of commodified

information and their provision of news and information that is socially and politically valuable. While the normative liberal view comprehends the news media as challenging the status quo, Marxist perspectives view the media as a prop in maintaining and managing dominant social relations. When the media is owned and controlled by political and business elites, a modicum of democratic political space may exist, but it will be far from emancipatory. Thus, the public remains a spectator (Herman 1999), consuming media largely supportive of interests of the privileged, grounded in dichotomized news coverage (Herman and Chomsky 1994, p. 35) afforded by the media's power to define and frame public understanding of the world, and indirectly, ideas, attitudes and behaviours. This has implications for democracy. Information is a critical component of theories of electoral democracy (Putnam 1976, p. 146) in that citizens are unable to make informed decisions if they do not possess valuable information about their society and their leaders. Similarly, political leaders require quality information about their citizens, their needs and preferences in order to formulate corresponding policies. Without an adequately informed citizenry, who have the means, if not always the inclination, to hold their elected representatives to account, a democracy is not 'effectively self-governing' (Curran 2011, p. 2). The reality, however, is that much media output is focused more on forms of entertainment than issues of public concern or political debate (Curran 2011; Davis 2010), and political communication also conforming to the principles and strategies of product marketing and branding (Scammell 2015).

Savigny and Temple (2010) posit that a traditional top-down model of political marketing is generally understood as the selling of a 'political product in much the same way as any other manufactured product or service' (p. 1051); where a demand (public sentiment) is identified and where satisfaction of that demand is accommodated and incorporated into a product (the political entity), and satisfaction of the demand (a policy) leads to popularity among consumers (favourable voters, etc.) and, finally, profit for the producer of the product (election for the party/politician). The authors' recognition of political marketing models and the powerful (though unacknowledged) role of traditional media entities within such models remains valuable to understanding and critique of contemporary digitally media platforms and their role in contemporary political communication and strategy, where modern politics and media practices are 'inextricably' linked as the activities of one affects the activities of the other (p. 1057). It is possible to see an intensification of political marketing owing to the emergence of digital online technology and social media platforms affording modern political communication the added advantage of removing barriers to direct access to audiences. The

authors describe this as the testing of the political product directly with consumers in real time without the traditional gatekeeping role of media workers. From a political perspective, the advantage appears obvious in removing the counter-veiling force that media might normatively present and, instead, marketing directly to the public on social media platforms. A 'disintermediation'—where the production of content is freed from being filtered by journalists and other media gatekeepers, which Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) argue has been put to use by right wing populist political movements in Europe. Political marketing has been supplemented by increased personalisation of political communication since the 1990s, according to Stanyer (2013) and McAllister (2007) who have charted the rise of politicians as celebrities in Europe and elsewhere. Stanyer identifies the increasing use by politicians of their 'personal lives as a resource' (p. 2), which he argues marks a significant shift in political communication in Europe. It is important to note that Stanyer differentiates between the traditional visibility of political leaders and a more recent, new 'intimization' of political communication (p. 11) and the revealing of the private for public consumption. Intimization involves the ability of politicians to manage, and selectively disclose information to 'non-co-present others' in order to create a positive impression, and which Stanyer argues is not driven by new communication technology alone. Rather, intimization as a process of mediated revealing over time of personal information and images is the outcome of combined social, economic and politics forces in that a politician's publicising of their personal life may be a response to a crises or major incident, such as being unsure of electoral support in a period when 'they can no longer relay on the loyalties of voters' (p. 18). Stanyer's acknowledgement of the 'causes of intimization' (p. 22) are useful for this study, which proposes that Hun Sen encountered a critical juncture in a poor election result in 2013 and the popularising of social media which amplified his unpopularity with a public who had previously only access to pro-government broadcast media. Hun Sen's response was to co-opt social media technology and embark on the creation of a new public persona that included a new focus on the personal. Scammell (2015) argues that the notion of personal brand in political image management must give consideration to a fusion of the political, economic, aesthetic, personal, and popular culture (p. 10). Importantly, the brand involves the symbolic rather than the tangible, a psychological representation more than a physical asset that establishes an emotional connection with an audience. Scammell's application of a brand distinction model to George W. Bush during the 2004 US presidential campaign presages in ways elements of brand construction in Hun Sen's new online persona in terms of the Bush brand focus on an 'ordinary family man' and also a commander-in-chief with a caring side, though a major difference being

the focus on love for 'freedom' in the Bush brand. Abidin (2017) similarly recognises brand development in a young Singaporean member of parliament who had embraced social media and self-branding through frequent selfie opportunities that enhanced connections and engagement with the public, in contrast to his older colleagues and members of Singapore's parliament who had yet to 'shed their image of authoritarianism, paternalism, hierarchy and distance' (p. 85). Similarly, Lilleker (2015) found that while digital networking platforms afford a range of interactive affordances and experiences, what was of most importance for the UK MPs studied was the 'creation of favourable emotional associations between' the politicians and their audience. Looking beyond individual practice to process, akin to the discussion of mediatization (Couldry 2008; Dahlgren and Alvares 2013), Metz, Kruikemeier and Lecheler (2020) describe an amalgamation of political communication and social media leading to 'permanent campaigning' by political leaders and their ability to de-align from parties and focus public attention on their individual 'self' by revealing aspects of their personal, emotional and private lives and personalities. The authors note the role of social media as a valuable 'tool' for a politician's public impression management, which allowed the sharing of emotional narratives and personal feelings on particular subject matters, and which had a positive effect on audience engagement with politicians online. Studying the Facebook activity of German parliamentarians, the authors describe politicians adopting a 'more personalised agenda', and such self-personalisation allows politician to position as 'ordinary' people and the posting of emotional content evoking a positive effect on likes and share, as did content involving humour, enthusiasm, and fear (p. 1485). In this study, it will be demonstrated how Hun Sen mixed both emotion and fear in his activity on Facebook, as captured in such themes that are presented in Chapter 7 as the gift of peace and the threat of war. Appeals to emotion are also recognised in Hun Sen's Facebook activity by Young (2021) who notes that in posting comments, images and live broadcasts of his official duties and private life, he attempts 'to connect himself closer to the imaginations of the Cambodian population' (p. 5). In such imagining, this study will show that Hun Sen's new social media persona is both warm and threatening, pleasant and dangerous.

Hun Sen is not unique in leveraging social media in support of his political brand and the creation of an online persona in a bid to accrue symbolic capital, as this study proposes. In the Southeast Asia region, Myanmar's experience with digital networking technology is in ways similar to Cambodia. Online technology was initially associated with progressive social and political forces until its adoption in more recent years by Myanmar's military leaders, including

Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing who used Facebook as his primary platform to communicate with the public. As Combs (2018) notes, social networking site were important for casting the Myanmar military as defenders of the country's 'traditional values'. In a country where 90% of the estimated 60 million population are Buddhist, the military had used state media to promote its alignment to Buddhism (Steinberg 2007), a project of veneration of the Buddhist religious hierarchy that General Min Aung Hlaing continued on Facebook (The Global New Light of Myanmar 2018) before his account was suspended in 2018 (Long 2018) amid criticism that Facebook had not done enough to stop the promotion of ethnic hatred on its platform. Also within the Southeast Asia region, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte mobilised social media in establishing his brand of personal political machismo–Dutertismo; where his online thuggery and often vile and outlandish remarks were mirrored in real world extrajudicial killings and the arrest and judicial harassment of his critics in media and politics (Aspinwall 2019). While the 2016 presidential election in the Philippines that brought Duterte to power was labelled the county's first 'social media election, Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay (2020) note that Duterte's own use of social media was lacklustre at best compared with that of his election rivals. However, what Duterte lacked in terms of crafting his own presence on social media was made up for by the devotion of his online supporters and his employment of paid influencers and local Facebook celebrities. Duterte's popularity was not the product of a social media campaign, rather social networking amplified support for Duterte's messages that spoke to the emotions and frustrations of mostly middle and upper class voters who feared growing crime in society, the authors note. Teehankee and Thompson (2016) note that the 'authenticity' of Duterte's vulgarity and ruthlessness delighted more-privileged supporters who had most to lose from crime and instability, and his use of social media influencers, celebrities, and an extensive 'keyboard army' of paid trolls and volunteers amplified his online message (p. 134). For Hun Sen and Min Aung Hlaing, Facebook was a site for the symbolic representation of values in terms of family and religion, and in the Philippines for the amplification of the ruthlessness of the Dutertismo brand.

The observation by Hilbert et al., (2016, p. 446) that 'questions of political mobilization, engagement, and participation hinge on the underlying communication flows' is pertinent to this study of social media, and to what Curran (2002) refers to as the subtle power to define through customary representations of social reality. According to Curran, new modes of communication have tended, initially, to challenge the influence and authority of established centres of power by circumventing and presenting new ideas and information to audiences in

a novel way. Curran cites as example printing challenging the power of the Church in early modern Europe. Competition for the 'newly mediated space' is swift as the prevailing powers respond to the sense of displacement and dislocation of their authority by a new technology (Curran 2002, p. 69) and, in turn, co-opts the communication technology to their own ends. Such competition was addressed by Manuel Castells (2010) when he wrote of power and counter-power competing in the contested and networked communication terrain, which is now horizontal as well as vertical owing to social media's affordances in what Castells refers to as the practice of mass self-communication among networked publics. Castells warns that whomever controls horizontal communication networks may, one day, determine the future of democracy (2010, p. 15). Fuchs (2012), however, positions Castells in the techno-optimists camp, arguing that Castells' belief in the mobilizing and crystallizing capacity of the internet is technologically deterministic for following a simplistic logic: If social movements are born on digital media platforms, blocking such platforms must lead to their death, which was not the case in Egypt when the government cut internet access in 2011 and yet protests continued. Fuchs argues that societies are complex and do not operate along stimulus and response lines. Correspondingly, I propose that the so-called social media revolutions of recent years, where new media became the message and assumed the status of myth, demonstrate the historical continuation of the technological determinism debate in the field of communication. To address the mythologising of social media in terms of the democratising potential of such technology, it is instructive to next turn to the period of the Arab Spring, and the extension of such myths to Cambodia during the period of the 2013 national election.

2.5 Demythologising social media: From the Arab Spring to Cambodia

Debate over causal relations between technology and society revived during the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 (Faris and Rahimi 2015) and the later Arab Spring uprisings, where stories of the transcendent power of social media adhered to technological determinist narratives. Similar accounts of technology producing socio-political change followed Cambodia's 2013 national election, as addressed in Chapter 1. Commenting on the failure of so-called social media revolutions, Krastev (2015) describes a 'Silicon Valley effect' and a misplaced belief in the 'utopian possibilities of the world of technology'. The myth of the so-called social media revolutions of the Arab Spring were exposed when established powers were willing to inflict sustained repression to maintain control, a scenario which was repeated in

Cambodia in the aftermath of the 2013 election. The affordances of social media 'that make it easier to put on sizable protests without similar levels of organizational capacity…also engenders weaknesses,' notes Tufecki (2014, p. 15) who, alongside scholars such as MacKinnon (2010) Gladwell (2010) Morozov (2011), Gunitsky (2015), and Mehrabov (2016) recognises the affordance of social media as a tool of propaganda, surveillance, and counter-mobilization for authoritarian actors. As much as myth reveals about the societies that sustain them, myth also reveals much about the institutions that embrace and propagate them. In the case of the so-called social media revolutions of the Arab Spring, journalism played an important role in a contemporary form of mythmaking, according to Hirst (2012). Not merely unintentional contributors to the myth, journalists were active agents who employed the social media revolution trope to dramatise news. Critiquing such journalistic narratives as a 'bias of convenience', Hirst argues that journalists covering the Arab uprisings lacked deep understanding of the region's political, social and cultural dynamic and, therefore, adopted technologically deterministic reporting to make up for their shortfalls. Reporters assigned Western technology a privileged place above the human participants, and endowed technology with the ability to alter society and, ultimately, distorted understanding of events. Similarly, Wilson and Dunn (2011) and Norris (2012) found that social media did not start the revolutions, and though social media did play a role as an alternative channel of information sharing and networking, such platforms did not appear to have played a part greater than other media, such as, for example, mobile telephones and SMS texts. Based on survey data from countries in the region prior to and after the eruption of protests in 2010 and 2011, Pippa Norris found that Facebook and Twitter were less important sources of protest information than traditional news media, including satellite TV networks such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, as well as newspapers, internet sites, and the everyday practice of talking with friends and family (p. 10). Wilson and Dunn (2011) came to a similar conclusion regarding the importance of social media to the protesters based on a descriptive analysis of media use during the Egyptian revolution from January to February 2011. Media used for protest-related information during the upheaval showed that 92% of respondents said they relied on TV for information, 82% on phones, and 46% on SMS messaging, compared with Facebook 42% and Twitter 13%. 'Traditional media, such as telephone, satellite television, and print media, dramatically outscore social media, blogs, and E-mail,' the authors noted (Wilson and Dunn 2011, p. 1252).

Western news media's enthusiasm to declare a Twitter Revolution in Iran during the 2009 Green Movement protests, conveniently overlooked that social media was not considered

reliable by the actual protesters, according to Ansari (2012), as social media technology was rendered useless at crucial times when the government simply blocked internet access. The Iranian government also realised the value of such platforms as means to track and find protesters, prevent protests by being forewarned, and using social media to plant state misinformation. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) criticise media reporting and commentary of the Egyptian uprising for 'attributing magical powers to internet technology' (p. 1346). The social media branding of the Tunisian revolution reveals for Esseghaier (2012) the persistence of Orientalism (Said 1995) in that international news media trivialized the cause of the revolution and focused instead on Western participation through technology, which erased the importance of other modes of communication, including what was communicated in the physical presence of Tunisians engaging in mass action. The focus on social media in the uprisings revealed the link between 'journalism's normative, liberal democratic ideals and the use of technologies', according to Creech (2014, p. 1015), particularly US-centric journalism's 'tendency to tacitly articulate values onto the way in which world events are understood' (p. 1021). Kraidy (2016) refers to an obsession with gadgetry in popular narratives during the Arab uprisings that relied on causal explanations involving the power of technology to magically transform over-arching structures of power and domination. Digital communication disseminated the bodily experience of revolution, repression, and resistance, across spatial and temporal terrains. Therefore, focus should be on the body and not technology as the site of the creative insurgency of people in myriad forms: street graffiti, blogging, puppetry, satirical and radical online videos. It is the body that mobilises, that directs, acts on ideas, and may join collectively with other bodies in the 'rise of a revolutionary selfhood', Kraidy argues: 'Technology publicises corporeal dissent, but the human body is the indispensable political medium' (2016, p. 12). Social media in Iran is described by Rajabi (2015) as a space where witness to oppression is memorialised through the body of victimhood; a space for collective memory to coalesce and for new identities born of struggle to emerge. Thus, this study proposes that a similar decentering of technology and a re-centering of society and the individual is required, particularly when a narrative of Western technology advancing democracy was also evident in 2013 when Hun Sen's party suffered its greatest loss of parliamentary seats in more than 20 years—losing 22 seats and the opposition gaining 26 seats in the national election that year (Hughes 2015).

Searching for answers to explain the surprise swing in votes to the opposition party, the influence of social media emerged as an explanation in news media and election monitoring

reports (Woodside 2013; Greenwood 2013; Committee for free and fair elections in Cambodia 2013). As official vote results were being tallied, Greenwood predicted that 'an online democracy is here to stay in Cambodia'. Such conclusions, however, were based largely on anecdotal evidence and the observing of young Cambodians attending political rallies and using smartphones and social media. In his essay 'The election Facebook (almost) won', Finsen's (2015) argument regarding Cambodia is reminiscent of the Arab Spring when stating that 'without new media–especially Facebook and YouTube–it is doubtful that the opposition would have been able to achieve the results they did in the election' (2015, p. 166). Finsen did, however, include nuance in questioning whether the twin forces he believed delivered momentum to the 2013 election result—youth and social media—would change the character of politics in Cambodia long term. Despite Cambodia's increasingly youthful population and Facebook's continued popularity since 2013, change in Cambodia has seen an aggressive reversal. Reminiscent of media commentary on the Arab Spring, the power of social media in the hands of progressive political actors was also inflated in Cambodia. The response by the Cambodian government to social media in the aftermath of the 2013 election also followed patterns witnessed elsewhere, including the introduction of new legal mechanisms focused on sanctioning online communication; targeting of prominent social media users, and the co-opting of platforms for regime use (Tufecki 2014). Hun Sen's response was not to shut down social media, but to co-opt the power of social media; to make platforms tools of 'autocratic best practices' (Gunitsky 2015, p. 50).

2.6 Social media research in the Cambodian context

The approach by Cambodian authorities to social media mirrors in ways the description by Zheng (2014) of Chinese authorities seeking to control online activity by curation in terms of mobilising 'support for its own cause' online. Control of online activity in Cambodia is less about denying access than of successfully competing online (Deibert and Rohozinski 2011) through the leveraging of symbolic capital, creating spectacles of support; denial of access to dissenting voices is replaced by the co-opting of platform affordance towards the project of regime resilience. While Hughes and Eng's (2018) defining of a 'quiet encroachment' on cyber space, which will be addressed in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8, is notable in its deeper analysis of even circumscribed online engagement, research on social media in Cambodia has tended to focus on networked platforms and their role in political participation in terms of either

enabling or constraining (Finsen 2015). Conducting a survey of 401 Cambodians, Chan (2015) found that major motivations for using new media platforms, similar to this study, was to access information from trusted media sources, predominately international, and to express political views. Political advocacy, however, was lower on the list of priorities of those surveyed and, overall, new media was not found to be used for active political engagement. Proposing the existence of an 'everyday politics' of micro-activism by Cambodian youths in their 'Facebooking' activities, Vong and Hok (2018) argue persuasively that, in the context of Cambodia, when large numbers of young people and traditional political actors converge on Facebook, a form of politics is necessarily set in motion, particularly when social media has animated government responses to issues acquiring viral prominence. This everyday form of politics is instituted when individuals, expressing micro, spontaneous expressive acts, regarding social and political discontents, are joined by others in large numbers which draws government attention resulting in changes to political decision-making. Hun Sen's amending of road traffic legislation in 2016, following criticism of the law on Facebook by young people, has been offered as early evidence of the efficacy of everyday politics online. Other examples of Facebook virality linked to government action have surfaced in the intervening years. However, one should question whether such actions are a genuine response to public pressure expressed through Facebook or a strategy of selectively responding to smaller issues by an increasingly social-media astute government that is keen to build popularity with a younger, voting demographic. The possibilities of social media's viral power influencing political decision-making is also evident in Vorn and Ly's (2020) pilot survey of 150 Facebook users to determine how the social networking platform could promote better governance in Cambodia. The survey found that the activity for which Facebook was used for by the largest number of respondents was consuming news (88%), while among the least used purposes were expressing opinions (28%) or criticise and demand intervention (17%). While 95% of respondents believed that government should listen to citizens, the majority thought the government did not listen. As the authors note, though somewhat under-emphasise, the complaints made by citizens on Facebook that officials did respond to, depended 'on the scale of the problems' and those 'linked to politics or the affairs of powerful governmental officials might not be resolved effectively' (p. 119). It could be argued that the Vorn and Ly's survey findings demonstrate not the affordances but the limitations of Facebook in promoting better governance or substantive reform as the instances offered in the study where online public pressure elicited a government response were related to rather mundane matters, such as the cleaning of an untidy road and a provincial governor who resigned from his position after

online criticism of his poor handling of a building disaster that killed 30 people. The same official, however, was promoted shortly after to a higher position by Hun Sen. Reading against the survey's conclusion that Facebook might be an effective tool for Cambodians to hold government to account (though only with government buy-in), it could be argued that the power of social media to affect substantive social and political reform has been more imagined than material in Cambodia. Chunly's (2019) analysis of survey questionnaires with 500 people in Phnom Penh found that while almost 80% of respondents had 'liked' content on Facebook that could be considered social or political in nature, just over 60% had shared or reposted such content, while only around 30% had commented or expressed their thoughts on such content. Asked about their off-line civic or political activity, fewer than 6% of respondents had ever attended an organised protest, while just 17% had attended a political rally, campaign or speech. The survey findings would seem to suggest that real world civic and political participation remains low compared to that reported online. A finding of significance in Chunly's research was that almost a quarter of respondents used Facebook's closed Messenger App to privately discuss social and political issues with their friends or networks. This finding, I propose, hints at the managed performances of the self in public on social media in Cambodia, which aligns with Kim's (2016) description of a spiral of silence on Facebook when a hostile opinion climate leads those with minority views to withhold expression of their opinions in public. In Cambodia, social media has grown in popularity while the ruling party has leveraged platform affordances to create an online environment saturated with Facebook activity while independent news media and the rights of citizens are systematically diminished (Human Rights Watch 2016, 2016a). Between January 2017 and January 2018, Facebook saw a 43% increase in users in Cambodia, bringing the number of people on the platform nationally to some seven million in a population of some 16 million (We Are Social/Hootsuite 2018). Correspondingly, between 2014 and early 2018, at least 15 people were arrested and jailed for comments made on Facebook, and many more were threatened with arrest (Ellis-Petersen 2018).

2.7 'Voice' in Authoritarian Contexts

Despite enormous growth in mobile phones and social media use in Asia allowing for new ways to connect, express opinions and engage in politics, a relationship between growth in information and communication technology and political participation is not easily established.

Research demonstrates the difficulty in linking social media use, even in democratic contexts, to 'causal and transformative' political activity (Boulianne 2015, p. 534) and as Boulianne (2016) found, news media accessed on social networking sites influenced 'civic awareness' more than direct political engagement among Canadian research participants, though awareness is a precursor for political engagement.

Chan, Chen and Lee (2016) similarly found no significant relationship between social media use and political efficacy—the ability to participate in politics—in a study of mobile and social media as it related to political participation among university students in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. No direct relationships between political expression on social media and political participation was found. What the authors did identify, however, was the potential for news on social media to 'engender discussion' of political matters and the opportunities inherent in communication technologies to facilitate 'more informed citizens who can shape and influence future democratic development' (2016, p. 16). Political discussion online is not simply a function of personal psychology, as Shen and Liang (2015) note, but also of macro-societal factors in that online public expression is contingent on political contexts. Ong (2019) similarly argues that self-censorship of political expression on social media complicates the value of social media data research as individuals in authoritarian societies in Southeast Asia choose to self-censor when the perceived negative returns for expressing political opinions outweigh their benefits. Self-censorship for Ong constitutes a form of missing data and, therefore, social media data available online is inherently biased by the degree of self-censorship practiced by users of such platforms. Thus, to assess the meaning and usage of social media platforms in Cambodia it is necessary to move beyond visible expression and to be cognisant that everything that is online is still not all there, including the '"contemplations" that motivate what not to post, not to share, not to comment upon, what is deleted' (Markham and Gammelby 2018, p. 456). This appeal to the importance of what is not made public resonates with Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba's (2012) work on transformations in traditional forms of politics afforded by digital media in repressive environments. In contexts where information is restricted, digital media plays an important role by allowing people to participate in a form of sublimated politics born of the awareness of access. Within restricted environments where 'even information seeking can be a transgressive political act' (2012, p. 244), such simple acts as being aware, consuming information, forming opinions, and commenting, become forms of engagement. This resonates with Jorba and Bimber's (2012) focus on digital media affording a sense of citizenship in authoritarian states. Rather than overt acts of political participation and expression of public

opinion, which are concerns more relevant to democracies, the question of most interest in non-democracies is what form repertories of engagement actually take. This is what Jorba and Bimber describe as the 'where and when political experiences happen for people, and where and when people engage with public affairs or avoid them' (p. 26). Thus, the authors highlight the 'possibility of voice' as a fundamental element of citizenship (p. 30) afforded by digital media in authoritarian contexts. Particularly 'critical voice, which suggests an underlying autonomy of the citizen, built in opposition or even in relation to a particular political system' (p. 37). The authors importantly note that in 'themselves, technologies do not do anything'—affordances do not compel action; meaning only emerges when people incorporate both into practice (ibid.) Couldry's (2010) defining of voice not only in terms of a process but also in terms of a value, and the valuing of voice which returns the social to the political, a theme similar to the sense of value in participation, even in small ways, as addressed by Ferreira (2017, pp. 19-20) in terms of self-representation being key to self-affirmation of a community in a public arena through, for example, social media. Similarly, Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs (2004) propose that the simple act of talking with others in public, at times when traditional political participation is dwindling, can become a form of political deliberation. While social media platforms have, arguably, afforded new opportunities for people to raise their voice. Opportunity alone does not compel action. While voice leading to a sense of empowerment may build civic and political identity, such concepts, notionally and literally, can be nurtured or, alternatively, neutered by the 'character of civic cultures' (Dahlgren 2017, p. 64), including the potential of empowering and disempowering media ecologies in which voice manifests—enabling citizens to engage meaningfully in shaping their social life or, alternatively, demanding submissiveness. Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005, p. 239) note that if a group's values are intrinsically undemocratic, members will often perform in accordance with those standards and act accordingly. Equally, the business structure and economic character of social media platforms, the values of their owners, developers and shareholders, and their day-to-day operational practices similarly requires scrutiny because, as argued previously in this chapter, such entities are techno-social systems embodying a distinct political and economic character—capitalism, meaning there is little that binds them intrinsically to concerns with such things as democracy or progressive social actors in country such as Cambodia (Fuchs 2014, 2017).

2.8 Facebook: A Faustian bargain in Cambodia

Neil Postman (1995) describes new technology as being a 'Faustian bargain' that gives something while also always taking something in return. Of the emancipatory promises offered by the owners of social media platforms, Mejias (2013) similarly writes of the 'illusory sense of empowerment' in digital social networks where participation is 'both a form of violence and a form of pleasure' (p. 24). Research participants in Cambodia demonstrated an awareness of the bargains involved in their use of social media platforms in terms of possible personal costs and benefits. Correspondingly, with social media in Cambodia on can observer the intersection of the field of politics and field of economics. Cambodian opposition political figures, civic society workers, and everyday people recounted in this research how Facebook's business model had been corrosive rather than supportive of the country's democratic process. Senior officials in the Grassroots Democracy Party and the Cambodian National Rescue Party lamented that poorly-funded opposition political parties such as theirs were disadvantaged compared to Hun Sen's powerful ruling party, which had funds to boost posts and increase their audience reach online. Opacity in Facebook's business practices had also protected opaque government practices in Cambodia with regards to the co-opting of social media. In 2018, opposition leader Sam Rainsy launched a request to subpoena for discovery against Facebook Inc at the Northern District of California Court seeking to compel the company to provide information regarding the provenance of Hun Sen's millions of Facebook followers. The case stemmed from a newspaper investigation in 2016 that revealed just 20% of the almost 1 million Facebook followers who had 'liked' Hun Sen's official Facebook page were located in Cambodia (Nass and Turton 2016) and 80% were outside the country. Large numbers of Hun Sen's followers, it transpired, hailed from India, the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition to the unusual geographic spread, almost 50% of Hun Sen's 1.25 million foreign Facebook followers (of a total of 3 million at that time) were added in a one-month period. Sam Rainsy accused Hun Sen of employing 'click farms'– companies specialized in creating fake social media accounts and followers – to boost his following on Facebook and, consequently, his appearance of public popularity. Facebook said it would not comply with the request for transparency regarding Hun Sen's followers on the grounds the request violated US privacy laws (Rosenblatt 2018) and the California court also rejected the subpoena request in May 2018. In turn, Hun Sen launched a defamation case and Sam Rainsy was ultimately found guilty of criminal libel (Ouch 2016).

Similarly, Facebook's business practices were criticised for disadvantaging progressive social actors in Cambodia and elsewhere in October 2017 when the company selected six countries—Cambodia, Bolivia, Serbia, Slovakia, Sri Lanka and Guatemala—to conduct an experiment on the effect of changes made to Facebook's News Feed function. Instead of posts normally populating the News Feed, Facebook users in the six countries were provided a new Explore Feed where they could see content that was normally in their News Feed. Posts from friends remained in the News Feed, but all other content allowed to populate the News Feed was sponsored. As Cellan-Jones (2017) noted: 'In other words, if you wanted to have your material seen in the place most users spend their time you had to pay for the privilege'. The Facebook experiment erased audiences for independent news organisations and non-profit groups. The Phnom Penh Post, one of the few independent news sources at that time, estimated that the audience for their news on Facebook—where the majority of Cambodians access news—was reduced by 45% (Paviour 2017). Voice of Democracy radio reported a 30% to 40% decline in their audience (Ingram 2018). Facebook's business model has also been implicated in undermining democratic practices and progressive social actors, for example in the Philippines the company has been accused of failing to take responsibility for stemming misinformation (Tsalikis 2019). In Myanmar, the UN accused the company of playing a 'determining' role in ethnic violence (Miles 2018) and questions had previously been raised as to why Facebook was not doing more to remove hate speech, and whether the firm's revenue focus in Myanmar was the reason (Htun Naing 2015; Klein 2018; Phandeeyar et al. 2018). Civil society groups criticised Zuckerberg and Facebook for allowing hate speech to circulate widely on the platform in Myanmar and for not investing adequately in initiatives to stem its spread. More recently, Amnesty International (2020) accused Facebook and Google of participating with Vietnamese authorities in censoring peaceful dissent and expression in Vietnam and of playing 'an increasingly prominent and complicit role in the Vietnamese authorities' systematic repression of freedom of expression (p. 6). This apparent collusion by both firms in online repression of dissenting views requires scrutiny in the context of the political economy of tech firms and authoritarian actors: Vietnam is a highly lucrative market for both firms—Facebook's income from Vietnam neared US$1 billion in 2018, and $475 million for Google primarily through YouTube advertising (p. 7).

Social media represents the new complexity of power in Cambodia in terms of configuring relationships between the fields of politics, economics, domestic and international media, and global technology firms. State and private media have a long history of ownership by, and

partisanship toward, Hun Sen and his family. Technology firms such as Facebook are also now positioned within this terrain where they profit from the pre-existing political and economic conditions, while also being configuring of those conditions. The Cambodian public has also increasingly turned to social media to access alternative sources of news and information, particularly sources not controlled by the state. Social media inhabits a contradictory space, as Mejias (2013) described in terms of imprisoning and liberating, violence and pleasure. Open expression of voice was extremely curtailed in the repressive atmosphere of Cambodia in 2018, yet people still turned to social media to privately seek out independent sources of news and information while, in public, they adhered to displays of compliance to authority. Thus, an innate tension exists between values such as 'voice' and 'empowerment' associated with social media, the socio-political milieu in which such sentiments are expressed, and the technological practices and financial models of firms such as Facebook. This research was cognisant of the pressure on citizens to adapt their 'voice' to personal and objective political circumstances—a process where the technical affordances of social media and the social practices of citizens in the context of a community, with shared experiences and histories, created a contradictory information and communication technology milieu—where both public compliance and private challenge were present. This, I propose, demonstrates elements of James C. Scott's (1985, 1989, 1990) forms of 'everyday resistance'—as discussed next—which was quietly present in the repertoires of social media usage by research participants in 2018.

2.9 Forms of Everyday Resistance

Resistance under authoritarian regimes involves what Scott describes as the prosaic means of everyday struggle in situations where openly defying the powerful could invite actual danger. The weak develop weapons of resistance that are designed to not draw attention or detection to their insubordination. Such surreptitious resistance is calculated to be overlooked, misrecognised by the powerful, who being powerful are often more sensitive to openly-expressive forms of political opposition in terms of public demonstrations of dissent. Aware of the danger and their awareness of surveillance, fear of sanction, and past experiences of coercion and violence, subordinate groups have engendered a tactical wisdom that involves moving slowly. Slow actions are marked by disguise and anonymity that prevent them being immediately noticed or obvious to power. They also protect weak creators from becoming obvious targets for sanction (Scott 1989, p. 40). Thus, the weak resist through disguise, acts of

dissimulation, of foot-dragging, false compliance, feigning ignorance, and, at a symbolic level, in the practices of ridicule, slander, and satire. When the powerful monopolise the means of coercive force, direct confrontation with the powerful is rarely an option chosen by the weak. Scott's description of performing obedience is telling when accounts by Cambodians of the 'cunning' that was required to survive the Khmer Rouge regime are considered (Kiernan and Boua 1982, p. 342). Openly confronting authority and injustice is dissimulated into the manufacture and communication of rumours, gossip, euphemism, and metaphor; the jokes, folk songs, and character assassination by the weak of the powerful; the 'undeclared ideological guerrilla war that rages' (Scott 1990, p. 137) in the spoken and unspoken spaces between the dominant and subordinated. Scott writes of the potential for the 'Aesopian language' of the weak to give way to 'direct vituperation' against the powerful, and the possibility of power shifting and everyday forms of resistance potentially giving way to 'overt, collective defiance' (1989, p. 58). In Cambodia, it could be argued that such collective defiance was witnessed in the 2013 election. However, repertories of resistance are complicated by the dynamic of social competition and conflict within societies, which are non-binary, and the 'weapons of the weak' can be co-opted and dominated by elites, which was evident in the Cambodian authorities adoption of social media technology post-2013. Scott's insights are valuable for identifying instances and patterns of disguised resistance, and for allowing analysis of 'voice' under conditions of domination where true intentions are concealed behind masks of public conformity, and which was a key finding of this study with regards to social media usage in Cambodia.

Acts of apparent conformity on social networking platforms by everyday users in Cambodia are, it is argued, often the 'public discursive affirmations of the very arrangement being resisted' (Scott, 1989, pp. 55-56). Identifying the on-stage, public expression of apparent compliance by the weak on social media in Cambodia was to recognise, for this study, a *silent* struggle at work where 'submission and stupidity are often no more than a pose–a necessary tactic' (Ibid. p. 50). By detailing the discrepancies between what Scott describes as the hidden transcripts of off-stage comments, gestures and practices with the on-stage, public transcript of subordinates and their dealings with elites, we can ascertain the influence of domination in public discourse. For the majority of people interviewed for this research in 2018, public activity on social media was a disguise for the harbouring of dissenting thoughts and critical views, and their silent activity of resistance in accessing independent sources of news and information by which to remain civically aware. Scott's description of the 'division of the self'

in authoritarian environments, where the self cynically observes the Other self on the public stage, speaks less to the expression of subordination and conformity than the active manipulation of ritual and a performance of domination directed toward personal advantage (1990 p. 33), which was often the case for research participants and their use of social media, as will be seen in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8.

In 2018, research participants described the unreality of social media in terms of what Scott refers to as 'theatres of the powerless' in that what was publicly expressed, witnessed, shared, and discussed on Facebook was primarily a distorted and disguised performance. Resistance was present too, in that research participants told of continuing disguised activities on social media, which included, for a small number, communicating with only trusted individuals in closed groups, employing the smokescreen of satire in public commentary and, for the majority, continuing to be silently and civically engaged through accessing independent sources of information and communication not dominated by the ruling party. As will be shown in the following chapter, Scott's approach to resistance does not contradict Pierre Bourdieu's field theory but supplements it. Scott provides description of the repertories that resistance may adopt, while Bourdieu speaks of the Quixotic moments when resistance can turn to acts of defiance if sources of power weaken: 'Periods in which expectations and chances fall out of line, can leave a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibles' (Bourdieu 2000, p. 235).

Conclusion

In this chapter, social media as a technology, its meaning for users and democratic potential has been situated in the broader debate regarding technological determinism; where technology is seen as 'constituting a power' that 'determines rather than serves' (Scharff and Dusek 2014) and resulting changes in society are viewed as the determinants of technology. Technology embodying the hopes and dreams (as well as fears) of societies is elucidated in the trope of the 'technological sublime' (Nye 1994) and recurrent belief in the promise of each new technology to transform societies. A process of 'societal amnesia' (Mosco 2004) has occluded realisation that the previous promised transformations, including of time, space and politics, have not been achieved before another technology offers promise of yet more transformation in the current 'age' of a 'digital sublime'. As demonstrated, a deterministic narrative of technological

transformation was evident in the regional uprisings known as the Arab Spring where the theme of 'user-generated democracy' (Loader and Mercea 2011) emerged in media commentary regarding the role of social media platforms. The implicit understanding being that 'new ICTs made and were the revolutions' (Olorunnisol & Martin, 2013, p. 285). Such narratives re-emerged in Cambodia when social media became a focus of explanation in the result of the 2013 national election over and above more complex social factors. Highlighting the socio-economic context surrounding the 2013 election period, Hughes (2015) notes that the election result was a product of underlying issues in society, including poverty, youth unemployment, landlessness and younger, better-educated voters, and new information and communication technology. In an article published shortly before the election result was known, Soeung (2013) notes that social media had changed the dynamics of elections worldwide and Cambodia would be no exception—though social media's impact, the writer adds, would be 'extremely limited in rural areas' where people still relied on state-controlled broadcast media. Voting patterns from 2013 show that some of the largest electoral gains for the opposition party were in rural areas (Committee for Free and Fair Elections 2013, p. 116)—the least connected to new technology. Social media, therefore, was one among many factors that played a role in Cambodia's 2013 election, as social media was one among many factors during the events of the Arab Spring. Social media was present but did not determine the outcomes that occurred. Social media in authoritarian contexts affords both progressive and authoritarian actors, and it is in this contradiction between surveillance and a sense of freedom that this study is focused. Social media affords news means of monitoring and control and, conversely, a sense, if not always the expression, of 'voice' to those denied other forms of civil and political engagement (Jorba and Bimber 2012; Anduiza et al., 2012).

Yet, where there is power and repression there is also resistance, as Scott's (1989, 1990) work on everyday forms of resistance by the weak in authoritarian societies demonstrates. Fieldwork findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 resonate with Scott's thinking in that the political life of subordinate groups and their resistance to power is often overlooked or mis-recognised because it exists and germinates at a level that may not be recognised as traditionally 'political'. The apparent lack of observable political activity in authoritarian societies is then mistakenly taken as an indication of a dominant power's popularity or the unpopularity or weakness of an opposition. To focus on declared zones of political activity tells a fraction of the story, Scott notes, which leads to surprise and consternation when new or unexpected subaltern forces appear or reappear on a public stage from which they were excluded. One might look for a

recent example in the 'act of bearing witness' (Ellis 2009) afforded by information and communication technology and the global appeal of the Black Lives Matter movement (Zuckerman 2020). Kraidy's concept of creative insurgency returns agency to the body over technology. Social media was a platform for the performance of self in Cambodia, and for the experience of a sense of 'voice' and attendant 'authorial subjectivity' (Siapera 2008, p. 58), which adjusted to contextual conditions that necessitated what I argue is the *practice of active silence,* which will be presented in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8. Next, in Chapter 3, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory is introduced as the theoretical lens through which to interpret this study's findings regarding the affordances and limitations of social media in the Cambodian context.

Chapter Three

Building the Theoretical Foundations: Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and the concepts of *habitus, illusio, doxa*, *symbolic capital* and the *hysteresis effect* will be presented as a theoretical lens from which to assess the role of social media in Cambodia's political process. Application of Bourdieu's field theory to research on social media and society will be demonstrated (Krotz 2006; Zhou 2011; Papacharissi and Easton 2013; D'heer and Verdegem 2014; Stevenson 2016; Mulligan 2016) and its value in explicating relations between agency and structure in online and offline worlds. Benson & Neveu (2005) propose that field theory is tailor-made for cross-national media research and comparison, and in *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (1998) Bourdieu argues for the application of field theory cross-culturally, noting that compared to research focused on the 'exoticism' and 'picturesque differences' of cultures, field theory was 'more respectful of historical realities (and of people)' in that it sought to comprehend the structures and construction of social space, and the 'mechanisms of reproduction of that space…in a model aspiring to a universal validity' (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 2-3). Theoretical discussion of social media and the experiences of social networking platforms for individuals, societies, and political processes leads also to engagement with the influential concept of Jürgen Habermas' (1989) public sphere. The presence and use of social media during protest movements, including the Arab Spring uprisings, provided new impetus to claims that social media and the internet could constitute 'a new public sphere of political communication that has emancipatory political potentials' (Fuchs 2017, p. 218). Writers such as Yochai Benkler (2006) and Manuel Castells (2012) had, at times, according to Fuchs (2014), stressed 'philosophically idealistic interpretations and revisions of Habermas' concept of the public sphere' (p. 57) and the potential power of internet technology to be socially transformative. Proposing that field theory offers the most developed means for 'a comprehensive mapping not only of the media space, but increasingly of "mediatized" societies', Benson and Neveu (2005, p. 18) note the structures and processes addressed in field theory provide a means to analyse theoretically the weaknesses of a putative new Habermasian public sphere. Including, the public sphere's inability to account for 'lines of division', 'relationships of force' and other basic characteristics of

socially-organised space. Similarly, Craig Calhoun (1992) questions whether an inclusive, deliberative public sphere had ever existed, and Fuchs notes that a contemporary public sphere must be more than a digital platform for communication. What is crucially important is how platforms operate, who operates them, and according to what logic. A truly public sphere of social media, according to Fuchs, requires replacing the logic of capitalism that dominates the operation and ownership of social media platforms with the logics of commons-based endeavours and inclusive democratic political debate. The application of Bourdieu's field theory in this study thus seeks to understand actors and chart relationships of power in the social media field in Cambodia, and to explicate the affordances and limitations of such platforms for creating a more open information and communication terrain and, ultimately, more democratic forms of governance.

3.2 Bourdieu's Field Theory – the most 'useful abstraction'

Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee (2008) propose that some researchers conducting fieldwork may find the application of theory speculative at best and, at worst, far removed from the actualities and experiences encountered during the course of empirical investigation. At the opposite extreme, theory is employed in the narrowest of fashions and interpretations that it does little to serve broader social-theoretical agendas. Thus, the authors propose a position between the opposite poles of scepticism and selectivity in the application of the 'useful abstraction' that is theory. This is a position where theoretical frameworks are imperative to a systematic explanation of social life, and of translating experiences and ideas into a discourse of social processes within society. In the field of communication scholarship, Couldry presents a similar defence of the theoretical, arguing that media research had, at times, fallen between 'a theory-free zone' and 'isolated capsules of theory saturation' (2008a, p. 161). Defending the importance of 'good' media theory in contrast to theory for theory's sake, Couldry argues that theoretical frames are vital in a period of complex media landscapes, globalized conflict and instability, and where contemporary political systems rely ever more on spectacle as strategy. Theory, therefore, is crucial to untangling contemporary media forms from patterns of power, and provides, in its abstractions, 'better tools with which to practice our *suspicion towards* totalising claims' (Ibid.). A theoretical grasp of how large media entities operate and are comprehended as 'naturalised social forms' is crucial, according to Couldry, in order to analyse, understand, and be suspicious of 'our whole way of organising life and thought around

and through media' (pp. 173-174). Thus, the myths of transformative media technology, the exceptionalism of sublime technologies addressed in Chapter 2 requires questioning, according to Couldry, in terms of the process of mythos construction: 'What type of myths? Whose myths? Myths constructed on what terms?'(Ibid., p. 174). Attempting to theorise how media and meaning are both constructed within and act upon the world, Couldry explored the 'sociology of associations' (associology) of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) and the reflexive 'sociology of sociology' of Bourdieu's field theory. Both theories, Couldry argues, were intensely sceptical of generalised conceptions of the social and of media's claim to social world representation. Field theory, however, was better equipped than actor-network theory to map the complex interplay of mediated representation, interpretation, and their consequences within media spheres, Couldry concluded. Primarily focused on the 'essences' of associations (Latour 1996), actor-network theory offered an important theory of how relations are formed between actors and things, and how 'actant' relations (human and non-human) are sustained in technological networks. Thus, there is value in Couldry's argument that actor-network theory provides limited insights regarding interpretations by actors/agents, and reflections upon the associations and relationships with other actors and institutions that result. Actor-network theory may assist understanding of how online activity has acquired the characteristics of a space, a virtual 'territory'. However, ANT was theoretically less well equipped—'agnostic'—to assist understanding in the crucial dimensions of 'the consequences of the *representations* that media generate' (Ibid.). Bourdieu's field theory, Couldry proposes, is therefore a more capable tool 'to map out the *stable* if complex relations between relatively autonomous spaces of material and discursive production' (Couldry 2008a, p. 165). Field theory allows analysis of the dynamics of power, authority, and dissent that is 'best understood by reference to the detailed dynamics of specific fields' (Couldry 2012, p. 154) and the experience and practices of agents. Latour argued too that his theory was not conceived to 'occupy a position' in the debate between agency and structure, nor to overcome such a dichotomy, or to offer solutions. But to 'follow them elsewhere and to try to explore the very conditions that make these two opposite disappointments possible' (Latour 1999, p. 17).

In *Media meta-capital: Extending the range of Bourdieu's field theory* (2004), Couldry extends the concept of meta-capital, which Bourdieu traditionally associated with the state, to media institutions in order to understand their existence within, and action on, social space and their influence on other fields and agents. Media meta-capital, Couldry proposes, afforded the ability 'to exercise power over other forms of power' (2004, p. 179) as media possesses a 'type of

definitional power across the whole of social space' (p. 181). Building on Patrick Champagne's concept of *capital médiatique* (media capital), Couldry questions whether, much like economic capital, media capital could emerge as a unique 'species of capital' that might act 'as a "trump card" in all fields' (p. 182). In a later work, Couldry (2012) stands on firmer ground to posit the question: When the state and related institutions responsible for policy formulation are 'certainly subject to media's meta-capital via the latter's operations within the political field' (p. 142), what are the implications for political authority? Couldry's insight regarding the politics of spectacle and the accruing of symbolic capital through media forms, and mediated counter-spectacle by dissenting and opposition voices, resonates with processes identified in Cambodia and social media practice addressed in the data findings chapters of this research.

Couldry's line of questioning is pertinent to Cambodia in that as politicians strive to accrue symbolic capital in the political field through positive media coverage, 'spectacle becomes ever more central to the organisation of politics' (p. 147) and, as a corollary, so does counter-spectacle: protests, terrorism, celebrity. Couldry, thus, notes that 'If all political actors are driven by this logic, then any large-scale political strategy becomes unstable, always liable to interruption by *other* actors with a similar strategy' (2012, p. 144). Thus, there can never be a 'singular media logic' nor should a 'linear outcome' from such a logic be expected. Chadwick (2013) likewise describes how the competing and symbiotic capitals of media and politics have increased in a hybrid media system where power and agency are both available and curtailed by those most capable of creating, directing, and curbing information flows across old and new media regimes. Chadwick speaks of 'the interpenetrated fields of media and politics simultaneously' generating and shaping 'the very hybridity that they then seek to exploit' (p. 207). Such hybridity is evident among agents and authorities in Cambodia in their adoption of social media platforms and the contradictions, changes and continuities that have ensued. Building on the value of Bourdieu's field theory to media research and practices, a discussion of key Bourdieusian concepts is presented in the following section.

3.3 Agents, habitus, fields, and dispelling the 'Trojan Horse' of determinism

Bourdieu was critical of 'theoretical theory' (Swartz 1995) that pursues abstraction rather than elucidating an empirical understanding of the social universe. Thus, field theory, Bourdieu proposes, is a method of research and means to theoretically understand how individuals and

social structures are ‘not simply opposed but depend on each other’ (Calhoun et al., 2012, pp. 325-326), and how both tend to reproduce even amid dramatic changes. In the application of field theory, Bourdieu refers to mapping a ‘social topology’ and examining agents and fields, the position of agents within fields being scrutinised, relations between agents that constitute the field, and competition among agents for the field’s defining form of capital, be it economic, cultural, social, or political. Such mapping includes the strategies and trajectories of the agents involved, both individuals and institutions, their habitus, and the opportunities and constraints of the particular field vis-à-vis the field of power. Central to Bourdieu’s field theory are the concepts of *field* and *habitus*: fields being competitive ‘social space’ where agents use strategies to protect or advance their positions according to a ‘logic of practice’—modes of behaviour that are understood by agents competing for what is valued in the field (Thomson 2014). Habitus constitutes the repertories of attitudes, behaviour, practices and subjective perceptions embodied in an agent, and which orientate and connect the agent to objective structures of meaning and power in society. With roots in the Latin origin of the Greek term *hexis* and Aristotelian philosophy that describe dispositions, or the state of the habitual, Bourdieu borrowed habitus from the earlier work of French sociologist Marcel Mauss and adapted the term as a conceptual paradigm for understanding how agents embody particular ‘structures of dispositions’ (Lane 2000). The habitus is, thus, the accumulated and continually appended, repertoire of pre-dispositions which accrue in the process of socialization of agents. Family and educational system are seen as the primary custodians and conveyors of the ingredient of the habitus—the agent’s assumptions, judgments, evaluations and potential behaviours, what Grenfell (2006) refers to as a form of ‘social karma’ whose cause is ‘occulted‘ by space and time. Jenkins (2002) describes the concept of habitus as allowing Bourdieu to transcend the ‘sterility of the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism’ (p. 74), and by examining the relational experience of agents to the social world, field theory overcomes the dichotomised arguments of agency and structure, free will and control. The habitus, according to Jenkins, is where the idiosyncratic (the personal) and the systematic (the social) combine. More than habits or attitudes, the habitus includes the complexity of thinking, emotion and feelings; what Jenkins refers to as the individual’s ‘generative basis’ for practice, which is a rational and contradictory process produced in adjustment to and reciprocity with objective conditions. Embodied within the corporeal and mental schemata of agents, the habitus is continually adapted and at the same time durable. Fields are structuring of habitus and agents and, similarly, fields are structured by habitus and the relations of force between agents in terms of their acquisition of species of capital valued within fields—the economic,

cultural, social. Symbolic capital and its exchange value within a field can alter an agent's social standing in that forms of capital may be converted to other forms of capital, such as education attainment potentially leading to financial reward and social mobility. Species of capital are defined within fields as valuable to that field, but they may also be transferred between fields. Symbolic capital accumulation requires tactics, strategy and investment of time and energy in a process described by Svendsen and Svendsen (2004, p. 241) as 'the games of society', which are not only economic. Bourdieu defines this in his concept of *illusio*, the agent's cognitive and emotional investment in 'the rules of the game' that agents play in the many fields that constitute social life. Illusio is the value invested in competing; the 'enchanted relation' to the game (Bourdieu 1998, p. 77) whose opposite is *ataraxia*, the state of indifference. Bourdieu's accompanying concept of *doxa* encompasses the set of rules for *illusio's* investment in the game—doxa being the shared beliefs and widely held assumptions among agents that encapsulates the 'horizon of possibilities' (Lane 2000, p. 194) for agents. Thus, it is habitus informed by doxa that 'distinguishes the thinkable from the unthinkable' in society (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002, p.119), and this is the entry point for Lane (2000) of a 'certain pessimism, determinism and stasis' in Bourdieu's work. If agents have a 'pre-reflexive relationship to their social world then their capacity to act on that world through rational action must be considered severely limited,' Lane argues (p. 196). Jenkins (2002) also criticised habitus—what Alexander (1995, p. 136) describes as a 'Trojan horse for determinism'—as agents, by their pre-dispositions, are never truly free of the experiences and forces that constitute their social universe. Owing to the durability of 'the dispositions of the habitus' (Jenkins 2002, p. 90), radical change is therefore only possible as a result of outside factors impinging on the social universe: where 'things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies' (Ibid, p. 91).

However, as Elliott (2009) argues, the concept of habitus 'can easily be misrepresented as a form of defeatist politics' (p. 150) though Bourdieu himself did not imbue the habitus with the stasis it has been attributed. The habitus can only be understood relationally and non-deterministically, in constant relations with 'invisible structures that are the relations between fields' (Bourdieu 2005, p. 29), and as a system of durable yet 'transposable' dispositions, which function as 'principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to the rule' (Bourdieu 2002, p. 72). Thus, Burawoy and Von Holdt (2012) refer to habitus preserving the 'weight and depth' of the individual 'who in Marx is simply the effect or carrier

of social relations' (p. 36). In their evaluation of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and field theory, Burawoy and Von Holdt note that both theories focus on symbolic domination within and through culture; the dominated acquiescing in their own domination in the acceptance of language, discourse, and normative visions of dominant, ideological narratives. Gramscian hegemony differs in that it is 'force and consent combined' that wins, in a practical sense, the consent of the dominated, according to the authors. Whereas Bourdieu places an agent's consent 'at a much greater psychological depth than hegemony' (2012, p. 60). Similarly, fields are always spaces of activity, of potentials, and of '*struggles* aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces,' according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.101). Hesmondhalgh (2006) also sees situational agency in noting that Bourdieu may be 'sceptical about revolutionary transformations…[b]ut he does not rule them out' (p. 216). Bourdieu (2002) argues too that theories that treated social practice as 'a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions' (p. 73) must be abandoned, and that field theory bestows 'primacy to relations' and offers a philosophy of action where the 'potentialities' of agents are engendered within structures and acts (Bourdieu 1998). Fields and the forces they exert are also not immutable, they too contain the essence of their own rupture and/or reproduction, according to Bourdieu:

> This is what I mean when I describe the global space as a *field*, that is, both as a field of forces whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and as a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure (1998, p. 32)

Even doxa, self-referentially described as the 'ultimate form of conformism' by Bourdieu and Wacquant, does not, the authors note, 'exclude practical forms of resistance and the possibility of a revolt' (1992, p. 74). Damning field theory with faint praise, Jenkins (2002) concedes that the endurance and reproduction of dominant social orders, as theorised and problematized by Bourdieu, came '*close* to being the norm of historical experience' (p. 91) though instances of disruption and change were still of 'vital significance'. It is this very tension between *agents, habitus, doxa* and *fields* where Bourdieu's field theory is most valuable in understanding the persistence of replication of social, political and economic forms amidst major social change, technological transformations, and failed revolutions in contemporary times. Thus, Kerr and Robinson's (2009) study of adaptative strategies of people in terms of habitus dissimulation and submission to doxa in post-Soviet Union Ukraine is valuable to this study in Cambodia in terms of agents repressing true sentiments and withholding of opinions in order to reflect, or at

least not openly contradict, a new doxa. In this study, the case of Cambodia demonstrates how the popularising of social media signalled a critical breakdown in the established doxic order between agents and the field of power (relations and practices of government, political figures, state media)—a transformation that was not, ultimately, transformative of Cambodian politics but may yet have important consequences in terms of 'subtler changes' (Siapera 2018, p. 257) for the political process in the future.

3.4 Social media and participation in politics and 'the political'

To consider the political affordances of social media in the context of an authoritarian state such as Cambodia, there is a necessity to address conceptualisations of politics and 'the political', and the nature and character of both in terms of political participation. Research participants involved in formal partisan politics told of the value of digitally networked platforms for the practice of politics, particularly in terms of enabling new forms of self-presentation, interacting with new audiences, and the potential to monitor and mobilise citizens and their sentiments. For everyday users of social media, however, the political affordances of social media were described in terms of personal aims and private intentions more than public actions, expressions, and activities. The dearth of engagement in public with the explicitly political on social media did not, however, constitutes an apolitical, cynical, alienated, or timorous public. The political was present, but in terms of what could be described as small 'p' political engagement. Such acts might appear insignificant in more liberal political contexts, yet they constituted a form of critical political engagement in a repressive environment. With echoes of the 'ontological turn' referenced by Wiley (2016), such acts were moments of contestation in and through personalised, sublimated forms of participation on social media. Wiley notes that a political theory that delineates an 'autonomous' sphere of politics has the effect of excluding disparate definitions of the political, in that there are 'many things that should be considered political' (p.13). This conceptual pliability should not, however, give licence to the claim that 'everything is political' but, instead, to ask, 'which political'? (Ibid.). Addressing the concept of a 'political imagination' in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Wiley notes that the authors viewed narrow theories of the political as attempts to 'confine politics within acceptable bourgeois limits', and primarily confined to the working of the state in opposition to the centrality of society. Carpentier (2018) notes that participatory practices are deeply complex social acts as they involve both 'discursive' and 'material' manifestations and

contestations. Therefore, definitions of what constitutes participation range in participatory media theory from a broad, sociological approach that includes any form of social practice to more narrowly defined political studies definitions. The sociological view positions participation as any engagement with social processes and, therefore, may include any and all forms of human interaction, including interaction with texts and technologies. A political studies approach is defined by Carpentier as an 'equalisation of power' in processes of decision-making, which necessitates a clear conceptualisation of whether participation is a 'corrective' to a societal power imbalance, and which involves the logics of power in decision-making matters (p. 81). Similarly, Van Deth (2001) posits that for those concerned with democratic decision-making, a crucial challenge exists in explicating a productive definition of political participation, which avoids 'the correct, but useless' formulation that participation can be everything (p.13). A traditional definition of political participation is often understood as an activity or action which is voluntary and is concerned with government, the state, and politics in a broad understanding of such words. Political participation in practice, however, is more abstract and is most usefully understood along a continuum of repertoires (van Deth 2014, 2015). Voting, demonstrating, and signing petitions are obvious forms of participation. Less obvious modes are found in non-participation: such as rejection (to not purchase a particular good or service) being a form of political expression and a form of participation by negation. Both are examples of what van Deth describes as institutional and extra-institutional modes of political participation, where voting and demonstrating rubs symbolic shoulders with buycott/boycotts and flash mobs; from 'collective' to 'connective' action; presence being replaced by collaboration, and which critics would argue mostly reinforce feeling of 'being involved' rather than the 'realization of political or social change' (2015 p. 1162). To overcome the conceptual ambivalence associated with a Babel's tower of modes of political participation and the importance of establishing conceptual clarity, van Deth (2014) proposes four categories of participation that are inclusive of all modes currently existing and those yet to emerge (p. 349). As van Deth notes, assessing changes in political participation and democratisation relies less on empirical data than on what the researcher defines as constituting participation. In van Deth's categorisation, a minimalist definition of participation involves action/activity that people do as citizens and not as formal political actors; that it is conducted voluntarily, that involves intention, that it is aimed at amending something of a collective or community character, and is directed toward the institutional architecture of society: government, the state, politics—as broadly understood. In contrast, a motivational definition of participation is focused on the expressive, creative, and personalised—and all the activities used to express

political aims and intentions. This is where, as van Deth notes, the focus is not on 'politics' as a noun, but 'the political' as an adjective articulating the motivations of actors (p. 359); political participation assessed on the basis of 'aims and intentions of participants', therefore, necessitates starting with the articulation of political argument as articulated by those involved, which is a qualitative approach that leaves 'it to the citizens involved to define not only what is "participation", but especially what is considered to be "politics" and "political"' (van Deth 2014, p. 363). Consideration of the aims and intentions of participants in terms of participation was required for this study in terms of identifying 'the political' in motivated 'non-political' activities. (Ibid. p. 364).

Bourdieu's field theory considers the field of politics as constituted by the habitus of those involved, their field-position strategies, values, symbolic capital, and 'the rationality and reason' that is 'politics', and which is 'understood in terms of its field-like behaviours' (Grenfell 2014, p. 255). Cognisance of 'the political' is also present in Bourdieusian thought, however, in terms of political struggles, which Bourdieu describes as being both an inextricably practical and theoretical contest that involves the conservation or transformation of the social world through categories of perception (in contrast to action). For Bourdieu, what is contested in 'political' struggle (in contrast to narrowly defined 'politics') are categories of perception; categorisations that allows the world to be perceived (Bourdieu 1985, p. 729). Reminding that the etymology of the word 'to categorise' has roots in the Greek word kategoresthai, which means 'to accuse publicly', Bourdieu speaks of the 'practical efficacy' of an 'official truth' (1977, p.196), and of the traditional and professional manipulators of symbolic power in society (doxosophists) , ranging from poets and prophets in ancient societies to present-day politicians and the media. Holders of symbolic power attempt to co-opt the 'common sense' to their agendas 'by appropriating the words that are invested with value by the whole group because they are the repositories of its belief' (Bourdieu 1985, p.743). Frangie (2009) argues that from a Bourdieusian perspective what is at stake in political struggle, therefore, is the 'principles of vision and division of the social world'; 'the political game' being a contest for the 'monopoly of the capacity to make see and make believe differently' (p. 217). The possibility of political action (participation) is, therefore, located firstly in 'the ways social agents perceive and comprehend the social world', which Frangie explores through Bourdieu's 'reflexive politics' and the possibility of 'self-creation' that is present in the conceptualisations of habitus as continually amended sedimentation. The reflexivity inherent in the agent's continual shaping of habitus is both an 'act of resistance to domination', according to Frangie

(p. 214), and the source of stability that the social world requires. Political action, therefore, is often preceded by a 'rupture' that challenges the common-senseness of the social world, when the natural is recognised a contingent, possibly artificial. Frangie describes this rupturing as the 'political field' being subject to the structuring force of 'the political', which is any intervention that might either change or question the dominant mode of vision and division of the social world (p. 218). Political 'involvement', as Frangie describes, is thus the reflexivity and socio-analysis that alters established modes, importantly, 'the conditions for such change in one's worldview'—the 'gaze back' to comprehend, accept, or possibly change the 'mixture of existential contingencies and social determinations' that constitutes the social self (Ibid.).

The case will be made in this study that the arrival of social media and the access it afforded to disparate sources of news and information challenged Hun Sen's hegemony and constituted such a rupture as Frangie posits—and which I address next in terms of a Bourdieusian hysteresis effect. Social media and the access to news and information afforded challenged established doxa through growing awareness—an alteration in perception of how the social world is created. This was a personal 'political' recategorization akin to what Foucault (1984) refers to as a 'critical ontology of ourselves' in the social world—an attitude or ethos, 'in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' (p. 50). Thus, 'the political' participation afforded by social media for everyday users in Cambodia was in 'altering the ways social agents perceive and comprehend the social world' (Frangie 2009, p. 217). Similarly, to consider political participation in and through media requires theorisation of process, what Carpentier describes in terms of Bourdieusian competing interests where political participation requires acknowledging both social and material conditions as they sediment as a structuring force in the participatory process—'a discursive-material knot' (2018, p. 76). It could be said that everyday users of social media in Cambodia engaged with how the political is imagined (Browne and Diehl 2019); the ways people imagine their social existence based on expectations and normative notions that inform common understandings and practices. Through the political imaginary—where individuals creatively confer and withhold legitimacy of social events, situations, and institutions—social media users engaged with 'the political' personally in Cambodia. Though writing a decade ago, Loader and Mercea's (2011) reflection on social media and participatory politics and the focus on new communication technologies to 'reconfigure communicative power relations' through 'user-centered' (p.759) engagement remains valuable in its consideration of socio-cultural context, social diversity and

inequality, and also the definitions of what is recognised as political participation and democratic engagement. As Loader and Mercea note, more discursive and personal forms of political engagement online require recognition alongside more public forms of deliberation—these are the meanings and activities that 'reach into the private spaces to enable the personal to become political' (p.761). In Cambodia, this was identified in terms of a growing civic awareness and 'the political' act of choosing to remain critically engaged in an authoritarian context.

3.5 Hysteresis and crises of legitimacy that realign societies

It was in Algeria during the war against French colonialism that Bourdieu formulated the basis for field theory (Grenfell 2006), particularly the realisation that for people to adopt 'revolutionary' planning they must first have adequate conditions materially that 'allow for a forward projection in time' and an estimation of the future return for action taken now. This relating of current material conditions to the making of 'rational calculations towards the future' (p. 232) links individual agents with both social structures (fields) and the 'personal cognitive structures, which guided their thoughts and actions' (p. 233) (habitus). Grenfell relates the Bourdieusian dynamic of strategic acts, informed by a logic of practice, which perceives the best practice as a means for success within a field. When agents are engaged in a continuous struggle over dominant and dominated positioning within fields, a recognition of 'legitimacy' (Bourdieu 1985) is central to the shared translation of society's symbols into the experiences and agreements that create everyday realities. Doxa confers the 'legitimate mode of perception' (1985, p. 730) yet there are also times when questions of legitimacy arise. Where there is a 'break with the doxa that takes the ordinary order for granted' (p. 734) and legitimacy is challenged. Crises of legitimacy occur when the habitus and field are not in alignment, when the 'dispositions' of habitus are suddenly or unexpectedly out of synchronisation with a field; a Quixotic moment when 'collective expectations' that constitute normality are no longer valid (Bourdieu 2000, p. 160). Bourdieu (1992, 2000, 2002) explores this process of asynchronicity between habitus and field in his conceptualisation of the *hysteresis effect*: the 'blips' in habitus when 'the relationship of immediate adaptation is suspended' (2000, p.162) such as during times of generational conflict or rapid technological and social change when long-established societal practices and symbols—relationships, ways of living, working—are 'out of sync'; when habitus born of different 'conditions of existence' impose 'different definitions of the

impossible, the possible, and the probable' (Bourdieu 2002, p. 78) on individuals and their society. Bourdieu's hysteresis effect offers value to this study as it elucidates the permeability of both societal structures and social consciousness, and the accelerant of social crises that force a re-conceptualisation of the doxic order of understanding and the ensuing reinvention of a logic of practice for agents and fields. Such a process was evident in Cambodia at the time of the 2013 national election when the 'collective expectations' (Grenfell 2006) that were the foundation of the legitimate, everyday construction of normality transformed to such a degree that what was considered the norm no longer applied. The effect of hysteresis is that new norms require appropriation and are 're-legitimated in terms of the new logic of practice of the field' (2006, p. 235). The hysteresis effect provides an understanding of events in Cambodia at the time of the 2013 election when the field of power lagged behind the changed habitus of agents in Cambodia in terms of political sentiment and technological diffusion as new social media platforms were rapidly adopted by members of the public. Applying hysteresis as another of Bourdieu's 'thinking tools', Hardy (2014) notes that the process of hysteresis assists in uncovering 'links between the objective nature of systemic change (field transformation) and the subjective character of an individual response to that change (altered *habitus*)' (p. 144). Hardy offers insight in that new technologies and their affordances present new possibilities, which may force a re-evaluation of 'legitimate positions' within fields. Hysteresis also manifests in the differentiality of agents recognising the potentialities in new technology, acquiring skills required to utilise such technology, and agents re-positioning in fields as a result of early adoption of such technology. Bourdieu's hysteresis effect, Hardy notes, 'allows us to appreciate the nature and consequences of field changes as experienced personally and at a social environmental level' (p. 145). The 'mutual miscomprehension' between habitus and field, individuals and the state, at the heart of hysteresis (Hardy 2014, p.135) is valuable to an understanding of how the field of power in Cambodia initially lagged in adjusting to the changed information and communication environment for everyday people that social media heralded. Instances of hysteresis occur at watershed moments in history, times of rapid social and technological transformation, and hysteresis was evident in the temporary bewilderment of the field of power in Cambodia as it was forced to resynchronise, adapt, and then co-opt social media as a strategy of political enhancement in the aftermath of the 2013 election. As this study sought to assess whether social media could contribute to a space of greater openness and debate in Cambodian society, the potential of platforms as contemporary iterations of a Habermasian 'public sphere' is now addressed.

3.6 The Public Sphere vs. 'systematically distorted communication'

Interest in Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere was reinvigorated by debate regarding events of the Arab Spring and the efficacy of social media in terms of an inclusive platform of communication for deliberation and action on societal issues. The public sphere concept was originally based on Habermas' historical exploration of social transformation that occurred in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Germany, France and Britain, which had produced, for a time, he argues, a bourgeois sphere of discussion, reasoned debate, and political consciousness (Habermas 1989, p. 54). Social and commercial forces, however, undermined this brief blossoming of discourse between the public and state on issues of mutual concern. With the co-opting of print media by advertisers and publishers focused on profit maximization through growing circulation and the trivialisation of news (p. 160), Habermas argues that deliberative debate and political discussion lost substance for a distracted and largely disinterested voting public. Discourses of power and money triumphed over arguments based on rationality and morality, and contemporary societies had, at best, a nominally representative democracy. With suitable Frankfurt School pessimism and a touch of elitism, Habermas views society as largely preoccupied with leisure pursuits at the expense of political engagement, and capitalist interests burrowing ever deeper into social life making reasoned reflection on public matters ever more remote. More ruinous than false consciousness, contemporary society suffers from 'fragmented consciousness', which 'blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification' (Habermas 1987, p. 355). Summing up Habermas' pessimistic view of European socio-political history, Calhoun's observed that 'Habermas tends to judge the eighteenth century by Locke and Kant, the nineteenth century by Marx and Mill, and the twentieth century by the typical suburban television viewer' (Calhoun 1992, p. 33). Describing the Habermasian public sphere as a 'God-term of democratic discourse theory', Gitlin (1998) notes that it had become an ideal, a sacred sphere against which all 'violations and deviations' of a deliberative, rational, and sovereign public—the Enlightenment ideal of a true democracy—could be measured. The possibility of a reconceptualised public sphere, of 'distinct communities of information', was reinvigorated by the emergence of the internet in the 1990s. However, replication of social exclusion in conjunction with technological advancement did not leave room for optimism, and the concept of a 'unitary public sphere' remains a fraught and questionable idea, Gitlin notes (p. 170). Writing in a collection of essays to mark the publication in English in 1989 of Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Calhoun (ed. 1992) questions whether

there was ever truly a public sphere. Or was the idea simply idealised (Outhwaite 1994) by Habermas and constructed on the exclusion of the proletariat, women and ethnicities, and deaf to issues of culture, identity, nationalism, and class in the context of public debate? A bourgeois public sphere could only have existed in a system of domination with a plebeian public sphere (Calhoun 1992, p. 37). The concept, Holub (1991) argues, was a 'fundamental ideological obfuscation' where fictional characters, such as the propertied class, were the defenders of equality and opportunity of access. Habermas' fundamental contradiction, according to Negt and Kluge (1993), was 'namely, that the bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole' (p. xlvi). Responding in the Calhoun collection, which was three decades after the original German publication of *Structural Transformation*, Habermas admitted that his earlier characterisation of the public moving herd-like from a 'culture-debating to a culture-consuming public' was too simplistic. Habermas admitted overlooking the 'resisting power' and 'critical potential' of a differentiated public (1992, p. 438) and conceded that his theory of the public sphere and its model of democratic communication was 'entirely implausible in view of the high level of complexity of functionally differentiated societies' (p. 443). The affordances of the information age, Habermas mused, might allow for a new egalitarianism of communication, though it was still unlikely as key impediments remained, namely electronic mass media and its contradictory position in society.

And yet, the idea of a public sphere, while impractical if not impossible, 'remains extraordinarily suggestive', argues Calhoun. This sentiment is echoed by Peter Dahlgren (1995) in his reimaging of the concept 'somewhere between philosophy and history', but newly conceptualised in form and strategy as an ideal to be attained in 'the fulfilment of the communicational requirements of a viable democracy' (1995, p. 9). Bruns and Highfield (2016) propose such a re-imagining, questioning whether the concept should be finally abandoned or radically re-thought in the current period of fragmentation and complexity in both media and social systems. New definitions of the public sphere, far removed from the Habermasian origin have emerged, according to Bruns and Highfield, including such terms as the 'political public sphere,' 'networked public sphere', and 'public sphericules' (Gitlin 1998), which acknowledges numerous publics and subsets of publics brought together by thematic interests rather that society-wide issues. Bruns and Highfield's proposal is that social media networks are 'successors' of a sort to the public sphere (2016, p. 111) in terms of the potential for 'issue publics' and 'issue communities' that form and coalesce around short-lived ideas and

events. The authors propose that the fragmentation of publics does not necessarily lead to ideological balkanisation among communities. Rather, the concept is reconceptualised as a 'multiple publics models' where neither total isolation nor separation occurs as, they argue, opposing views may assemble around the same issues and events. Even a newly conceptualised public sphere enabled by the affordances of social media requires critique given that such technology is not intrinsically democratic, as referenced in Chapter 2 (Morozov 2011; Fuchs 2014, 2017) and Hartley and Green (2006) note that the generally progressive notion of a 'counter-public sphere', promoted in terms of progressive groups empowered by communications technology, will always have its opposite in terms of equally well organized and equipped reactionary groups who are also online. 'The very conditions that enable a discourse public to emerge also ensure that there will never be just one of them', as Hartley and Green note (pp. 346-347).

Thus, the Bourdieusian mapping of social media in Cambodia addressed in this study was as much to understand, as Crossley and Roberts (2004) propose, why publics diverge from the possibilities inherent in the affordances of a new information and communication technology, and the reasons for that departure. Field theory provides a framework, theoretically and empirically, that allows for analysis of what Habermas referred to as 'systematically distorted communication' (Crossley and Roberts 2004, p. 88), yet for which Habermas offered no means by which to identify or analyse such distortions. Bourdieu's field theory allows for a 'communicative conception of rationality' which 'does not involve the suspension of power relations, strategic manoeuvring or egoistic interest' (Ibid., p. 94). A public sphere remains an 'epistemocentric illusion', Bourdieu argued (2000, p. 67), based on a fallacy of the 'universality of reason and the existence of universalizable interests'. Field theory, conversely, acknowledges 'practical reason' (Bourdieu 1998)—that human communication will always be distorted, owing to the tension and differing interests inherent in the habitus and fields of power.

Findings in Chapters 5 and 6 will address how divisive politics in Cambodia has been replicated and amplified on social media, which has added another level of contention in society. Rather than a public sphere of information, communication, debate and action, social media in Cambodia became the newest terrain of conflict between old political rivals. Optimism in the possible emergence of a digital public sphere, evident in discourse of the earlier part of the past decade during events such as the Arab Spring, has now given way to a generalised pessimism

of the distorting 'effects' of social media on societies and the democratic process. Popular narratives regarding social media have traversed from early narratives of 'technologies of freedom' (Pool 1983) to more recent technological dystopia (Moore 2018; Pomerantsev 2019). Neither of these positions, however, adequately describe the Cambodian context, as the meta-analysis in Chapter 8 attests, where social media platforms are interwoven in a complex interplay of interests and mutual adaptations of habitus and fields in the non-determining yet regulated improvisations of everyday life (Throop and Murphy 2002).

Conclusion

Concurring with Couldry (2008a, 2012) and Benson and Neveu (2005) on the efficacy of field theory for media research, including cross-culturally, Bourdieu's theories (1992, 1998, 2002) afforded this study an invaluable theoretical framework by which to analyse the social media field in contemporary Cambodia, and to comprehend the practices and meanings associated with social media usage and the affordances and limitations of such platforms in the context of an authoritarian state. Bourdieu's field theory explicates the interaction of individual dispositions and social structures and how both tend to reproduce amid dramatic changes, which in the case of this research was the introduction of social media as a new information and communication technology in an authoritarian regime. Agents, from a Bourdieusian perspective, are never completely defined by society nor are they ever truly free of the experiences and forces that constitute their social universe, and which forge their personal dispositions (*habitus*), although not in the manner of automata, nor in obedience to rules. Bourdieu, instead, looks to regularities and replication, and field theory seeks to understand why 'Agents *do* do…the only thing to do' through anticipating 'the necessity immanent in the way of the world' (Bourdieu 1990a, p.11). Recognition of a mutually constitutive relationship, both cooperative and antagonistic, between agents and fields assists in explaining why societies are marked more by continuities than radical transformations. The affordances of social media in terms of use and practice cannot be understood in isolation from the social, political, and economic contexts, and the dispositions of agents in Cambodian society. A Bourdieusian logic of practice (1990) was evident in Cambodia, as we will see in chapters 5 and 6, where research participants told of negotiating their use of social media owing to the authoritarian character of the state and where expressing true political sentiment in public could lead to sanctions ranging from mild (social ostracization) to severe (loss of employment, arrest). Social media usage and

repertoires of use were contingent on complex social factors (habitus and field) more so than technological affordances, but not in a determining way. What was made public on social media was often not a true representation of actual sentiment, but a performance. Chapter 4 will address the methodology that informed and underpinned the fieldwork data collection in 2017 and 2018 and the method of data analysis.

Chapter Four

Research Methods and Design

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I address the data collection methods that were considered most appropriate for this research; the method of data analysis; ethical considerations specific to this research, and my own suitability and limitations in undertaking this study. Guided by Markham and Gammelby's (2018) proposal that with social media *everything is not all there,* this research sought to move beyond the visible in order to make sense of the 'ephemeral connections and entanglements that exist between and beyond' (pp. 462-463) visibility on social media platforms. To attain a deep, nuanced and insightful understanding of the role of social media in Cambodia's political process, it was crucial to pursue a qualitative approach and to speak with people about how they use social media, their reflections on those practices and meanings in the context of their lives and wider Cambodian society. To achieve this deep level of understanding, three data collection methods were employed: in-depth interviewing during two fieldwork periods in 2017 and 2018, a media diary keeping exercise, and a focus group discussion. In the case of what *was* made visible on platforms, Chapter 7 analyses the social media activity of four senior political figures and follows a qualitative approach that also understands that meaning 'does not lie on the surface' and interpretation allows the discovery of meaning in the data (Fielding 2018, p. 593). Also addressed in this chapter are considerations pertaining to the conduct of research in politically-charged environments, which presents challenges and raises important ethical questions regarding the safety and security of research participants. Conducting research in a developing country adds to basic research challenges with additional layers of ethical complexity. As Said (1995) notes with regard to European researchers, they must be aware of, and acknowledge, the limiting and distorted historical and socio-political constructions of 'the East' in their scholarly endeavours. Foremost among considerations in this study was the safety and security of the research participants whose voluntary and informed participation allowed this research to proceed and develop from conceptualisation in 2016 to fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. Thus, priority was given to the safety of participants and their level of comfort in terms of participation, whether in face-to-face interviews, the focus group discussion, or the keeping of diaries of social media activity.

4.2 The Other and Othering in Cross-Cultural Research

Conducting research in a former French colony in Southeast Asia, I was cognisant of the psychological, political and historical construction of 'the East' that Said (1995) identifies as imbuing the European canon of thought, particularly the concept of Orientalism in the French and British traditions. 'The Orient' is primarily a European invention, Said demonstrates, a geographical construct suffused with exoticism and romance, adventure and exploitation; the material location of Europe's oldest colonies and the source of some of the most enduring constructs of Other-ness, with attendant symbols and ideas of place and disparaging characteristics of peoples and their cultures. Such constructs continue to endure in contemporary culture, political debate and academic 'doctrines and theses', where ontological and epistemological positions juxtapose the Oriental and the Occidental, according to Said. Orientalism is, therefore, a constructed discourse where power and knowledge converge productively (Foucault 1972); where the West conjures the East. Orientalism's 'limitations on thought' must be acknowledged in all areas, including academic endeavour, as the construct continues in the 'distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts' (Said 1995, p. 12). A European researcher in Asia will be, firstly, a European researcher and, secondly, an individual conducting research, according to Said. Personal background is not an 'inert fact' and researchers must be aware of their tacit, historical role in the power relationship with 'the Orient'. Though criticised for conceptualising 'the West' as essentialised as 'the Orient' and for an 'inconsistent methodology and shaky grasp of facts' (Irwin 2008), Said's work remains crucial for placing the Other and post-colonial studies at the centre of scholarly enquiry. In the afterword to the 1995 edition of Orientalism, Said notes that the West held no special ownership over Othering, which existed as a historical, political and social process in all societies and cultures, and among disparate individuals and institutions. The Other, Said argues, is not simply a binary East/West construct as it can as easily be a North/South or have/have-not relationship. Orientalism was intended as a means to 'liberate intellectuals from the shackles' of modes of thought and representation, and for scholars to be inspired to produce studies of their own that illuminated the histories of others in a 'generous enabling mode' (Said 1995, p. 340). This research acknowledges Said's proposition that it is possible to conduct cross-cultural study, respectfully and sensitively, without engaging in the process of Other-ing. The first step, however, is to frankly and honestly

address and critique the discourse of Othering, and our role and that of society in the historical enterprise and contemporary manifestations of Orientalism.

History is replete with abuse of non-Western, indigenous, and ethnic people by Western researchers in experimental research, according to Liamputtong (2010). Bitter experience of colonial-era research, racism and the construction of the Other, from New Zealand's Maori to African Americans in the US, have resulted in injury and insult to vulnerable groups which has, rightfully, left them suspicious of the motives of Western researchers. In Asia, surveys and interviews under the guise of scientific enquiry were once used to lay the groundwork for the taxation of local communities, according to Liamputtong. Tax collection by French colonial authorities was particularly punitive in Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos) and the death of a French colonial administrator, Louis Bardez, who was killed in 1925 by villagers unable to pay delinquent taxes is remembered to this day in Cambodia. The potential negative impact of research, when 'power differentials' can never be fully mitigated between researcher and the researched (Somekh & Lewin 2011, p. 4), necessitates that ethical considerations assume centrality in cross-cultural settings where 'complicated historical, political, social and cultural agendas' may be present (Liamputtong 2010, p. 32). Thus, Liamputtong's guidance was followed in that the researcher requires cultural sensitivity and specific cultural knowledge of the community to be studied, and that qualitative methods are best suited to such contexts owing to their flexible and interpretative approach. A researcher in a setting of cultural difference will always be to some degree an outsider to a community, though such a position is not always a disadvantage. Banks (1998) offers a typology of insiders and outsiders in cross-cultural research and argues that individuals can oppose—as much as endorse—their epistemological communities and bigotries. Researchers must become aware of their own values and cultural perspective and, with reflexivity, at least attempt to aim for the elusive ideal of objectivity. As a means to self-assessment of insider-outsider relations in cross-cultural contexts, Banks proposes four categories: a.) *Indigenous-insider* is a community member who is socialised within the community and embodies and endorses the values, behaviours and belief of the community. Indigenous-insiders are considered legitimate community members by the community under study; b). An *indigenous-outsider* is socialised within the indigenous community but has assimilated into an outside culture. Their beliefs and values are akin to the indigenous community, but they are influenced by the outside culture and, therefore, are perceived to be an outsider; c). The *external-insider* is socialised within another culture but due to unique experiences and circumstances adopts the values and beliefs of the indigenous

community. This leads an outsider to being viewed by the community as an adoptee who has the trust of the community; d). An *external-outsider* is socialised within a community different to that being studied, has only a partial understanding and appreciation of the values, behaviours and beliefs of the community studied. Misunderstandings and misinterpretation of behaviour within the studied community are common in this category of researcher. Researchers who are indigenous-insiders and indigenous-outsiders, Banks notes, have situational advantages, including linguistic and shared cultural experiences. However, such researchers may suffer in being too close to the community under study and, therefore, unable to ask certain critical questions. Or they are distrusted owing to outside cultural influence, what Liamputtong (2010) refers to as 'suspicious insiders'. External-insiders are technically outsiders, yet they have gained the trust of the community. The most problematic position for a researcher is an external-outsider. Counterintuitively, being an outsider may also have certain advantages in that it allows a degree of critical distance from cultural norms. Gokah (2006) found that being an external outsider in Africa afforded him a 'stranger value' that resulted in a high level of openness by research participants. Addressing what was described as the false dichotomy in the 'fixity of distinction' between native/non-native, outsider/insider in research, Narayan (1993) argues that factors such as education, gender, class, and sexual orientation, 'or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identities we associate with insider/outsider status' (p. 672). Globalisation, media, migration and the transnational diffusion of ideas and attitudes has resulted in identities that are often 'multiplex' and hybrid. Researchers should embrace such 'hybridity', argues Narayan—an American researcher of German and Indian heritage—as researchers may be bi- or multi-cultural at different times in different places by simultaneously belonging to different worlds, personally and professionally. Thus, a multiplex identity 'is a condition of everyone, even of that conglomerate category termed "white men"' (p. 681).

This research was guided by Narayan's proposal that telling the stories of Others requires more than a notional authentic identity, rather, it necessitates 'an ethical stance that neither effaces ourselves as a hybrid nor defaces the vivid humanity of the people with whom we work' (p. 681). Themes of hybridity and reflexivity are present in Guba and Lincoln's (1994) reflection on social realities being constructed cognitively from within a social and experiential base that is local and specific yet can be commonly shared by large numbers of individuals and within cultures. Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) propose that objective truth is an impossibility, though it is possible to strive to attain the most sophisticated and informed construction of the

lived experiences of research participants. Whether as an indigenous insider, an adopted outsider, or the novelty of being a complete stranger, conducting ethical research in a cross-cultural context owes much to the researcher being aware of their own limiting subjectivities and biases, and respecting the dignity and experiences of research participants and communities when documenting and interpreting how they construct reality and why.

Thus, this study was made possible by a degree of 'stranger value' that I held for research participants who were often enthused that I was interested in wanting to know more about their worlds and experiences, and my status as an 'adopted' outsider in the Cambodian context having lived in that country for almost 20 years. Professional relationships and a reputation developed over a decade as editor-in-chief of a leading newspaper in Cambodia facilitated access to senior figures on both the government and opposition sides of politics. Similarly, as I maintain an active presence on Twitter where I monitor and comment on political and social issues in Cambodia, I was also *knowable* to research participants whom I had never met in person. In the next section, the research methods employed in this study are introduced.

4.3 Qualitative social media research and thematic analysis

Owing to the intertwining of individuals, society, the economy, and technology in online information and communication platforms, Van Dijck (2009) proposes that digital technology requires a nuanced model from which to understand agency—one that engages a multi-disciplinary lens incorporating cultural theory, political economy, technological design, and empirical sociology. Domingo (2015) adopts a similar position, arguing for researchers to see the person behind the social media 'user' and proposes, as does Madianou (2015), more ethnographic approaches to understanding the constructions and contradictions of online and offline selves in social media. Kozinets (2010, 2015) proffers a 'netnographic' methodology as a means to understand the social situatedness of social media users and how they influence and are influenced by participation in online as well as off-line social activities. Proposing a deeper, more contextually rich, qualitative approach to social media research, Brabham (2015) notes that large data sets do not necessarily yield valuable insights. Reliance on the convenience of big data, where size alone appears to confer significance, could lead to naive conclusions regarding the meanings of online interactions, engagements, and endorsements.

How people conduct themselves on social media may be very different to how their lives are lived, Brabham notes.

Reflecting on the dominant paradigm of social media research through large-scale data capture and analysis, Fuchs (2017a) champions the importance of qualitative social media research to counter what he observes is an obsession with quantification. Big data is often unable to connect with the broader human concerns of meaning, interpretation, and attitudes present within social media networks. As Fuchs argues: 'We do not just have to understand what people do on the internet but also why they do it, what the broader implications are, and how power structures frame and shape online activities (Fuchs 2017a, p. 43). Mosco (2014) notes the difference in quantitative analysis of social media data in terms of determining how a voter voted compared to ascertaining how a young person becomes racist. Reliance on quantitative analysis alone ends up applying a 'scientific gloss on behavioural and attitudinal data that was often far messier than the numbers make it appear' (Mosco 2014, p. 197). A body of qualitative research of social media platforms has developed in conjunction with such calls from leading scholars in the area of communication studies. Ahmad and Popa (2014) employed in-depth interviewing in a qualitative case study to explore the social media usage and transformations in political marketing and campaigning in the 2012 gubernatorial election in Jakarta. Joko Widodo, who used social media extensively, won the election with the lowest amount of money ever spent by a candidate in any governorship race in Indonesian history. Ahmad and Popa conducted interviewing and ascertained that Joko's social media campaign had focused on his personal branding, direct contact with campaign volunteers, and messaging directed at a volatile swing vote. Two years after becoming Jakarta governor, Joko went on to win the Indonesian presidential election. Also adopting a qualitative approach, Wheatley and Vatnoey (2020) studied the tweeted discussions and debates, engagement and conflicts that developed around a Twitter blocklist, @Repeal_Shield, created during the 2018 Irish abortion referendum campaign. As the authors note, public declarations of stances and positions on social media may be considered elements of public performance on social networks. Therefore, the complexity of communication on social media platforms requires qualitative, reflexive approaches (2020, p. 11).

This study of social media in Cambodia attempts to identify and explain, through qualitative methods, what 'reasonably stable relationships can be found among the idiosyncratic messiness of life' (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014 p. 7). To achieve this, Saldaña (2016) notes that

categorisation of data by themes is an appropriate method of investigation in 'virtually all qualitative studies' (p. 200). Thus, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Boyatzis 1998) was chosen to qualitatively analyse the data collected using the qualitative methods of:

- In-depth interviewing in 2017 and 2018
- Media diary keeping
- A focus group discussion

Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that owing to its focus on identifying themes and patterns within data, thematic analysis provides a rich, detailed, and deep analysis on both a semantic and latent level. Analysis of latent themes, according to Boyatzis, 'allows for the fullest sense of context as a referent or basis for understanding the phenomena' (1998, p. 166). Thus, the researcher must identify in data the patterns and themes to be analysed on a semantic, surface level, or a deeper interpretative, latent level. The combination of semantic and latent exploration provided by thematic analysis allows understanding of not only what has occurred, but also why it may have occurred (Braun & Clarke 2006; Attride-Stirling 2001). This is what Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) describe in terms of recognition of latent and manifest meaning in themes and identification of 'implicit and explicit ideas' within a data set. Themes identified in the stories told by people, when woven together, provide what Aranson (1995, p. 4) describes as a detailed portrait of the collective experience. Themes do not reside passively in data. They are residents in our minds and are identified in data through robust and active engagement. Themes may be identified in their initial phase either inductively from the raw data at hand or deductively based on prior research and theory. The inductive approach was adopted in this research in that the themes generated in the initial rounds of data gathering and coding in 2017 were based on the raw data and without attempts to fit findings into theoretical preconceptions, hypotheses, or pre-existing coding frames (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules 2017). In the second round of data collection and analysis in 2018, inductive analysis continued and was complemented by deductive analysis where themes identified in 2017 were observed in the 2018 data in the same, similar and, although varied, related manifestations. Callard (2011) describes a hybrid inductive/deductive approach to thematic analysis where analysis is informed by being grounded in the data at hand and also, where appropriate, being recognised in existing theory and framing schema. This study was, therefore, guided by Patton's (2015) observation that 'qualitative analysis is typically inductive in the early stages' and once patterns and themes have been established, can develop in the confirmatory stage of analysis to being

deductive in terms of 'testing and affirming the authenticity and appropriateness of the inductive' analysis (2015, p. 542). As Patton notes, citing Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 22), theorising is situated in the interplay between the inductive dimensions of data, the concepts and properties generated, and the deductive hypothesizing on the relationships between concepts.

Thematic analysis involves making decisions which are founded in an ongoing reflexive dialogue between the data and the researcher throughout the analysis process. Decisions informing themes were made with regard to patterned responses and the establishing of meaning across the data gathered in Cambodia. However, the more instances of a particular topic did not, in itself, establish importance as a theme. For example, in 2018, research participants spoke of the fear of using social media and much attention would have been required on the theme of fear if instances of reference to fear denoted importance alone. Rather, while fear was ubiquitous, it was of equal if not more value to understand the nature of the reasons the research participants were fearful. Excavating to this level of thematic analysis involved the exploration of more complex meanings and motivations, which the theme of opportunity captured in that participants had unique and personal manifestations of fear—such as the fear of losing a job, circumscribed access to career opportunities, being considered an outsider among peers of acquaintances who did not share the same political views but were valued for access to opportunities in different fields. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note: 'the "keyness" of a theme is not necessarily dependent on a quantifiable measure – but rather on whether it captures something important in relations to the overall research question' (p. 82).

As addressed in Chapter 2, research on social media in Cambodia has tended to focus on technology either enabling or constraining agents in terms of political engagement. This thematic analysis sought a deeper understanding of what motivated use of social media and the meanings associated with that usage; an understanding at the level of the dispositional and the relational that field theory seeks to understand of social phenomena and of technology, and technological affordances as social practice (Sterne 2003, p. 376). As Sterne posits, 'technologies are little crystallized parts of habitus' (Ibid.) and the most fundamental questions of technology are 'always social questions' as technologies are socially located and, therefore, 'always implicated in social struggle' (Ibid., p. 383). Analysing data thematically in this study involved a continuous movement back and forth across the gathered data sets to identify patterns and issues of possible interest, combined with ongoing analysis and a recursive

revisiting of themes to identify new and contradictory meanings when considered in relation to the overall process observed in Cambodia, and as themes informed the research questions. Braun and Clarke's six phases of analysis (2006, p. 87) were adopted and applied (see Figure 2):

1. Data familiarisation: All data was transcribed and thoroughly assessed for initial ideas through a review of topics.
2. Generation of initial codes: Interesting elements in the data from 2017 was coded, which resulted in more than 40 topics.
3. Searching for themes: Topics were analysed further to identify potential themes and which resulted in more than a dozen preliminary, guiding themes inductively identified.
4. Reviewing themes: Preliminary themes were assessed in terms of a relational reference point for themes inductively and deductively identified in the data gathered in 2018. This reviewing of themes led to the identification of 10 key themes and provided the 'thematic map' for the 2017/18 data and the final analysis in this study.
5. Defining and naming themes: A final analysis was undertaken to refine the meanings and understanding of the key themes, which led to the development of five meta-themes that underpinned the overall analysis and supported the theoretical basis in answering the research questions.
6. Production of report: A meta-analysis is provided in Chapter 8 that seeks to explain, through a written narrative that uses selected extracts of compelling data and draws upon relevant literature, the finding of this study as a means to answer the overall research questions.

The analysis of themes guided this research in identifying and understanding repertories of social media use and the meanings everyday people and elite social media users in Cambodia invested in social media technology. Topics in the data formed ideas and preliminary themes, which built to key themes and, eventually, the formulation of meta-themes. Thematic analysis was, therefore, an appropriate and valuable means to analyse the in-depth interviews gathered during two periods of fieldwork, the media diaries of social media users, a focus group discussion, and the public posts on the Facebook pages of four leading Cambodian politicians. Bourdieu's field theory provided the theoretical lens subsequently applied in the interpretation of data thematically analysed in this research.

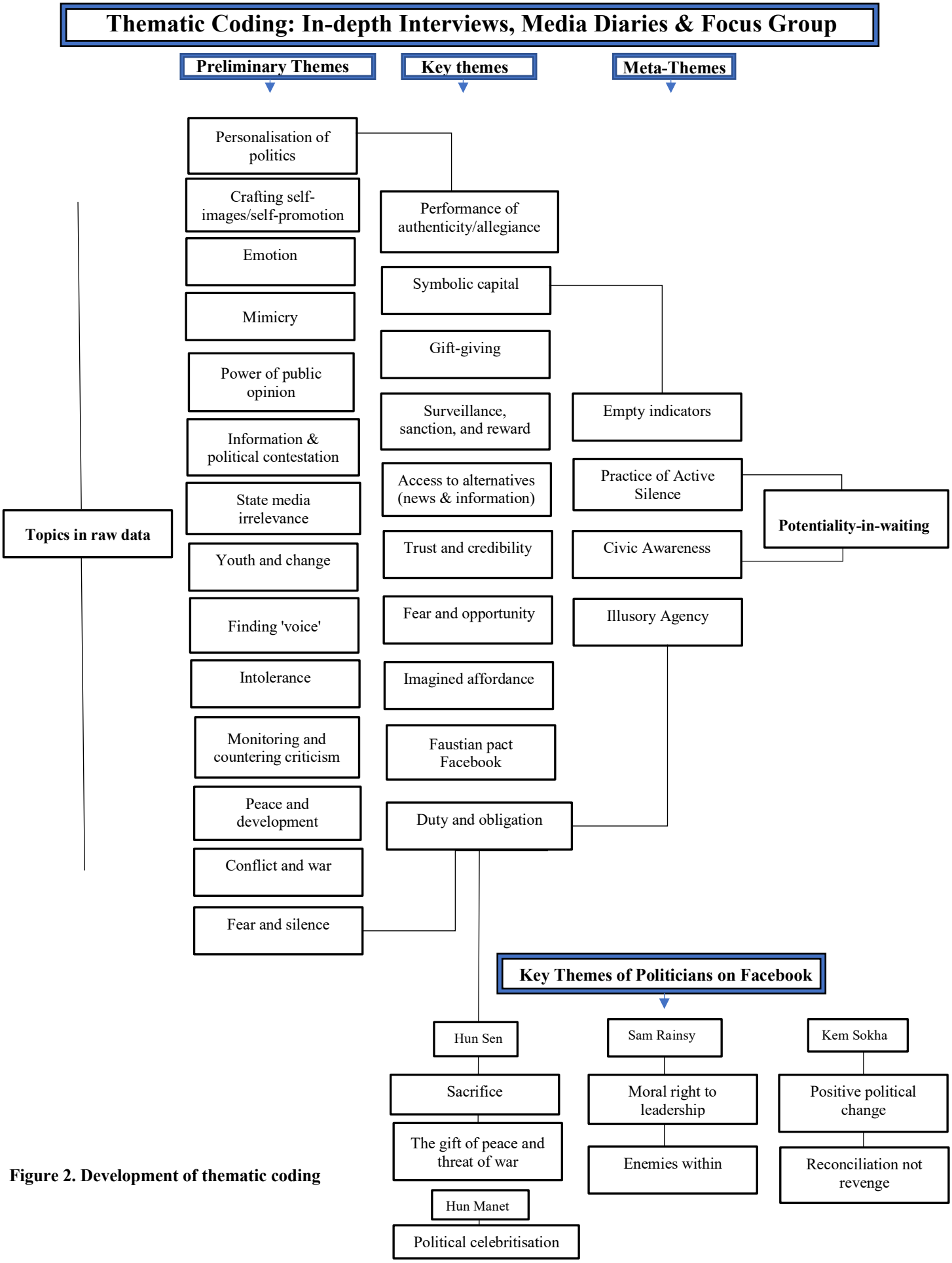


Figure 2. Development of thematic coding

4.3.1 Thematic analysis, field theory and social media research

This study follows a path set by other scholars in the application of both thematic analysis and field theory to social media research (Krotz 2006; Zhou 2011; Papacharissi & Easton 2013; Mulligan 2016; Nycyk 2016; Stevenson 2016; Tsatsou and Zhao 2016; Slama 2017). Applying field theory to a thematic analysis of the process whereby novice computer hackers became accepted by an established hacking community, Nycyk (2016) analyses the themes present in 500 posts from an online forum for hackers. Nycyk identifies how established hackers used their cultural and social capital to either assist or retard the induction of newbie hackers into the wider hacking community. Applying Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital to the field of digital media, Krotz (2006) notes that without new cultural capital (knowledge of new technology) and the ability to acquire new technological devices (economic capital), social actors may be excluded from newly-emergent fields of work and life in contemporary society, and that old inequalities were replicated in the new media society as a result. Bourdieu's concept of capital provided Zhou (2011) insight regarding the influence of new media in the formation of social strata consciousness in China. Drawing on habitus and social capital to analyse adoption of new media technologies and the subjective construction of social status, Zhou sought to discover whether adopters of new media technology perceived themselves as having an elevated sense of their subjective position in society. Ownership and competence in technological usage was found by Zhou to be a new form of symbolic capital that shaped subjective consciousness of social status. Applying field theory to social media research in Indonesia, Slama (2017) applies social capital and capital conversion to an ethnographic analysis of both the economic and cultural exchange at play between Islamic preachers in Indonesia and their religious constituencies online and offline. For a new generation of Islamic preacher catering to Indonesia's middle class, Slama found that mastering social media afforded new opportunities to accumulate social and economic capital. Conversely, Islamic preachers who had not adopted social media may fail to accrue new cultural capital, leading to a loss of audience and, importantly, donations (economic capital) from devotees. Mulligan (2016) applies field theory to analyse power structures within the mediated space of Twitter discourse during Ireland's local election in 2014 and the 2015 marriage referendum. Mulligan sought to understand how actors within fields struggle for power and position, and the factors that influence and limit interaction within fields. Seeking nuance and depth in an analysis of the link between social media, online platforms and social activism in the context of Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement, Tsatsou and Zhao (2016) employ thematic analysis and social

capital analysis, based on Putnam's (2000) conception of capital, to understand the complex relationship between online communication, offline activism, and social capital from the perspective of individuals involved in activism. Among the more influential works, Papacharissi & Easton (2013) demonstrate field theory's applicability in understanding new practices and forms of symbolic capital created on social media. People perform on social media, according to Papacharissi and Easton, as they do in their offline lives: policing the actions and personas of others; connecting with and excluding; endorsing, sanctioning, and expressing self and narcissism. Field theory, they note, provides the theoretical grounds to account for how 'actors move through online spaces as new and crowded fields of meaning-making' (Papacharissi and Easton 2013, p. 177).

4.4 Research Design: Qualitative research methods and the value of triangulation

Noting the research value of 'synthesis, triangulation, multiple perspectives and cross-fertilization', Della Porta & Keating (2008) argue for employing various methods and methodologies in social science research. Flick (2018) speaks of triangulation of different methods as a means to both extend knowledge of a subject and to obtain 'mutually assessing results'. Cognisant that such triangulation of methods bolsters the validity of research and findings if similar trends and themes emerge within data from different sources (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012, p. 86), this study employed mutually informative qualitative methods: in-depth interviewing, media diary keeping (Allport 1942), a focus group discussion, as well as the analysis of social media posts by four leading political figures. Flick advises that triangulation of different methods should identify perspectives at different levels, from the essential and personal level to the structural aspects of an issue or problem. Thus, in this study in-depth interviews at two intervals, 2017 and 2018, and with different interviewee participants (elite and everyday users of social media) constituted the essential and personal level of enquiry. A media diary exercise also constituted a personal level of understanding although recounted from the perspective of the diary-keepers themselves. A focus group discussion constituted a level above the personal in that participants discussed issues in a group setting where meaning was negotiated. Lastly, analysis of posts by senior political figures on social media equated to structural-level investigation of 'naturally-occurring' data (Barbour 2018). Extending the range of research insights through a combination of methods, the process of triangulation aspires to a 'broader, deeper, more comprehensive understandings of what is

studied' (Flick 2018, p. 17), where 'different constructions of a phenomenon' (p. 23) add to the elucidation of phenomena from different perspectives.

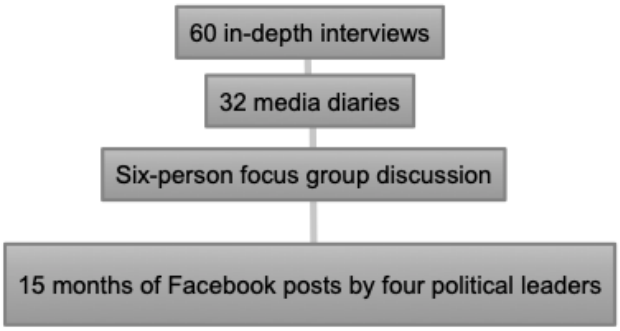


Figure 3. Workflow plan of qualitative data gathering methods.

As Figure 3 illustrates, 60 in-depth interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018 provided entry points of understanding to the subjective use and meaning of social media in Cambodia by elite and everyday users. YouTube was popular among research participants, and for some Twitter. However, Facebook was used by all research participants in 2017/18 and was therefore the focus of this research. The interviews and themes provided insight into the subjective and structural conditions of the socio-technical activity of social media usage, particularly as this technology pertained to the field of politics. Themes identified in the interviews were then illuminated and complicated by the analysis of themes that emerged in the 32 media diaries and the six-person focus group discussion. Cognisant of Braun and Clarke's (2013, p. 231) advice that it is important to not simply consider themes individually, but also the relationship between themes, an additional node in this triangulated research enquiry involved analysis of Facebook posts by four leading political figures, which is presented in Chapter 7.

4.4.1 In-depth interviewing

Proposing interviewing as a valid and valuable method of empirical research, Kvale (2007) describes the interview as facilitating the gathering of a rich description of the 'life-world of the interviewee with the intention of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena' (p. 149). Central to the interview process is 'communicative validity', according to Kvale, which 'leads to a change of emphasis from observation of, to conversation and interaction with, the social world' (p. 168). Guided by ten questions pertaining to social media use and practice in

Cambodia (see Appendix A and B), a semi-structured interview process was adopted (Kvale 2007; Roulston and Choi 2018; Flick 2018) which was neither tightly structured nor non-directional. The prepared questions led the interviews toward specific areas of research interest. However, the interviewees were free to diverge regarding aspects of questions they found most important based on their own experience and understanding. Interviews conducted in 2017/18 provided insight into the 'dramatis personae' on the stage of life (Barbour and Schostak 2005) of the research participants, and were guided by Kvale's model for interview inquiry and included: *Thematising and designing:* themes of investigation were conceptualised prior to the conduct of the interviews and formed the basis for questions that guided the interview process. My plans for interviewing and questions were pilot tested with a small number of confidantes in Cambodia for coherence and clarity. Participant consent forms and potential interview questions were submitted for full ethical review by DCU's ethics review panel, which was granted clearance to proceed in April 2017 (Appendix C). The ethics review panel subsequently extended clearance for a second round of fieldwork in 2018. Following Kvale's model for interviewing, the interview process included the presentation to participants of a research statement (Appendix D) prior to interviewing and an informed consent form (Appendix E). Both documents were sent to and studied by participants prior to interviewing. Consent forms were signed by participants on conclusion of each interview and after a debriefing discussion that concluded the interview process. Interviews were conducted in-person in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh and in the provinces of Kompong Cham, Kampot, Battambang, and Siem Reap at locations requested by the interviewees. Locations included work offices, government ministries, educational establishments, homes, quiet cafes, and restaurants. Before interviewing, the research focus and the consent form and research statement were again explained verbally to the interviewees and any questions were addressed. Research participants were assured of anonymity in the protection of their identities, as well as assurance regarding the security of the gathered data. Interviews ranged in length from the shortest at around 35 minutes to more than 90 minutes in the case of the longest. After each interview, a debriefing was conducted where the interviewee was asked if there was anything they wanted to include or address in light of the interview process just concluded.

4.4.2 Interview schedule and sample

Thirty-one interviews were conducted in a first round of fieldwork in June and July 2017 with research participants working or active in areas such as government and politics, civil society,

social and political activism, media and academia, political analysis and research. All but one of the interviews was audio recorded. The outlier was a single interview with a government official working at the Council of Ministers in Phnom Penh who for security reasons did not want his voice recorded. Despite the inability to record this interview, the written notes concur with the observation by Morgenbesser and Weiss (2018) that in authoritarian Southeast Asia, 'the greater candour that *not* recording may encourage' is 'worth the trade-off' in terms interview value (p. 395). Thirty-one interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh and one additional interview was conducted in London in December 2017 with an exiled leader of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (total n=32). A second round of fieldwork was conducted in July/August 2018 when a further 28 in-depth interviews were conducted. Following Kvale's model: the 60 interviews were transcribed in full to produce text documents and were then coded and thematically analysed. NVivo Pro., a qualitative research software tool, was used for coding purposes and management of data. Validation (Kvale 2007) of the reliability of the interview findings was attested to in that the interviews conducted across both years of fieldwork led to the emergence of both familiar and dissimilar themes regarding the use and meaning of social media in the context of Cambodia—themes that were also to emerge in the diary keeping and focus group methods.

4.4.3 Interviewee selection

To identify research participants who had experiences pertinent to the subject of this study, purposive sampling (Groenewald 2004) was chosen as the most valuable means of accessing 'information rich' (Schreier 2018; Patton 2015) experiences as a path to answering the research questions. An important consideration for conducting fieldwork in June and July 2017 was its correspondence with the holding of nationwide local elections, which took place on June 4. Conducting interviews in the aftermath of the local election was chosen in order to capture people during a time of heightened political engagement and discussion—a time when social media might be considered to be at its most influential. Cognisant that research is often a temporal snapshot of a particular society, practice or event, it was considered valuable to conduct a second round of fieldwork the following year in 2018 to determine if the social practice of social media usage changed over time. Chamberlin and Hodgetts (2018) note the merits of assessing the dynamics of social change over time, and the following of research topics during times of transition (p. 673). The result of the 2017 commune-level election also presented an opportune baseline by which to judge support for the country's political parties

ahead of a national election scheduled for July 2018. Cambodia's prior national election had been held five years earlier, in 2013, when, as addressed in chapters 1 and 2, social media was attributed a leading role in a result that showed a large swing in support to the opposition CNRP.

Different gender and age groups of social media users, and from different geographic regions, participated in the two fieldwork periods, see Figures 4 and 5. For the 2017 interviewees, the study enlisted prominent or expert social media users, including politicians, civil society leaders, and activists, in order to understand how elite users of social media used such platforms and how influential they believed such platforms were politically. For the 2018 interviewees, I sought the participation of everyday users of social media, including farmers, female factory workers, civil servants, students, teachers, and Buddhist monks, to determine how important and influential social media was in their day-to-day lives and decision-making. If elite users could be considered the producers of political messaging on social media, then everyday users could be conceptualised as the audience for such messages. As shall be seen in chapters 5 and 6, interviewees in 2017 and 2018 provided rich insights into how users engaged with social media technology and their perception of the importance of social media in society, the political process, and their own practices and beliefs.

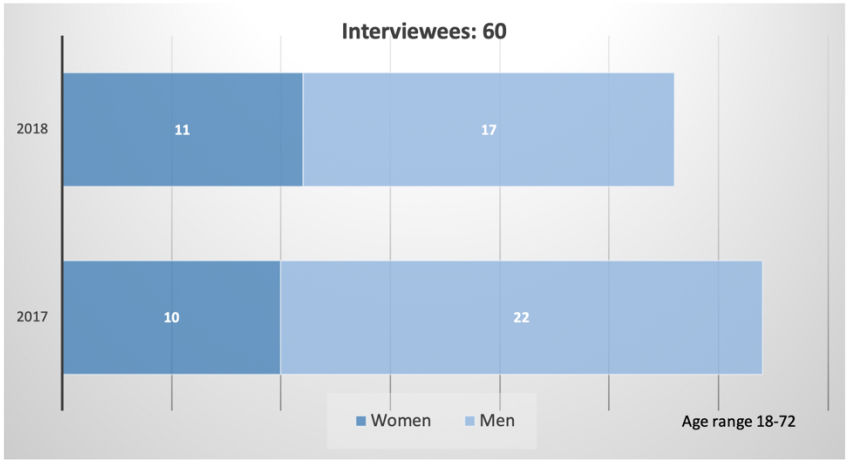


Figure 4. In-depth interview participant in 2017/18 by gender and age range.



Figure 5: Geographic locations of interviews conducted in 2017/2018: Phnom Penh, Kampot, Kampong Cham, Siem Reap, and Battambang.

Interview participants were enlisted through a process of snowball sampling, which Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) describe as a process of 'chain referral' particularly suited to research involving sensitive issues and where insider knowledge is required to locate specific individuals and hard-to-reach groups (Chamberlin and Hodgetts 2018). Cohen and Arieli (2011) extend the value of snowball sampling from hard-to-reach groups to environments beset by conflict, where, in some respects, the entire population is marginalised to a degree, and difficult to access by an outsider researcher (p. 423). Following contact with a small number of social media users ahead of travelling to Cambodia in 2017, the referral process developed over the months of June and July where initial research participants were asked to recommend other influential social media users, and so on. This snowball approach continued until the process became largely recursive in terms of new participants recommending individuals who were already part of the sample. Identifying the 2018 interviewees similarly followed a similar process of chain referral that began in the months before fieldwork commenced. However, the political situation in Cambodia had deteriorated dramatically between 2017 and 2018. By the time of the national election in July 2018, the country was experiencing its most authoritarian phase in decades (International Commission of Jurists 2019). The willingness of people to participate in research and ensuring their safety was an overriding consideration. My previous experience working as a journalist for two decades in Cambodia guided my cautious and considered approach to working with research participants and to ensure their safe participation. Interviews were cancelled and re-scheduled at times, and venues were changed

to ensure the maximum comfort for interviewees. Questions asked in the interviews, media diary exercise, and focus groups discussion were first pilot tested in Phnom Penh with a small group of Cambodian confidantes to ensure their clarity in the Cambodian context. Interviews were conducted both in English and Khmer, depending on the preference of participants, and two trusted assistants undertook translation where required. In-depth discussion was conducted in the days before interviewing to ensure the assistants were deeply familiar with the research plan and the interview questions. One of my Cambodian confidantes was instrumental in identifying the media diary participants having previously worked with school leavers in rural Cambodia in his capacity as a civil society organiser. Morgenbesser and Weiss (2018) note the value of working with 'trusted intermediaries' in authoritarian Southeast Asia, where local associates 'help close the gap' with research respondents and reduce suspicion regarding motives (p. 395).

Criteria for inclusion in the 2018 sample included social media users who demonstrated an everyday rather than expert, professional or partisan use of social media. Interviewees were sought from rural areas and the capital city, and balance was pursued in terms of gender, age groups, educational levels, and socio-economic circumstances. Crucially, participants had to be willing to speak about their social media usage as it related to political matters. The 28 people who agreed to participate were not active in party politics excepting a farmer who was also the chief of his village. A village chief nominally ensures that the interests of the government are carried out at village level. Often remaining in their positions for decades, village chiefs may command the respect of village residents irrespective of national party affiliation.

4.4.4 Social media diary exercise

Diary keeping (Allport 1942) as a methodological approach was employed in the 2018 fieldwork period as a means of gathering additional data to complement and complicate data gathered from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. Employed in qualitative research as a means of eliciting rich insights and reflexivity on social processes in a particular timeframe (Berg and Düvel 2012), diary research methods involve participants self-recording their thoughts and practices over a defined period, reflecting on those activities, and sharing the results with a researcher. Media diaries, depending on their format, may involve collecting details about forms of engagement, types of media involved, and the location and times of use.

Less structured diary formats allow for greater reflection and self-reporting of insights and impressions. A semi-structured diary format (Murray 2018, p. 272-273) was employed in this study to allow diary participants to provide responses to questions posed regarding their everyday social media practices (see Appendix F). The structured element of the diary included queries that each respondent was asked to address, and the unstructured component involved providing space in the diary form for the respondents to write more detailed reflections on their answers. Markham and Couldry (2007) attest to the value of conducting both researcher-present data, such as interviews, focus group discussions, and researcher-absent data, such as diaries, which allow participants to relate their own subjective experiences of media consumption amid the objective conditions of their own lives and society. The researcher-absent diary method removes the dynamic of participants possibly responding to the presence and prodding of the researcher during person-to-person encounters. The diary, as a researcher-absent method, encourages 'personally styled, self-analytical, informal recording of thoughts and actions' (Markham and Couldry 2007, p. 684). Diary participants were identified through a chain referral process of youths who had attended a workshop on access to information organised by a civil society group. Emails and Facebook Messenger posts were sent to 127 school-leaving aged youths seeking participants for the diary exercise. A Word document file of the research statement and the media diary format, both in English and Khmer language, was sent to potential participants who expressed an initial interest. Follow-up conversations were conducted with those seeking further information about the project and the diary process. Of the 127 potential candidates, 32 completed the weeklong diary exercise and returned their document diaries by email and Messenger, (see Figure 6).

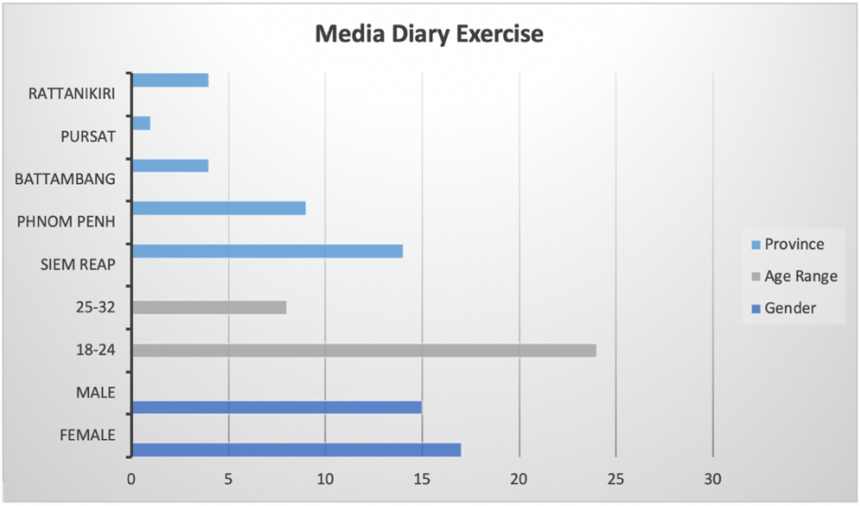


Figure 6: Media diary participants: 32 people participated in the media diary exercise: 17 women and 15 men aged between 18 and 32 years, and resident in five provinces: Phnom Penh, Pursat, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Ratanakkiri.

The returned diaries were translated to English and coded by topic and theme (Richards 2005). Topic coding was used for data in the diaries related to incidence of use and other descriptive characteristics of social media usage. For example, a diary keeper who simply recorded accessing international news was coded under international news as a topic. Engaging with family or friends on a personal basis was coded under personal usage as a topic. Longer, information-rich responses in the diaries were coded by theme as in the manner of coding of the in-depth interviews and focus group. The diaries were coded and organised with the assistance of Excel spreadsheet software, which was found suitable owing to the large number of topics involved and was user-friendly in the generation of descriptive charts presented in Chapter 6.

4.4.5 Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion was convened with six people aged 18 to 28 years in the northern city of Siem Reap. Four women and two men participated in the discussion, which was chosen as a method in order to understand if, in group interaction, the sharing and comparing of experiences related to social media usage differed compared to that recounted in interview settings. The participants, identified through chain-referral, included five university-level students and one employee of a non-profit group. The participants availed of pseudonyms to protect their identities. One of the participants had also participated in the media diary exercise. All participants received a research statement and informed consent document in advance of the meeting. Once all participants were in attendance, the research objectives were explained and participants were encouraged to ask questions, which were answered. All six participants signed informed consent forms after the discussion and debriefing had concluded. I directed the discussion, which lasted around 90 minutes, with the assistance of a Cambodian facilitator who posed my pre-prepared questions to the group. This allowed me to take notes and ensure the discussion flowed smoothly. The facilitator and I spent some hours in advance of the meeting discussing questions and possible strategies for eliciting the richest responses from the participants in terms of giving the group space to express themselves, what MacDougall and Darbyshire (2018) describe as ‘focused but roomy’ discussion. Barbour’s (2018) recommendation that detailed planning be undertaken to prepare for a focus group was heeded in that the group discussion was scheduled for a date after all in-depth interviews had been concluded and the media diary exercise was completed. Transcribed fully from an audio recording, the almost 90-minute group discussion was coded and thematically analysed.

Elements of consensus and diversity (Morgan and Hoffman 2018) were exhibited in the group discussion, which chimes with Flick's (2018) observation that discussion generated in a focus group reveals diversity and differences in the ways people read meaning in a topic of discussion and its negotiation. The value of 'sharing and comparing' (Morgan and Hoffman 2018) and the similarities and differences expressed in discussion provided important instances of diversity and consensus in relation to the themes identified in the in-depth interviews. Thus, through the triangulation of different methods and different sources—the focus group discussion, interviews, and media diaries—this study sought to capture the multiple 'truths' (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 286) of social life. Triangulation afforded insights that one method alone would not have generated, and the final node in this process was the analysis of Facebook posts by politicians.

4.5 Facebook data analysis 2017-2018

To achieve the qualitative research goal of an insider understanding of the world of social phenomena, Flick's (2018, p. xix) three levels of qualitative analysis was applied in this study. The first level, *analysis of experience*, was achieved through the gathering and analysis of 60 in-depth interviews. The second level, *analysis of interactions and communication*, was achieved in the six-person focus group discussion as well as the collection and analysis of 32 self-reported media diaries. The third level, *analysis of documents,* involved analysing public posts on the Facebook pages of four prominent Cambodian political figures in a 15-month period between the 2017 and 2018 election: Prime Minister Hun Sen; Lieutenant General Hun Manet (Hun Sen's son and heir-apparent); and opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. Ditchfield and Meredith (2018) speak in favour of the research value of Facebook in terms of the platform providing a 'preserved archive' of naturally occurring data. Such communicative traces as Facebook posts and interactions exist independent of whether the researcher is present or not to record and analyse. As a type of pre-existing textual data for which the researcher was absent at the time of production (Braun and Clarke 2013), Facebook posts allow insight into people's interests, experiences and perspectives in a particular historical context. Ditchfield and Meredith also note the 'meaning-making' of participants and their activity on Facebook (2018, p. 449) where discourse is constructed, and meaning is present and appraised. In this study, public posts to the Facebook pages of the four political figures were inductively coded with the assistance of Excel, first by topics which were analysed and then developed into

themes. Preliminary topics and themes form the basis for what Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 224) refer to as the 'central organising concepts', which then develop into central, key themes that provide meaningful, interpretative insights to answer key research questions. The Facebook posts analysed were made available through the archiving services of the social media analytics company *Quintly*. Textual posts were coded in the case of Hun Sen [n=2,812], Sam Rainsy [N=998] and Kem Sokha [n=614], and images in the case of Hun Manet [n=2,398] as his text posts contained scant information compared to photographs posted to his Facebook page. Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) speak of visual images being materially embedded, socially and historically, in society and human relations, which makes them valuable artefacts for analysis. It is important to note that the analysis of Facebook posts in this study was not a turn to quantification. Rather, the consideration of Facebook posts was a means of establishing the contours and patterns of meaning-making in the production of social media posts by the political figures analysed; their posts being 'cultural fragments' imbued with socio-cultural meanings and ideas (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 153). Similarly, preponderance alone was not attributed overdue importance, as Braun and Clarke note regarding data saliency—something can be important without appearing frequently (Ibid., p. 224). Thus, the identification of preliminary topics and themes in the Facebook posts provided the basis for the formation of key themes which, upon analysis, provided additional and important insights in the triangulation of my data methods and the formulation of meta-themes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, ethical considerations were addressed regarding the conduct of research cross-culturally. Edward Said's seminal work on the Othering of Orientalism reminds that the historical, political and economic processes upon which the Orient and Oriental is constructed are not consigned to history. Thus, one might consider the narratives of Otherness, and acts of racialised violence that accompanied the recent Covid19 outbreaks in Europe and America, what Kim (2020) refers to as the rephrasing of the 'Yellow Peril' rhetoric of the eighteenth century within an Orientalist 21st-century discourse on disease. Liamputtong's (2010) argument was presented in support of this study's pursuit of a qualitative and interpretative approach to research as the most suitable means for ensuring the dignity of participants, and the telling of their stories, in a cross-cultural context. Similarly, Banks' (1998) spectrum of self-assessment for cross-cultural researchers was also presented as a means to self-assess

researcher suitability in this study. There will always be limits in terms of a researcher's fit within a community or research context, as Narayan (1993) argues; we are all outsiders at some time in our lives and in particular contexts. In this chapter, the validity of qualitative research as a means to analyse the social media field was also established, and examples were presented of both Bourdieu's field theory and thematic analysis productively applied to the study of social media and the life worlds and practices of people engaging with such platforms. Discussion on the application of the qualitative data collection methods used in this study—a.) in-depth interviewing, b.) media diaries, c.) a focus group discussion, and d.) analysis of Facebook posts as informational and communicative artefacts—was presented, and the case was made for thematic analysis as a qualitative method of analysis. The reporting of findings from the research methods employed in 2017/18 and a preliminary analysis of that data is presented in the following chapters 5, 6 and 7. While themes and meta-themes developed in this study are referenced in the three following data presentation chapters, the primary discussion of meta-themes is presented in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8.

Chapter Five

Presentation of Fieldwork Findings 2017: Social media and Cambodia's political process

5.1 Introduction

Findings are presented in this chapter from a first wave of interviews conducted following the 2017 local election in Cambodia with 32 research participants who were prominent or influential users of social media. Interviewees included, among others, a senior minister in the Hun Sen government, a second ministerial-level official in the government, an exiled leader of the opposition party interviewed in London later in 2017, a female opposition party leader, the publisher of a pro-government news outlet, a government worker with knowledge of the ruling party's cyber warfare initiative, as well as senior figures in civil society organisations, including human rights and union advocacy workers, independent researchers, political analysts, and social media personalities and commentators known for addressing social issue. Interviewees fell broadly into three groupings (See Table 1): a.) Those representing or holding pro-government views and sentiments; b.) Those aligned with or representing a pro-opposition political standpoint; and c.) Those working in civil society, activism, education and analysis, and not beholden to a particular political point of view.

Political adviser GDP[1]	Independent political analyst[13]	**Social media activist in ruling party**[23]
Civil society organisation director[2]	Digital media commentator[14]	**Ruling party minister**[24]
Independent political analyst [3]	***CNRP official involved in communications*** [15]	***Female CNRP Leader***[25]
Activist Monk[4]	Independent political analyst[16]	Social media celebrity/commentator[26]
Social media commentator[5]	Social media strategist[17]	Research organisation staff member[27]
Senior CPP official[6]	Anti-corruption organisation staff member[18]	Social media celebrity/commentator[28]
Journalist[7]	Union advocacy worker[19]	Aid organisation director[29]
Council of ministers staff member [8]	Digital media news publisher[20]	Independent news media manager[30]
Foreign diplomatic mission worker[9]	**Pro-government media publisher** [21]	University lecturer[31]
GDP political leader[10]	Election monitoring group member[22]	***CNRP leader in exile***[32]
Female social media user[11]		
Female social media user[12]		

Table 1. Interviewees 2017 (n=32) with identifying superscript numbers one to 32. Pro-ruling party grouping in **bold/underlined** (n=5); opposition political grouping in ***bold italics*** (n=5), and civil society members (n=22)

Findings are presented for the three groupings separately as a means to understand how social media was used, the meanings attributed to such use, and the perceived role of such platforms

in the country's political process. The data gathered in 2017 and presented in this chapter was coded and inductively analysed for the identification of preliminary themes.

Preliminary Theme	**Description**
Personalisation of politics	Social media was viewed as changing the nature of political contestation from party competition to more intense focus on personalities.
Crafting of positive self-image /self-promotion	Participants spoke of being keenly aware that social media aided in the creation of online personas that contrasted with traditional characterisations of political leaders.
Emotion	The understanding that to be successful on social media required making a personal connection with other users.
Mimicry	Particular to the ruling party, firstly in following the opposition online and secondly in adopting the online repertories of the opposition once online.
Power of public opinion	The belief that public opinion expressed online in significant strength could alter the government's policies and approaches.
Information and political contestation	That information was key to political contestation, particularly the ability for opposition to address the public directly and free of government censorship.
State media irrelevance	Social media eclipsed state-controlled media narratives.
Intolerance	Online communication and increased intolerance among users.
Youth and Change	That youth and social media had led to change in society.
Finding 'voice'	Social media had provided a platform for expression, particularly for women in a patriarchal, conservative society.
Monitoring and countering criticism	Social media providing new surveillance opportunities for the government and new means to instantly address critics.
Peace and development	Hun Sen's primary political message, now online, being a focus on economic development and stability
Conflict and war	Hun Sen's accompanying message to peace and development being the threat of conflict and war.
Fear and silence	Social media afforded new freedoms and new fears that evoked a need to remain silent.

Table 1a. Preliminary themes identified in 2017 data.

5.2 Pro-government perspectives: social media and symbolic capital

To ascertain how members and supporters of Hun Sen's ruling party used social media and viewed the political importance of such technology, interviews were conducted in 2017 with five interviewees holding pro-government views: Two senior-level CPP officials, an official at the Council of Ministers, the publisher of a pro-government media organisation, and a social media activist working with the ruling party. One of the first interviews was with a ministerial-level CPP official[6] who had a substantial following on his Facebook page. With a sophisticated understanding of Facebook analytics and a politician's sense for his audience, the official told of having recognised several years previously that social media had become a cultural trend among younger Cambodians and one that he felt he should keep pace with. Traditional media in Cambodia allowed only a one-way channel of information dissemination, the official said, while his Facebook page afforded the ability to make reciprocal connections with diverse audiences where he could both disseminate and receive information. The country, the official said, had experienced a cataclysmic demise in the domestic audience's trust and interest in traditional broadcast news since the introduction of social media. Now, social media and the insights afforded by analytics allowed understanding of what interested the public, what they liked, their educational level, and political preferences. All of which allowed the government to draw conclusions as to the direction Cambodian people and society were moving. Studying Facebook users could be utilised to make what he termed 'corrections' and 'adjustments'; the ability for government to monitor social media and change the 'social trend'. Freedoms afforded by social media were problematic, however, as it was creating an 'addiction' to new and novel information. Consequently, the technology needed to be harnessed to 'serve' society, and was dangerous depending on whose hands it was in, he said:

> It's just like a knife. You can chop the meat to cook, or it can be used to kill people… If we are able to use Facebook to disseminate correct, proper information, Cambodia can gain advantage from it, a lot. But, if we use this wrongly, Cambodia can be in trouble.

The official also described how, as a strategy, he did not post content overtly political on his Facebook page. Instead, he focused on posting content related to traditional Cambodian culture and to practical, politically neutral information useful to people. Being a senior member of the ruling party and *not* promoting political material on Facebook was a carefully considered

approach for a social media audience, he explained. In a country where people expected partisan politicking, the absence of political material on the official's Facebook page made people curious about him, which attracted followers as a result. This counterintuitive approach to political promotion was successful as by being indirect on Facebook, the official believed that he gained more followers: 'A different way, you know, you don't have to go directly', he explained.

Such a strategy of indirectness was already used effectively in politics, he noted, offering the example of donations by the ruling party to people in rural areas. By not explicitly promoting the ruling party during such visits, the official told how he earned credibility among villagers who expected speeches and party propaganda along with aid donations. His one subtle message while delivering assistance to such villagers was to impress that if anything should change in society, it would inhibit his ability to continue providing such donations. The tacit message conveyed was that volatility in the traditional structure of power in Cambodia would be borne by the villagers in terms of reduced access to state aid: 'If no peace, there's no way I can help you', as he explained.

The senior official told how the 'real' political contest on social media was in knowing how to win over the thinking of an audience; understanding 'the psychology' of people on Facebook in terms of giving them what they want to 'see' and 'hear'. Drawing comparison with real-world politics, the official noted that traditional methods of acquiring political support, such as the practice of paying rural people for votes at election time, was not an effective strategy. People could no longer be trusted to vote a particular way in the privacy of a voting booth even though they had taken a politician's money. Providing gifts was no longer effective. Political support required making a connection with an audience, and which he tried to do through posting material related to Cambodian culture and traditional values and national symbols:

> To vote for you, try to get their heart, not give them money. Because, you give them money, they use it, they vote for someone else anyway, because they do not love you. The heart is not with you. And that's what I learned from the social media.

It is evident here that the promotion of cultural over political content, and of the focus on the 'heart' (*emotion*) over the head (*rationality*), on the official's Facebook page was aimed at accumulating social capital through a curated authenticity (Stanyer 2013; Metz et al., 2020)—what I describe in the key theme of *performing authenticity*—and was a surreptitious means of

building political capital for the government by not actively seeking support but knowing that it would accrue vicariously through his personal actions online and offline. Bourdieu's work on symbolic capital accumulation is illuminating in this instance, as is his work on *gift giving* in terms of a gift being also a 'misfortune' (Bourdieu 1997, p. 231) in that the giver impresses a debt on the receiver, a debt that must be misrecognised by the receiver in order for the invisible process of possession by giving to be sustained. The gift incurs a debt of obligation, a 'recognition' of 'personal loyalty or prestige' by the receiver—the gift thus becoming a means of 'getting and keeping a lasting hold over someone' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 126).

First identified as a preliminary theme in this interview with the senior CPP official in 2017, *gift-giving* emerged as key theme in Hun Sen's social media strategy ahead of the 2018 national election. As will be shown in Chapter 7, other themes identified in 2017, such as *peace, economic development,* and *war* were prominent in Hun Sen's social media posts and are valuably understood from Bourdieu's perspective of gift-giving—where peace and development are personal gifts bestowed by Hun Sen with concomitant debts and obligations incurred by the public. When peace is gifted, it can always be taken back by the owner, a point Hun Sen reminded the Cambodian people, not least through social media ahead of the 2018 national election.

5.2.1 Social media – a digital terrain of conflict

The senior CPP official keenly recognized the potential of Facebook to craft communication based on audience analytics, for creating a personal online persona (Scammell 2015) and accruing social and political capital through repertoires of engagement that appealed to a younger generation of potential voters, and which developed the preliminary theme of *youth and change*. There remained also the dual narrative that social media represented a danger to the government if not properly managed. Employing the metaphor of two pugilists, the senior official described the social media strategies and abilities of the ruling party and opposition as akin to two equally-matched boxers entering the ring in a contest over the 2018 election. The theme of social media as a digital terrain of *conflict* also emerged among civil society interviewees regarding the contest between the ruling party and the opposition party. Social media was described by a political adviser to the Grassroot Democracy Party[1] as the site of a struggle where 'a lot of punches' are thrown. This conflict could be understood as operating on the level of symbolic power, similar to Couldry's (2012) description of 'modes of ordering'.

Owing to state media's loss of credibility with a domestic audience due to new and trusted sources of news and information made available via social media, the ruling party had moved to re-establish 'modes of ordering' by co-opting social media. Co-opted by the government, social media disintermediated (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018) modes of ordering similar to those previously fostered by state media in that government authorities sought through digital networks to re-establish a '"reality" that for many purposes seems consistent, orderly, unchallengeable and yet whose inconsistencies are based on a series of discriminations and exclusions that are largely hidden from view' (Couldry 2012, p. 88).

Explaining a shift in the ruling party's attitude toward social media, a minister in Hun Sen's government[24] recounted how party colleagues had been critical of the failure to regulate and curtail social media at the time of the 2013 national election. Attitudes of those in his party who had wanted to deny access to social media had changed, the minister explained, after Hun Sen publicly joined Facebook in 2015. The government had now learned to counter the advantage that the opposition gleaned from social media, and he believed networking platforms were no longer a key factor in the election process. Social media users were far less trusting of information on Facebook than they were previously, the minister said. During the 2013 election period, information on social media was considered credible. Now, young people were aware of the need to confirm, verify, and fact check what they encountered online. The minister placed credit for that scepticism and awareness partly on a government initiative to educate young people to use Facebook responsibly:

> Now the people understand that—what social media is. It's not just reporting only facts. It's also, you have your opinions. You have, oh, a lot. That's why I say that because of this kind of abuse, it makes the people understand better what social media is.

The government, the minister explained, now used social media to rapidly respond to negative online information with counter information, to quickly identify information as false and disavow rumours in real-time: 'I think that the most important thing to fight something on social media is a clear and quick reply', he said. The minister's description of social media resonates with Gunitsky's (2015) description of the co-opting of social media in support of regime durability, particularly in terms of framing public discourse.

The publisher[21] of one of Cambodia's leading pro-government online news sites provided insights into a parallel strategy of discourse framing in digital news. With one million users of

his site's mobile news app and a further two million followers on his site's Facebook page, the publisher told how his media organisation posted an average of 100 news articles per day across social and digital media platforms. Coupled with continuous push notifications on his site's mobile app, the media organisation had become one of the most popular in Cambodia. Political news was provided directly and exclusively from senior government officials, including Hun Sen, to his news organisations, which meant that none could compete in terms of access to political elites in the domestic media market. The publisher concurred with the opinion expressed by other interviewees in 2017 that the arrival of social media had provided Cambodians with access to news and information not previously possible. Facebook was invaluable for Cambodians to learn about their country and the world, the publisher said, though he was also perturbed by the freedom and ease to criticise government afforded by social media. The government, however, had warned that people would be quickly found and prosecuted if they insulted officials on social media, and the publisher referred to the case of the arrest of a Facebook user days earlier. Stories about Hun Sen issuing threats and trading insults with opposition political figures were among his most popular news items, and he believed the government was overtaking the opposition on social media and winning audiences by promoting positive messages, such as providing donations to hospitals, increasing worker salaries, and reducing the cost of electricity and water utilities. The theme of social media as an opportunity for government to promote a *positive self-image* in a controlled information environment again speaks to Scammell's political branding, Couldry's modes of ordering, and Gunitsky's affordance of social media for authoritarian regimes.

The themes of *self-promotion* and *symbolic capital* also emerged in an interview with a young female activist who had become a social media celebrity[23]. As an opinionated and energetic teenage activist at the time of the 2013 election, the interviewee attracted a following of hundreds of thousands of fans on her Facebook page. Posting photos and video commentaries of her activities with the opposition party, the activist's blunt denunciations of the government on issues such as corruption, deforestation, and land evictions turned her into the face of online youth activism in Cambodia. Shifting political allegiance to Hun Sen's government at the time of interviewing in 2017 after a personal dispute with opposition party figures, the now 22-year-old had become a ruling party member and leading critic of her former colleagues in opposition. Though fans on social media had turned against her—a group she now described as her 'many haters'—she still had more than two million followers on Facebook. Her change in political allegiance was also accompanied by a change in her views of social media, freedom of

expression, and the government she had once so strenuously criticised. Information circulating on social media could be very dangerous for Cambodia, she said. Using her own popularity as a cautionary tale, the former activist believed that social media's danger rested in its ability to allow people to build online followings among like-minded people. Facts were ignored or rejected in such an environment, and evidence to the contrary had no currency, she explained, emphasising that such a situation was currently taking place with critics of the government who were circulating 'fake news' to 'colour' the government's reputation.

> Social media are very important for Cambodia, but very dangerous for Cambodia also. Because Cambodian people, some people, they don't know about the fake news or something else. They just, for example, like they support me, what I am saying, they believe all…. But if they hate me, I do anything, I have evidence to show them, they still don't believe me. That's the problem.

Her own earlier robust criticism of the government was, she explained, the result of youthful ignorance: speaking without thinking, commenting without conducting research. Hun Sen, she explained, was previously unaware of the situation in the country as he had relied on officials to inform him. Now that Hun Sen was on Facebook, he was aware and could directly communicate with ordinary people and respond to their concerns: 'Now our prime minister can see the truth about his people…and he can help a lot now'. Social media was, she said, valuable for countering and monitoring the opposition online and potentially for use in lawsuits if such online activity was found to have broken laws—again, themes of crafted communication to enhance the regime, *monitor and counter criticism*, and punish proscribed activity are evident.

5.2.2 Social media, symbolic capital, and cyber war

The former teenage activist explained how she had first gained prominence on social media. Anti-government sentiment was strong in her household and among neighbours where she grew up. Yet, no one dared to speak openly or critically about the government. Cambodians had a deep fear of war, after experiencing many years of conflict. As a result, people had learned to bury their true feelings and opinions regarding figures of authority: 'They are afraid of the government…if some government members, they are doing bad, people never complain…they are really scared.' Openly criticizing the government in the media was all but unheard of before 2013 and the arrival of Facebook. A young woman unafraid to criticise officials in public was unique, she recounted, explaining how she quickly became noticed and a role model for youth who were traditionally afraid to speak out. The activist told how she set

an example for others by using her real name and photograph on her Facebook profile at a time when people posted anonymously or wore motorcycle helmets to disguise their identity in photos and videos.

> I show my real profile. My real name. My real face. And I complain to the government. So that's the reason that I become famous…. Last time they're afraid, yeah, and I am like a model for them…to be brave. So many people, so many youths come after me. And they said it like me, like without covering or hiding their profile anymore.

Explaining her shift of allegiance to the government, the former activist told how she wrote to Hun Sen to apologise for her past criticism and sought his approval for membership in his party, and membership for thousands of members of a charitable organisation that she had formed on the back of her fame on social media. Hun Sen agreed to both: 'I used a letter to ask the prime minister, because I have members, like over 100K, not in Facebook, outside. I have my members…. So now we are going to CPP.'

Bourdieu's field theory describes agents with different means, needs, and ends, depending on their positions within fields, as 'contributing to conserving or transforming' the structure of the field of power via the '"exchange rate" between different kinds of capital' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 32-34). Applying Bourdieu, we see the former activist's departure from the opposition to the government as demonstrating the exchange value of symbolic capital and the conversion of one species of capital for another. The former activist accrued substantial social capital online during her time with the opposition party which converted into offline support and membership of her charitable organisation. Her symbolic capital online and offline thus commanded an exchange value which was converted to political capital in joining the ruling party and gaining access to the field of power (Hun Sen's ruling party being the foremost site in which power operates) in Cambodia.

How the government connected with Cambodian youth was at the forefront of concerns for an official[8] with knowledge of a 'cyber war' department established at the ministerial cabinet offices in Phnom Penh known as the Council of Ministers. Describing the current generation of young people who had access to social media technology and Western tastes as 'new Cambodians in an old land', the official did not believe government initiatives with social media would work in instilling support for the ruling party. The government needed to tackle social issues and improve society, not simply hone its use of social media, he said, explaining that the objective of the cyber war team was to monitor and counter criticism of the government

and counterbalance the opposition's presence on digital platforms. Training for members of the team had taken place overseas in Russia, China and Malaysia, according to the official, and members had a range of surveillance technologies and strategies to execute their work. Technologies included key-word alert software that flagged content on specific social media accounts, logged the flagged posts, and the account holder's location, which could be identified through cooperation provided by private telecom companies who provided mobile ISP connections for smartphone owners. Of the 7 million active social media users in 2018, 6.3 million accessed social media via mobile devices (We are social/Hootsuite 2018). The cyber war team comprised of up to 20 staff who coordinated a network of other staff (he used the term 'cyber troops') located in provincial capitals across the country. The official explained that each member of the team had multiple Facebook accounts under their control and members were tasked with monitoring and reporting criticism of the government while at the same time disseminating positive information on social media in support of the government. As the government official described: 'In the old days you used guns and grenades to go to war. Today it is technological warfare. Now you need electronic devices.' According to the official, the government's online aim was an attempt to instil in young people the ruling party's historical narrative, which was built on the party's right to rule because it had participated in the removal of the Pol Pot regime in 1979. Recounting that Cambodian school children were indoctrinated in school more than educated, and history was often 'hijacked by ideology', the official told how different generations of students were manipulated to adhere to the dominant ideology of that time. During the Cold War, Cambodian students were taught to be anti-American. After the Cold War, they were taught to be anti-Communist. Nowadays, youth were little interested in the past as they were more concerned with finding employment. Thus, the government's efforts to attract young supporters was failing because of increased personal freedoms, access to information, and economic growth, which had resulted in young people being better informed about society and the world, and not harbouring the same fear of renewed civil conflict as their parents. Recounting the initial impact of social media in 2013, the official described the situation as the government finding itself 'behind a racing horse' and trying to catch up. The government had at first joked about the opposition using Facebook until 'the joke became a powerful political tool', he said, and now it was too late for the ruling party to restore popularity when so many of the population are young and information is so readily accessible. Using a medical analogy, the official equated the government to a body suffering from a terminal illness: 'We have been doing something, but it is done too late. The patient is bound to die. It is too late.'

Themes identified in the interviews with the five research participants holding pro-government sentiments included, included *information and political contestation*, the diminished popularity and *irrelevance of state media* and the affordances of social media for providing access to new and trusted sources of news and information online that had expanded public awareness of social and political matters—of civic concerns more broadly; of social media as a new terrain of political *conflict* where information and communication required control; the value of social media for crafting *positive self-images;* the creating of new online personas for political figures through the accumulation of social and cultural capital, and its exchange value in conversion to political capital. In the next section, findings from interviewees aligned with opposition politics are presented in terms of themes and theoretical concepts.

5.3 Opposition parties and perspectives on social media

To determine how opposition parties and political figures used social media and their understanding of the role of such technology in the political process, five interviews were conducted in 2017 with opposition party political figures: Three interviews involved senior officials of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP)—two interviews conducted in Phnom Penh in July 2017 and one interview in London in December 2017. A senior member and an adviser to the Grassroots Democracy Party (GDP) were also interviewed. Formed to contest the local election in 2017, the GDP presents itself as an alternative to both Hun Sen's CPP and the CNRP of Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. Providing context and background on social media and the role of such platforms for opposition politics, interviewees in this grouping identified the 2013 election as a turning-point in contemporary Cambodian history. Social media had increased access to alternative sources of news and information, allowed a new form of communication among those supporting political change in Cambodia, and helped to mobilise people to join opposition party rallies at the time of the 2013 vote. Social media, however, was not responsible for the result of the 2013 national election. A senior CNRP official involved in the party's communication strategy[15] recounted how social media had allowed the political opposition to address people directly by circumventing the ruling party's control over national broadcast media. Social media, however, did not create the desire for political change. Rather, social media reflected a desire for political change that was already present in society. The CNRP official explained that social media was, first and foremost, an alternative channel of information and communication in a country where the opposition were denied access to domestic broadcasting owing to decades of government control of state media

and influence over private media entities. Facebook had also proved extremely effective in helping to mobilise participation in events such as public rallies ahead of the 2013 national election and had afforded a new *power of public opinion* as expressed in activity online and off. Importantly, Facebook provided users, as it rapidly grew in popularity from 2013 onward, a window on the existence and activities of other opposition supporters. The CNRP official described this as social media illuminating public support that already existed for the opposition but was not reflected in the state-controlled national media. Some foreign observers, the official explained, had erred in crediting social media with the creation, rather than the illumination, of support for the opposition.

> Back then also there were not that many Cambodians, if you look at the percentage, that were using social media. It was like, I would say, icing on the cake. We already had the ground support, but actually it was coming from the urban, I'm sorry, from rural areas. So, the momentum of CNRP in 2013 was a rural momentum; it was not an urban momentum contrary to, I think, to people's observation.

> Social media helped in 2013 for international observers to notice the momentum. But they did not notice the momentum, the rural momentum, they only saw it when it's on Facebook.

Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe's (2010) observe that social networks such as Facebook support relational development among distributed users in that the platform allows those with shared interests to find each other and to share aspects of the self with others as a means of building relations within 'social networks and the social capital that is embedded within them' (p. 889), themes that resonate with Papacharissi's (2015) work on the affective aspect of new digital networks. Support for the opposition party grew following the strong election result in 2013, interviewees said, and it was in that post-election period that more people took to social media platforms to express political views as public demonstrations called for Hun Sen to step-down. An adviser to the Grassroots Democracy Party[1] told how Facebook provided momentum for supporters of the opposition, particularly in terms of providing access to varied sources of news and information, and in breaking down spatial and temporal barriers to making known a community of like-minded people who remained largely unconnected under the country's traditional state-controlled and state-influenced media. As people dared to express themselves and their opinions on Facebook, the adviser told, more people felt motivated, and were 'attracted by' the example of others to also express themselves on social media: 'They see, like hey, people get out on Facebook, why don't we?'

It was after the 2013 election and the months of street protests that followed when social media surpassed television in importance, the adviser said, describing Facebook as playing 'a very important role during the protests to get updated news, information from everywhere, you know, across the country.' A senior GDP official[10] also held the view that social media was not the decisive factor in the 2013 election. Voting for the political opposition had increased in 2013 due chiefly to the alliance of two opposition parties: the Sam Rainsy Party and Human Rights Party that had joined together in 2012 to form the CNRP. The unification of opposition parties he contended, was more important than social media for the outcome of the 2013 election: 'Alliance for change, that is the momentum.'

A senior female leader of the CNRP[25] said that social media was central to mobilising critical thought in Cambodia. What Facebook had done, the leader explained, was allowed dissemination and access for the first time, in one mediated space, of images, sounds and words pertaining to contentious issues and events that had rarely been seen before by a mass audience in Cambodia. The mediation of socially-contentious issues and conflict via social media, such as land usurpation by the rich and powerful of the poor, sensitised people to injustice. Such abuses had long occurred in Cambodia and were known prior to the popularizing of social media. Facebook, however, allowed for a wider audience to gain a visceral experience of those issues through the mediation of video images and the voices of social contention and conflict. The theme of a growing *civic awareness* via social media emerged in interviews in 2017 and again in 2018 in terms of the impact of viewing and becoming aware of issues such as land grabbing and deforestation, including through the mediated activism by such groups as the Boeng Kak anti-eviction protesters in Phnom Penh and groups working to stop deforestation in rural Cambodia (see Figure 7).

Social media had broken the Hun Sen government's 'monopoly' on information, according to a second senior CNRP leader living in exile[32] and interviewed in London in December 2017. A precursor to social media in ending the government's control over information began with the mobile phone, which helped to end rural isolation in Cambodia and the ruling party's domination of society, he said. Radio stations such as the Khmer-language services of US-funded Radio Free Asia and Voice of America had provided a critical alternative to Cambodia's state-controlled media. However, with social media, the ability to share images, video and sound on one platform spurred what the exiled leader described as a 'technological revolution leading to a cultural revolution'.

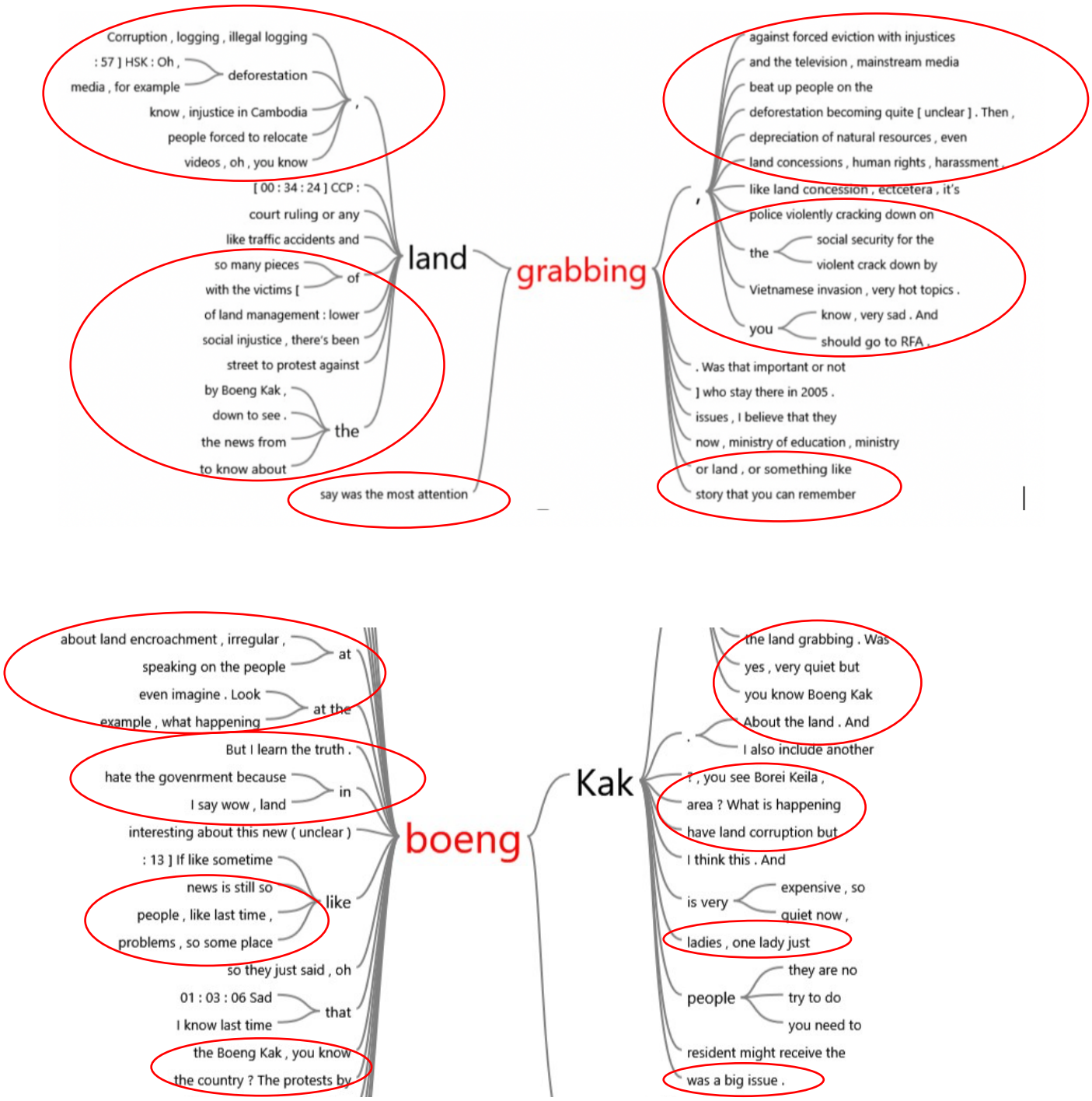


Figure 7. Word-trees constructed from interviews in 2017-2018 attests the emotive nature of witnessing mediated protests via social media, including repression of such protests.

The opposition leader also believed that social media empowered people by providing a means to expose wrongdoing by their leaders, and the political hierarchy would be compelled to reform for fear of provoking a public backlash, and reflected in the theme of *power of public opinion*:

> The powerless citizen can be empowered and can trigger a change in behaviour on the part of the powerful…. Because the powerful in Cambodia, they used to do whatever they want with total impunity. Not even being ashamed. But now, through Facebook, they can be named and shamed…they will lose popularity, the people will know more about their bad behaviour and politically it will be costly for them…. So, it kind of empowers the people.

The exiled leader also accepted that threats against social media users had been effective in instilling *fear and silencing* dissent—another theme common in the data from 2017/18. Since threats were made by Hun Sen against critical commentary on social media, the exiled leader told how there has been a noticeable reduction in people sharing and liking material on his own Facebook page.

The senior GDP[10] official similarly believed that social media had become a powerful means of holding authorities to account through the *power of public opinion* expressed online. When critical or embarrassing information related to poor standards in public services or questionable practices by authorities circulated on social media, officials had been forced to give an account of their behaviour and provide redress. People were, 'generally' free to comment on social media. However, the GDP official also acknowledged that people needed to be cautious with their online activities and abide by a 'certain code of ethics' as there were certain things that should be left unsaid. Correspondingly, the adviser to the GDP[1] believed that people had traversed from a naive relationship with social media platforms in 2013-2014 to a more mature approach in recent years, which was due, in part, to Hun Sen's adoption of social media. The public's relationship with Facebook had been 'innocent', 'immature', the adviser said. Now, owing to the ruling party's co-opting of social media and information manipulation on platforms, people had become more cautious in their use of networking technology:

> Right now the information sometimes is hardly trusted, except, you know, the trusted media…. For example, CPP spends so much time now on Facebook. While in 2012, 13, they hate it. But now everybody [has] access. Even the Prime Minister himself. You know, sometimes he spends so much money on boosting his posts, or some of his staff. Rich people, politicians from the ruling party, many of them [are] using social media.

Sceptical that social media users in Cambodia were convinced by the government's new approach to political messaging using Facebook, the adviser noted the power of employing symbols of traditional Cambodia culture on social media and promoting socially-respected

acts, such as charity (*gift giving*), which members of the elite had begun to feature on their Facebook pages. The adviser gave the example of a businessman whose company had been involved in removing poor people from their land and how the businessman had earned praise online for posting photos of his distribution of pizza to children living on the street: 'That's the nature of Khmer people. No matter how bad you are, you were, if you start doing good today, they forgive you, and they forget everything you do.'

As Bourdieu (1998) proposes, societies render homage to those who render homage to society by seeming to reject selfish self-interest: 'What is required is not that one do absolutely everything that one should, but rather that one at least give indications of trying to do so' (p. 98). The practice of gift giving as a means to generate symbolic capital via social media is again evident as a theme, as it the value of social media for providing access to trusted news media and in the accruing of *symbolic capital.* Evident also are the political affordances of social media platforms (Siapera 2018), which was addressed in Chapter 2, and identified in the theme of *information and political contestation*, and of the personal and affective aspects of online communication (Boltanski 1999; Ellis 2009) for political figures. Additional themes identified in 2017 will now be addressed.

5.3.1 Co-opt and control: The accruing of symbolic capital

Noting Hun Sen's warning of a possible return to civil war should he lose power, the CNRP official involved in communications[15] told how the government's 'message is fear and talking about the past' and the prime minister's threats could not be ignored. Many, however, and particularly young people, were inured to the prime minister's constant warnings. The senior GDP official[10] also described Hun Sen's social media message as one focused on 'peace and development' interspersed with occasional references to war, as war was a 'product' that Hun Sen's needed to peddle: 'He has to sell his product,' the GDP official said. Accompanying the rhetorical themes of *peace, development* or *war*, Hun Sen also posted more emotive material related to his family and personal life on social media, which the GDP official described as giving the impression of a more personal and intimate communication with his audience:

> You feel that there is a direct message from him. But in TV, radio, you wouldn't feel a direct message. So, Facebook is like a direct message for him, and more—

> also many posts [are] about family life, family free time. So, I think he knows how to send a message.

In focusing on family in his social media activity, Hun Sen was communicating one of the most important values in Cambodian culture, another GDP member said*:

> In Cambodia, family is important. The strongest social capital we have. And that's how he uses both in ways that try to promote his core values, his values, and also attack his enemies, his competitors.

The CNRP communications official[15] also said that Facebook provided Hun Sen with a platform to directly present a new public persona, a more accessible, softer side to his authoritarian personality, which was exemplified by his posting of photos with his children and grandchildren:

> You hear a rumour…that he's like that. Now you don't have to wonder. You see it on social media. You see it on Facebook…. You can see some of his posts, it's very, it's like pictures in his bedroom with his children, a lot of children, and grandchildren…. And we know that's, you know, that's, that's good. That's positive for him, right? He wants to appear soft. But then he keeps contradicting himself.

This is a contradiction between Hun Sen as authoritarian leader and his more emotive social media persona, as referenced by the CNRP official, and which chimes with Stanyer (2013) and Scammell's (2015) work on intimization and self-branding of political leaders. Accompanying his intimate self on social media are threats against his online critics who faced arrest and possibly violence in the off-line world. Revealed here is the central role of human and symbolic processes in social media strategies, particularly in terms of accruing and converting Bourdieusian species of valued symbolic capital. Papacharissi and Easton (2013) are instructive in the accruing of symbolic capital on social media platforms where self 'authorship is encouraged, and publicity becomes agency in the sense that it permits authors access to fields and forms of capital that were previously inaccessible' (p. 179). Bourdieu (1998) proffers that the social world does not emerge from a social void but is something that agents 'have to do'; the social world is constructed on an individual and collective basis, in cooperation and conflict, and positions occupied in social space are structured by the distribution of different types of capital which 'command the representations of the space' (p. 12). Species of capital, according to Bourdieu, are also 'weapons' in the positional struggle that can transform or

* This GDP member provided brief comment for this research but was not part of the formal interviewee process.

conserve the social space. Reflecting on Hun Sen's use of the soft power of social capital in terms of family values and his hard power in political capital, it is useful to consider Illouz (2007) who argues for the inclusion of an 'emotional field' in expanding Bourdieu's field theory. Within the emotional field there is a new social aptitude present—an 'emotional competence' that Illouz defines as the 'capacity to display an emotional style' which, similar to cultural competence, is transferable as a species of capital. Emotional capital, Illouz argues, is more potent than cultural capital as 'emotional capital seems to mobilise the least reflexive aspects of the habitus' in that emotions 'exist in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body' (2007, p. 63). Hun Sen's promotion of family values on social media demonstrates his establishing of a new emotional competence, an emotional tonality that echoes Stanyer's intimization, to his public persona, and the leveraging of emotional capital which, as opposition party officials interviewed noted, had earned Hun Sen new social capital, and therefore political capital. The creation of symbolic capital on social media was also an objective of opposition political figures. A senior female leader of the CNRP[25] described how she had adopted the format of one-minute videos posted to Facebook and employed cultural motifs in those messages as a means to add 'cultural value' and emotion to her political communication: 'It touches the people. So, I blend my message with culture, with values,' she said.

Themes evident in interviews with the political opposition were of social media's value in terms of *information and political contestation*; *access to alternative, trusted and credible,* news and information as a primary affordance of social media, and the accruing of *symbolic capital* on digital platforms. Information access afforded by social media had led to greater *awareness* and a mobilisation of critical cognizance on issues of public importance and concern, as well as identification with others who shared such sentiments. Distinction was also made between social media technology creating momentum for societal change and social media reflecting pre-existing demands for change and a desire for social justice, which previously had few channels for popular expression in Cambodia. The theme of *public opinion* holding power to account and people being empowered politically through the leveraging of information on social media was also an affordance considered of social media in 2017. However, as repression increased against social media users in 2017/18, the ability of public opinion to challenge power was, I propose, more *imagined* than real—a theme that will be addressed in the following section on civil society interviewees and in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8.

5.4 Civil society perspectives of social media

In this section, findings are presented from interviews conducted with 22 influential social media users working and associated with civil society, including in the areas of human rights, elections and corruption monitoring, trade union advocacy, academia, independent social research, journalism, social media activism, independent political analysis, and digital communications strategy. Interviewees provided insights regarding their use and understanding of social media from different professional orientations and social and political perspectives. Themes identified in this section chime with themes addressed in preceding sections. Interviewees in the civil society grouping believed that the political opposition's relationship with social media was born of necessity owing to the government's dominance over the media sector. Civil society interviewees referenced Hun Sen's co-opting of social media and his cultivation of a new and accessible family-centred persona which contrasted with him previously 'relishing the name "strong man"' (Chandler 2016) and presiding over a government built on secretiveness (Hughes and Eng 2018). Interviewees told of social media providing a means to achieve societal reforms as government was compelled to be more responsive to the demands of a networked citizenry—*the power of public opinion*. Six women interviewees in the civil society grouping were particularly compelling in their description of the sense of personal empowerment that their online 'voice' provided, first as bloggers and later with social networking sites. Conversely, however, interviewees also spoke of their concerns regarding the use of social media and the possible consequences of candid commentary in public. Thus, a contradiction was evident in the belief that social media afforded greater personal agency while surveillance and monitoring necessitated the need for personal strategies of subterfuge to avoid being sanctioned for activities on platforms that afforded that agency—social media.

Echoing interviews with political figures regarding the diminished trust in domestic media, a university lecturer in Phnom Penh[31] told how younger people in particular did not consider the country's broadcast news 'legitimate'. Young people, he said, 'laugh at it. They know it's not real.' An independent political analyst[13] and close friend of the late Dr. Kem Ley, a government critic assassinated in 2016, described Cambodia's domestic media being left 'paralysed' by social media. A female digital media commentator[14] similarly described state media's biased coverage of society as inflicting self-harm: 'I said this not just once, many times before, that mainstream media like television has committed suicide,' she said.

In tandem with their distrust of state media, interviewees also demonstrated awareness regarding issues related to social media such as misinformation, disinformation and the dangers of sharing unsubstantiated material online. A Cambodian journalist[7] captured the tension between old and new media, describing a general suspicion with regards to social media in Cambodia, and the online strategies of political parties. Cambodian people, he recounted, do not 'just believe' what they encounter on social media. They are discerning, he said. 'They know what they want' and make decisions based on 'their' circumstances:

> People are living in both realities: Online reality, the virtual, and on-the-ground reality. They can balance it…. Balance between the two. I think they [politicians] just underestimate the people. They think the people are still stupid, uneducated, and, you know, have a lower understanding of them. But, they just underestimate the people. People are way smarter.

A senior female staff member with a leading international aid organisation[29] believed that her generation of people in their 30s were far more cautious of expressing their opinions online than younger people. Maintaining a large network of professional contacts, she explained that her friends and colleagues supported both the ruling party and the opposition, therefore neither she nor they could 'expose their ideas' on social media. As she said: 'A lot of my friends have a similar tendency not to express certain things.' Younger people, she believed, were more eager to express themselves in public on social media, though she predicted that they too would likely change as they grew older and more 'careful before saying something'. A Cambodian staff member at a foreign embassy in Phnom Penh[9] told how potential jobs in government could be jeopardised by comments on social media not perceived as neutral. The embassy worker recounted how he and others exercised 'self-restraint' in their public commentary.

The term self-censorship was frequently referenced by civil society members, though it appeared to describe a measured 'restraint' than a self-imposed 'restriction'. This restraint was sensitive to and surveilling of the field of power, and while fear of repercussions was one reason to hide opinions on social media, another was opportunity. The staff member at the foreign diplomatic mission told how many of his friends had become members of the ruling party to benefit personally in terms of increased access to job opportunities. Therefore, cloaking true opinions was a necessity.

A political analyst[13] told how his strategy for staying safe on social media included never mentioning Hun Sen by name nor any of his family members. On social media in Cambodia,

he said, ‘You’re free to write. But not free to say exactly what you want to.’ Cambodian people had, therefore, learned to read between the lines in order to interpret and understand what was intended by authors, he added: ‘It’s hidden, but it’s publicly understood.’ Disguised personal sentiment was also described by the director of a civil society organisation[2] who said that while people were once willing to ‘scold directly’ on social media, they now had to be ‘careful’ and practice ‘self-censorship’. Rather than ‘say something straightforward’, they have now changed their ‘tone’. Self-censorship was necessary not only to protect one’s personal safety but also to safeguard employment and the security and livelihoods of other family members. Thus, interviewees told of needing to be cognisant of the effect of their social media activity on friendships—if friends supported the government—as well as their future careers and life opportunities being affected. A digital media commentator[14] told how she practiced self-censorship in her online commentary. She believed that self-censoring was relative to the situation and was not at ‘the expense of the truth’. Instead, she had learned how to ‘carefully’ address sensitive topics such as politics and corruption in a ‘common sense’ way:

> Self-censorship is not the worst thing at all, I mean, every one of us has it, even when we interact with other people socially, you know. But it’s not at the expense of the truth. So, when I write, I feel that at least I am more free than when I don’t. I can express it, even if it’s not 100%. But freedom is not something that is granted easily to you. It’s something that you have to fight for, you know. So, you slowly push the boundary a little bit.

This sense of negotiation of self-censorship that does not preclude a degree of truth reminds of Bourdieu’s doxa as the understanding of the *rules of the game* of social life, and the assuming of positions in fields of powers. A sophisticated understanding of doxa was also evident in the insight provided by the digital media commentator[14] regarding online political discussion involving a mailing list whose membership included leading Cambodian intellectuals and academics, businesspeople, and officials. The ‘common opinion’ among members of the professional network was that they wanted the opposition to win more seats in parliament, though not so many that the opposition would take power. The opposition’s primary value was in being a ‘check and balance’ on the ruling party; a means to make the ruling party more accountable. The general sentiment being that the opposition should neither replace nor change the basis of the established political system. What was more desirable for members of the network was an improved version of the current system: ‘They don’t want revolution, they want evolution.’

Such examples of the in-public negotiation of the self are reminders that of all the forms of 'hidden persuasion' the most implacable is the one exerted, quite simply, by the order of things (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 168). In the subtle and strategic 'construction of the self' in the digital information and communications terrain, Siapera (2018) refers to the fashioning of identity in 'being who we are', which is the result of 'specific socio-historical circumstances' and the materials and technologies available to us. Social media as a project of performance and as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988) allows construction of the self, but in ways 'circumscribed' by technology and specific contexts that require compatibility with social, cultural and political requirements. The social and relational aspects of a media technology and the interplay between individuals, institutions and environments is evident in this research in the experiences of social media users and their day-to-day gambles, strategies and performances. What was safe to post on Facebook 'depends on the day: lucky day or unfortunate day', as the journalist interviewee[7] said. Though social media was a new medium providing access to unique user-generated content, a process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000) was also evident in the repertoires of social media activity where civil society actors told of seeking content from existing and established news media sources, and of valuing news from established media organisations, and of being aware of the dangers posed by unverified information from online sources.

5.4.1 Finding 'voice' and 'authorial subjectivity' on social media

Siapera (2008) posits that the act of blogging may bring about a new sense of 'subjectivity' which is both connected and autonomous; an 'authorial' subjectivity that engages 'with one's self and society' and, wherein, a new political subjectivity may emerge. An 'authorial' position 'emerges precisely out of this activity of producing/claiming meaning from a subjective perspective' (p. 56) through authorship. Such an authorial subjectivity was evident in interviews with six female social media users in the civil society sector who described Cambodia as being a 'male dominated society' where women had limited access to resources. The six women interviewees—three of whom had prominent public profiles owing to their online activities—vividly described feeling empowered by the ability to 'voice' their 'thoughts to the world' through online authorship, four of whom had begun writing online with blogging and continued to social media. One of the women[14] recounted the psychological freedom experienced when she first began blogging and 'writing whatever came into my mind' and

'sharing it with other people'—an experience she noted that likely held a quite different significance for people living under repressive social and political conditions compared to those living in more democratic countries. Blogging had given the interviewee a sense of ownership through 'authorship', she said—a feeling of control over her thoughts as expressed in writing, which made her feel her ideas were valuable:

> If you can't have control over what's going on around you, at least there is one thing that you can have control of, and that's being able to, like, write something from your own thoughts, and have a sense of ownership, you know?

Empowerment and expression of ideas through online authorship brought another female interviewee[11] to what she described as a 'new level' where she was able to 'find' herself through a small community of women bloggers, which they re-named 'clogg-hers' (Cambodia women bloggers). Clogging, the woman said, helped her to overcome 'barriers in society' that prevented women from saying what they 'really want to say'. When the interviewee blogged on sensitive social issues she had adopted a strategy that involved degrees of truth owing to the fear she felt writing on subjects involving powerful people. Her blog posts on sensitive topics left vague and non-specific the names of individuals involved, locations, and other identifying details. This was an approach she described as 'creativity mixed up with the reality' as a strategy for avoiding the possibility of personal sanction. Domestic audiences understood such strategies of dissimulation, she said: 'If people read they can understand, if they live in Cambodia.' The interviewee described a 'combination of writing and technology' that had provided her with a sense of empowerment—a sense of *voice*—in a society where she was made 'feel so small'. Though the interviewee was now using Facebook, the social network was unlike blogging, and she told of keeping expression to a minimum as she did not want to be 'judged' by her friends, or worse. Rather than express her opinions publicly on social media, she had instead strategically chosen an expression of silence—what I would describe as a studied, engaged silence. As the female social media user said regarding her observed silence:

> You don't know what will happen in [the] future. But you just imagine because, for example, you live in a place where there are many tigers and you need to be careful about that. Because you know already, they will take you one day.

The theme of an engaged, *active silence* also emerged among research participants in 2018 and is addressed in the Chapter 6 in more detail.

5.4.2 Facebook and Hun Sen's new persona: Mimesis, entertainment and emotion

The director of a civil society organisation[2] described the government's approach to social media as a continuation of old political practices on new networked digital platforms where a 'carrot and stick' approach was being used. The carrot was the government appearing to support online participation through adopting platforms and fostering a more intimate relationship with younger voters and cultivating positive self-images. The stick was the government's ability to monitor and mete out punishment to an increasingly online nation. The government, she said, was not motivated to join social media based on an enlightened sense of increasing public participation in the political process. The decision to participate was due to a pressing need to 'control the platform' and bring the 'government closer to the people':

> They don't adapt their system in the digital world. They are just still in the physical world where, you know, they don't accept the criticism or the critic…. As I said, it is a carrot and stick. The government have to make sure that they can control this space as well. The same way that they control the physical space.

Instead of increasing government transparency and public participation, social media was instead used to silence criticism and promote policies that would be popular with a new, younger online public, she said. One of the earliest examples of Hun Sen's socially-mediated policymaking involved jettisoning provisions in new road traffic legislation in 2016 designed to reduce the number of people killed on Cambodia's roads. Hun Sen explained that he had rescinded stricter driving requirements in the new law in response to 'youth and students' who had complained to him on Facebook. Explaining his decision to amend the law, Hun Sen said his decision was 'a gift to all Cambodian compatriots' to mark the anniversary of his regime coming to power in 1979 (Kuch and Ouch 2016). A staff member with a trade union advocacy group[19] referred to Hun Sen's popular appeals to youth via Facebook, specifically recounting the unilateral changes made to the traffic law. Amending the law was an example of Hun Sen's old politics of personalist power for an online age, the advocacy worker said. Amending the traffic law was one of the most surprising political developments in recent years given that Hun Sen directly linked policy action to Facebook lobbying, a social science researcher explained[27]. Hun Sen's attempt to appease the public on Facebook might win back some popularity for his party and lead some to believe in the power of online social media activism. However, such policy reversals should not be interpreted as Hun Sen's interest in instituting fundamental reforms, the researcher said. Hun Sen may amend provisions in a law, but he will not ensure true rule of law. As the researcher said: [Hun Sen] 'is not going to give you rule of law, you

know. This is something very structural, very long term. You are not going to get that from being active on Facebook.' Hun Sen did not haphazardly react to the 'tsunami' of change caused by social media but studied the technology until he was ready to 'storm back' using the same platforms, a journalist said[7]. Hun Sen's response was structured and coordinated. He co-opted social media and plagiarized from the opposition's strategy of conducting politics online. Hun Sen's apparent *mimicry*, a preliminary theme, of the opposition leader was mentioned by interviewees, and the images presented in Figure 8 were a noted example referred to by research participants:



Figure 8: Posts to Facebook: Hun Sen at the beach in 2016 (Facebook, December 23, 2016). Two years earlier, opposition leader Sam Rainsy at the beach in 2014 (Facebook, May 15, 2014) .

A Cambodian staff member with an international organisation[18] focused on corruption monitoring told how the mimicking of the opposition leader was amusing to people who recognized Hun Sen's new tactics on social media as he attempted to present himself as more 'simple to the public'. The more ordinary Hun Sen presented himself, 'the more people like him', the anti-corruption organisation staff member noted: 'That's what people all say; mock teasing him for following Sam Rainsy's style…. It's getting people to like him. But, at the same time, people are not really sure around his personality.'

Hun Sen's approach to social media is illuminated by what Bourdieu (1990, p. 73) refers to as the role of mimesis (imitation) in the acquisition and construction of habitus; Adkins (2003, p. 36) notes that mimesis for Bourdieu concerned the process of adaptation and congruence between habitus and the field. Through a Bourdieusian lens, one sees mimetic adaptation in the social media strategy of Hun Sen, the 'stimuli' of his new emotive persona, and the

selection and amplification of certain elements of habitus and 'the whole history with which it is itself pregnant' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 124).

A social media celebrity commentator[26] described Hun Sen's construction of a new persona on social media as an image overhaul that was likely not his individual work but that of a dedicated social media team. Hun Sen's promotional videos often bear the digital imprimatur SPM, which stands for the honorific Samdech (lord) Prime Minister and denotes material produced by his dedicated media team. The objective with social media, the female commentator said, was to make Hun Sen 'appear more human' and more relatable to 'citizens, with the middle class, with the lower class.' Describing video material posted to Hun Sen's Facebook page that was closer to skilfully produced 'propaganda' than user-generated content, the commentator described Hun Sen as using social media to his 'advantage' and his social media producers as being 'very good at what they're doing…. I'm pretty sure it's a team.' As will be demonstrated, data presented in Chapter 7 indicates that the majority of material posted to Hun Sen's Facebook page features the prime minister participating in official functions and engagements and was produced by dedicated photographers and videographers. Notably, the production of Hun Sen's social media presence evolved in June 2016 when a live-feed of the popular TV show the *The Voice–Cambodia* appeared on his Facebook page. Commenting on the livestreaming of the music show, Hun Sen said his social media presence was to promote 'a peaceful Facebook for development and joy' (Paviour and Kuch 2016). The light entertainment focus of Hun Sen's Facebook activity echoes politics as marketing strategies (Savigny and Temple 2010) and Dahlgren and Alvares' (2013) warning of the financial logic that underpins new media forms where audiences are framed as consumers to be surveilled for behaviour and where the focus is on entertainment rather than engaged citizens and the 'pleasures of popular culture' are promoted over the potential for democratic participation.

There was also evidence of resistance to Hun Sen's new social media strategy and an awareness by interviewees of older ideological forms within his new online persona. This was evident in terms of the sense of tedium among members of civil society at being constantly reminded by Hun Sen that they should be grateful to him for the peace and prosperity that Cambodia enjoyed. The Cambodian staff member[9] working with a foreign diplomatic mission in Phnom Penh told how the theme of *peace and development* dominated so much of Hun Sen's social media output, yet the message would only likely appeal to the prime minister's own supporters.

Peace and development, the embassy worker remarked, were basic provisions that any leader should ensure for their country.

This study proposes that Hun Sen has sought to create 'an image of intimacy with local people' (Soeung 2016, p. 120) through his social media presence, where light entertainment and his promotion of family values combined with themes of *peace and development* or, alternatively, *conflict and war*, in a strategy of accruing emotional capital (Illouz 2007) as a means to form an emotive link with a younger generation of voters, while also maintaining threats and projections of fear in reserve through his regular references to potential war and conflict. Social media, however, is not the first platform for Hun Sen to craft *a positive self-image* and assume an alternative persona of 'emotion, drama, and performance' as Norén-Nilsson (2016) demonstrates in her analysis of Hun Sen's co-opting of the ancient legend of Sdech Kân—a commoner whose intelligence and guile led him to usurp a Cambodian King and become leader of the Khmer people. Hun Sen began co-opting the legend of Sdech Kân, as an allegory of his own rise to power, in the early 2000s. This included commissioning a leading historian to write a Sdech Kân biography in which Hun Sen wrote the preface with echoes of his own autobiography. Six statues of Sdech Kân bearing a significant resemblance to Hun Sen were also commissioned, and a feature film. Describing the communicative character of Hun Sen's enactment of Sdech Kân, Norén-Nilsson notes how the prime minister's 'performance can paradoxically be understood as a particularly "sincere" medium by which Hun Sen communicates with the citizenry. Through it, Hun Sen sends important messages' (2016, p. 47). Thus, Hun Sen's positioning as a reincarnated Sdech Kân, who in Khmer culture and historiography is a *neak mean bon* (man of merit) (Ibid., p. 42), could be considered an earlier example of Hun Sen's affective performance for a domestic audience that is now exhibited on social media. Symbolic capital accrues to a 'man of merit' in Cambodian culture. By extension, this study posits that social media is the newest platform for Hun Sen's most recent mimetic performance of a meritorious persona by which to accrue social and, upon conversion, political capital.

5.4.3 The imagined affordances of social media

A member of an activist group of Buddhist monks[4] who employed social media for social justice initiatives recounted receiving a phone call from Hun Sen in the hours after the assassination of political analyst Dr. Kem Ley in July 2016. The killing of Kem Ley, who was

shot dead at a coffee shop attached to one of the city's busiest petrol stations earlier that day, was reverberating on social media nationally and internationally. The monk recounted how he had tens of thousands of followers on Facebook and Hun Sen had implored him to not comment on social media about the killing. For that day at least, the monk said that he refrained from commenting as he judged it to be the safest option:

> Hun Sen convinced me: don't share anything. Two hours and thirty minutes he called me to keep silent. And I have no choice. If I share, I have to go out of my country. And this is my country, I don't want to go anywhere.

Interviewed in Phnom Penh in June 2017, the monk told of how three members of his activist group of Buddhist monks had been arrested in recent days and how their work, which now had around 100 monks participating, was forced to scale back in order to avert unwanted attention from authorities. Despite the killing of Kem Ley, his own caution with regards to Hun Sen and social media, and the repression faced by his fellow activist monks, the interviewee was resolute in the belief that social media had changed Cambodian society. Social media had already transformed Cambodian society, the monk affirmed, by giving power to ordinary people in the form of a new information and communication technology that could document and record events and, as a result, hold authorities to account. Later in 2017, the monk was forced to flee Cambodia for exile overseas amid fear of his own arrest. His exile exemplified the repressive wave that occurred in Cambodia between the fieldwork periods of 2017/18, and which was the intensification of a progressively more repressive environment from the post-2013 election period onwards. CNRP leader Kem Sokha was arrested in September 2017 and his party barred from politics later in the year. Despite these ongoing and severe setbacks for individual expression and political representation, belief in the ability of social media to hold power to account through the expression of *public opinion* emerged as a theme in interviews in 2017. This empowerment was premised on social media affording the exposing of wrongdoing and of authorities responding to the opinions and demands expressed by the many online. For example, a staff member with a trade union advocacy group[19] told how in 2013/14 he was involved in an initiative to train around 100 citizen journalists to use social media. The initiative later led to an online campaign against the government's promulgation of a controversial law to regulate and ultimately restrict the non-governmental organisation sector. The activist recounted how, within a week of the launch, the campaign's hashtag had reached millions of people, both domestically and internationally. Certainly, this was a highly effective social media campaign and prime example of digital activism in Cambodia. However, it should

be noted that the NGO law still passed into law in 2015 and snared its 'first victim' in 2017 (Meyn 2017). The union advocacy worker also explained how online activism was safer and more effective in the context of Cambodia where peaceful street protesters faced state violence and arrest. Organising physical protests was complex, he said. It required 'a lot of things to get people on the street. But, you know, on-line, if you post something interesting, you've got it.'

As addressed in the literature in Chapter 2, it is the lack of physical, disciplined structures that allows online organized protests to quickly coalesce around an issue but also weakens protests as they can quickly lose momentum in the face of intransigent power (Tufecki 2014, 2017). Similarly, events in Cambodia demonstrate that the affordances of social media for checking the power of government were more imagined than real. For example, months of post-2013 election protests were mediated and mobilised using social media. Yet, it took just days to end the protests in early 2014 when the state used deadly violence. Increased repression by authorities from 2014 onward was also not checked by the spreading popularity of social media and increased access to information. Some protesters moved from physical presence in the streets of Phnom Penh to online protest, such as the initiative known as Black Monday in 2016. Named after the call for people to wear items of black clothing each Monday, the protest was organised to push for the release of jailed human rights activists. Black Monday was short-lived, however, amid arrests and government accusations that participants were planning a 'colour revolution' (Palatino 2016). Fearful of gathering in public spaces, the protest moved online and involved people taking selfies wearing black items of clothing. The social media campaign also collapsed as authorities tracked down and threatened those who posted Black Monday selfies (Ben 2016).

In Chapter 2, Nagy and Neff's (2015) concept of 'imagined affordance' was introduced as a means to understand the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of users of technology, and the materiality of technologies and their functionality. Both users and designers are evoked in Nagy and Neff's concept of the imagining of a technology and what it may afford in terms of the 'expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge', though they exist in material systems and 'qualities that mediate affective experiences' (p. 2). The 'emotional aspect' of the interaction between humans and technology with regards to social media in Cambodia was of key interest for this study in terms of 'what people imagine a tool is for' (p. 5). It is important to note that in pursuing the concept of *imagined affordances* as key theme in this study does not imply that civil society actors were unaware of the processes

at work in their own society. Rather, imagined affordances presents a means to explore the narratives in which social media usage was framed in 2017, and the contradictions that existed regarding the exercise of authoritarian power and the apparent promise of social media to arrest that power. The examples of street protests in 2013/14, and of stifled online protest such as Black Monday, as well as the fears expressed by social media users in 2017, highlight the contradictory nature of the freedom and control afforded by social media. This tension is encapsulated in the theme of the *imagined affordances* of social media compared to the actual efficacy of social media practice for social change in Cambodia. For example, a legal expert with an election monitoring group[22] told how Facebook was responsible for disseminating news and information which had ushered in 'unbelievable' change in Cambodia, though the transformation was cognitive rather than societal in that social media allowed Cambodians to think critically about their society. The augmentation of biological faculties through social media was described by another influential social media strategist[17] who compared Cambodians who did not have social media to people with a physical disability. If people did not have social media they might only 'see with one eye', 'hear with one ear', and 'maybe we have our mouth shut' too, he said. The head of one of Cambodia's leading, independent online news sites[20] told how social media had profoundly changed people by increasing their perception of the world. Now, Cambodians no longer lived in a 'small' and 'dark' place, he said. 'They've been updating themselves. They use Facebook and they can see the change.' Particularly, access to independent sources of news was referred to in terms of cognitive food for a population starved of information by their government: 'When you don't give them the food, they have to go to somewhere else to find the food', said a staff member with the anti-corruption organisation.[18] Themes evident here are of a visceral, bodily experience of social media nurturing people with increased information, and imagined is the response of established power to new demands by a more informationally and civically aware public. Rather than facilitate direct political engagement, this study contends that social media afforded a form of critical, *civic awareness* more so than direct, political engagement—though the former is a precursor for the latter.

Conclusion

Social media inhabited a contradictory space for interviewees in 2017. It was a means of accessing news and information not controlled by the government, and it was also a new platform for Hun Sen, allowing him to author a new emotional persona and live-stream political

speeches and popular TV entertainment shows. Social media was imagined as a means to inform, mobilise and challenge power, and was also a means of government monitoring and surveillance. Far from a new public sphere (Habermas 1989) of competing ideas, social media provided what Gunitsky (2015) describes as 'a continuous feedback loop between the rulers and the ruled' (p. 47); a means of regime enhancement through counter-mobilisation, alternate framing and public preference divulgence through monitoring online sentiments. Responsiveness by a regime to public preferences divulged via social media enhances a regime's durability in that people feel their demands have achieved responses—the strategic improvements to livelihoods which ultimately leads to renewed support for the regime. Such incremental and piecemeal reforms resulting from preferences disclosed online and satisfied offline create, however, a 'low-level equilibrium trap'; small alterations to a system in the place of radical adjustments which may, in fact, 'prolong the durability of non-democratic states while bolstering their popular legitimacy' (Gunitsky 2015, p. 49). Thus, central to the contradictions of social media were its imagined affordances, including the imagined relationship between increased flows of information and communication and online activism to achieve off-line objectives.

Papacharissi's (2015, 2015a) work on the role of affect in building counter-publics among progressive actors offers a means to understand Hun Sen's cultivation of emotion capital (Illouz 2007) as a political strategy through revealing a more intimate personal side (Stanyer 2013) and his mobilisation of affective communication on social media to build a new audience among a younger generation of voters. Defining affect in terms of online 'engagement that is sentiment driven and that forms around structures of feeling', Papacharissi (2015, p. 134) is concerned with how social media facilitates feelings of engagement that can mobilise the 'latent ties' and the 'in-between' bonds of publics. Affect supplies 'the intensity with which we experience emotion' (Papacharissi 2015a, p. 316) and the resultant compulsion to act owing to those feelings. Hence, technology is not more important than the affective human narratives woven within new digital networks that connect between people. Bonds of sentiment are capable of collapsing boundaries between the public and private, where interests coalesce in 'actual and imagined communities' (Papacharissi 2015, p. 20). Whereas Papacharissi refers to the marginalised afforded visibility and agency through the process of online affect, the inverse was perceivable in Cambodia where the dominant was afforded a new, affective visibility of their own design and making on social media. Indeed, Papacharissi addresses such inversions, noting that the internet pluralises but does not democratise spheres of social, cultural, political

and economic expression and activity; the afforded opportunities of affective expression may 'simultaneously empower and compromise individuals' (2015, p. 94). Hun Sen's cultivating of a new social media persona and a focus on his family, rather than his reputation as one of the world's longest ruling autocrats, was a new means of connecting with supporters and 'disconnecting' his critics online in 2017.

Themes identified among interviewees in 2017 and 2018 included the valuing of access to independent sources of news and information, and the development of critical *civic awareness* that was afforded by social media as a result. The theme of social media and *information and political contestation* was evident in 2017 as were themes related to new constraints created through online *monitoring* and *surveillance*, and the manipulation of audiences through the creation of new *emotive, online self-promotion* by political figures. Concurring with Mejias (2013), social media in Cambodia in 2017 afforded a means to circumvent censorship while also cultivating news forms of self-censorship as users faced increased repression. Social media both freed and constrained simultaneously in Cambodia. Symbolic capital creation on social media, according to Mejias, also conceals how participation generates inequality in the creation of such capital: between those with resources to increase capital as a result of the network's architecture and those with fewer resources whose capital is diminished by participation—socially, politically, economically. This condition of visible participation in social media making disenfranchisement invisible was also described in interview with the exiled leader of the CNRP[32] in London who criticised the Facebook business model for prioritising profits over ethics and facilitating authoritarians such as Hun Sen to use the platform to enhance anti-democratic regime. The power of unaccountable information intermediaries such as Facebook to manipulate 'flows of social and public knowledge' is addressed by Couldry et. al (2018, p. 49), and Tufecki (2018) who describes Facebook's business model as a 'regime of one-sided, highly profitable surveillance' where the platform's more than 2 billion users are subject to surveillance and profiling and their interests and attention sold to the highest bidders in advertising and in politics, including to 'unsavory dictators', which has been the case in Cambodia and in other authoritarian contexts in Southeast Asia as addressed in Chapter 2 in the cases of Myanmar and the Philippines. Viewed from a different perspective, themes identified in the data also reflect what Foucault refers to as 'a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom' (1982, p. 794) in that where there is power, there is always resistance to power—both imagined (Nagy and Neff 2015) and the surreptitious (Scott 1989, 1990). It could be argued that there is an essential obstinacy evident in the discourse of civil

society actors and the expressed belief in social media's aspirational agency vis-a-vis the field of power. Cambodia had not significantly changed, socially or politically, owing to the presence of social media. In fact, the country regressed significantly between 2013 and 2017, and became more authoritarian in 2018. Yet, research participants *felt* there had been great change afforded by social media. It is this apparent contradiction that this study endeavours to explain, in the meta-analysis in Chapter 8, the experience of social media and the sense of a political subjectivity (Siapera 2008) afforded through activities that nurtured a sense of personal and civic awareness. This personal claiming of 'the political' echoes Scott's 'small acts of resistance' in producing and claiming meaning through dissimulated expression, including being *actively silent* in an authoritarian context. In the next chapter, themes identified in data collected during fieldwork conducted in 2018 are presented and analysed in terms of resonating with, expanding upon, and complicating themes identified in 2017.

Chapter Six

Presentation of Fieldwork Findings 2018: Repertories of everyday social media usage

6.1 Introduction

Building on data collected in 2017 and presented in Chapter 5, a second round of interviews was undertaken in July and August 2018 involving 28 participants. Additionally, a six-person focus group discussion and a diary-keeping exercise involving 32 participants was conducted during this period. Seeking to identify and triangulate differing perspectives on social media usage in Cambodian society, research participants in 2017 were prominent and influential social media users whereas interviewees in 2018 reflected the perspectives of everyday users. Interviewees in 2018 included men and women working in the country's garment-producing factories, in farming, fisheries and small businesses in rural areas, students in the capital city and provincial towns, members of the civil service and Buddhist clergy, and employees and managers in private business and the non-profit sector.

Ministry of planning staff member[1]	Kompong Cham village chief[11]	Kampot farmer[20]
Ministry of Education staff member[2]	***Male garment factory worker [12]***	Kampot small trader female[21]
Ministry of Education staff member[3]	***Female garment factory worker[13]***	Fisherman[22]
Ministry of Finance staff member[4]	University graduate Phnom Penh[14]	Fisherwoman[23]
Former UN staff member[5]	Female Website developer[15]	Battambang Civil society organisation worker[24]
University student Phnom Penh[6]	***Female Garment factory worker***	Battambang civil society organisation worker[25]
University student Phnom Penh[7]	***(administration)[16]***	Battambang university student[26]
Online media strategist[8]	***Female garment factory worker[17]***	Battambang university student[27]
Kompong Cham Buddhist monk[9]	***Female garment factory worker[18]***	**Battambang trainee schoolteacher[28]**
Kompong Cham Buddhist monks[10]	Kampot hospitality sector worker[19]	

Table 2. Interviewees in 2018 (n=28) with identifying superscript numbers one to 28. Government worker grouping in **bold** (n=5); garment factory employee grouping in ***bold italics*** (n=5), and everyday social media users (n=18).

The interviewees were not active in party politics except a rural farmer who was also the chief of his village. Five state workers were among the 28 interviewees: four civil servants employed at government ministries and a trainee high school teacher. Crucial to supporting the decades-long political and administrative structure of Hun Sen's government, state employees are beholden to their superiors in the ruling party hierarchy who as 'patrons award positions, status, and rent to lower level officials in exchange for loyalty and support' (Eng and Hughes 2017, p. 404; Roberts 2001) and their voting loyalty has been explicitly demanded during elections (Leng and Muong 2017). Thus, the five state workers represented an interesting subset within

the overall group of interview participants in 2018. Themes inductively identified in 2017 and themes inductively and deductively identified in 2018 informed on the development of key themes which are addressed in this chapter:

Key themes	**Definitions**
Performance of authenticity/allegiance	Social media as a forum for the performance of self in terms of crafting a form of authenticity and also signalling allegiance to the established doxa.
Symbolic capital	Bourdieusian species of capital that can be transformed into other species of capital in other fields.
Gift-giving	The symbolism of the gift and its inherent meanings and unspoken obligations.
Surveillance, sanction, and reward	That social media provided the ability to monitor users, and it could be both the source of punishment and profits.
Access to alternative sources of news and information	Social media was valued most for affording access to alternative sources of news and information not controlled by the ruling party or media entities subservient to the party.
Trust and credibility	Social media was valued for affording access to trusted and credible source of news and information.
Fear and opportunity	To engage with social media involved both fear and opportunities, and it was this contradictory mix that imbued the use of digital platforms.
Imagined affordances	That social media allowed the weak hold the powerful to account.
Facebook's Faustian bargain	Awareness by users of the financial model that underpinned the character of the technology they used in terms of it being a for-profit business with no social responsibilities.
Duty and obligation	The sense that citizens had duties and obligations to their country but understood through political partisanship and personalities.

Table 2a. Key themes and descriptions.

The political situation deteriorated in 2018 (Morgenbesser 2019) with the opposition CNRP forced to disband, CNRP leader Kem Sokha jailed, senior opposition figures and low-level activists fleeing the country (Mydans 2019) as Hun Sen redefined the opposition party and supporters as colour revolutionaries fomenting the overthrown of his government. Exiled CNRP leaders called for a boycott of the 2018 election (Peck 2018). Therefore, the vote became a competition for legitimacy: the greater the participation by voters the more Hun Sen could claim the election was legitimate and vice versa for the opposition. Ultimately, Hun Sen's CPP won all 125 seats in parliament, the first time a one-party government was returned by voters since multi-party elections were restored to post-war Cambodia in 1993. Findings presented in

this chapter demonstrate that voter turnout in 2018 was not a reflection of the popularity or appeal of Hun Sen and his party. Neither was the result purely the outcome of intimidation compelling people to vote. The election, viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, demonstrated the complex interplay of agents and fields, habitus and doxa, and the positions that people assume within fields of power and the role of social media usage in that process.

6.2 Social media affording access to *trusted* news

Preliminary analysis of themes presented in Chapter 5 revealed how a distrust toward Cambodia's pro-government domestic news media developed as social media gained popularity, as well as the value that research participants placed on access to trusted and credible sources of news and information afforded by social media. For everyday users of social media interviewed in 2018, social media also provided a means of accessing information and news not dominated by pro-government perspectives. Of the 28 interviewees, 25 (89%) said that social media was their primary means of accessing news and information. Three exceptions included the rural village chief whose internet access depended on his mobile phone credit; a Phnom Penh resident who was on a 'de-tox' from social media; and a garment factory worker who had no interest in news, preferring instead light entertainment via Facebook accessed on mobile phone. Diverse streams of news and information on social media were valued by interviewees for qualities such as accuracy, reliability, and as a means of comparison with state-controlled news narratives, particularly on sensitive social and political issues. The theme of *trust and credibilit*y in news was also evident among the civil servant interviewees who were also critical of pro-government news media. For example, a Ministry of Education staff member[3] told of navigating the news media environment in Cambodia, which required actively seeking 'balance between the news' that supported government and news considered independent. A member of staff at the Ministry of Planning[1] in his 20s told how he did not 'trust the news in Cambodia' preferring international news instead, which he accessed via social media. A third civil servant at the Ministry Finance[4], and also in his mid-20s, told how neither he nor most of his age group relied any longer on traditional media. And a fourth civil servant at the Ministry of Education[2] also felt that broadcast media was so overtly pro-government that it was 'useless' to watch. Interviewees spoke of the lack of credibility and interest in Cambodia's domestic news media, particularly the broadcast sector, which chimed with the theme of *state media's irrelevance* first identified in 2017. Interviewees in 2018,

instead, used social media to access non-state controlled or influenced news media and information. Despite this shift to social media, the preferred sources of news for research participants in 2018 remained primarily traditional news entities: 71% told of accessing traditional news sources not aligned with the government, both national and international. And while 36% of interviewees told of accessing news sources aligned with the government, a caveat must be attached in that several of those naming domestic pro-government news entities specified that such sources were valuable for crime and disaster reporting and were not trusted for political coverage. The apparent popularity of traditional news organisations was reinforced by the fact that some of the most followed Cambodian Facebook pages during the research period were the social media iterations of traditional radio stations and newspapers. For example, *Voice of America's* Khmer-language news service was the second most popular Facebook page in Cambodia by numbers of followers after Hun Sen's page. *Radio Free Asia's* Khmer-language service was the third most followed page, and the *Phnom Penh Post* Khmer edition was the fourth most followed page. The tabloid daily newspaper *Koh Santepheap* was the ninth most followed Facebook page, and the Khmer-language news service of *Radio France International* was the eleventh most popular (Socialbakers 2020). Opposition leader Sam Rainsy's Facebook page was at number eight.

6.2.1 Information manipulation and customary media scepticism in Cambodia

Interviewees spoke of the value or comparing articles from different news sources and of their awareness of a biased media environment in Cambodia. Some interviewees were sceptical of all information on social media as a result of the general distrust generated by what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define as misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information on social media. Themes of *trust, credibility* and strategies of corroboration were evident and emerged in tandem with the value placed in social media for affording an *awareness* of domestic and international news and events. Strategies of verification described by the interviewees involved self-taught means of source comparison and awareness of ideological differences in news agendas. For example, a university student interviewed in Phnom Penh[7] told of actively seeking news from Russia Today and Al Jazeera because she disliked the United States and considered Western media biased. Commenting on the politicised nature of news media in Cambodia, the Ministry of Planning staff member[1] explained that he did not trust any single source of news on social media, nationally or internationally, as he was aware from a young age that news was the product of the 'point of view' of media producers and owners: 'Even, sometimes, CNN and

BBC, talking about the political point of view, they also focus first on their political preferences', he said. Using a popular term in Cambodia for information designed to distort and manipulate, he explained that *leap poar* (to paint with a colour) worked by casting aspersions and creating suspicions through particular framing of information. Distorting information was 'an old thing in Cambodia', he said, which had traditionally made it difficult to 'understand which one is true and which one is fake', particularly in political coverage. The civil servant at the Ministry of Education[3] told how he could not trust any of the main news organisations in Cambodia to report on political matters: 'If it's about politics, I never take a look at it…. I don't waste my time.' The Ministry Finance staff member[4] told of his strategies for ensuring the reliability of news and described a maturation process in terms of becoming a more aware and careful social media user. Manipulation of information in Cambodia had been an issue for 'a long time already' and predated the arrival of social media, he said: 'Just that before it was not in the form of social media, but it's in the form of physical newspaper.' As manipulation of news was an old practice and much questionable information circulated on social media, he too believed that Cambodian 'people cannot get fooled' easily though educational attainment and the ability to think critically were factors.

An awareness of information manipulation was also evident among interviewees in rural areas. Two female students[26] [27] in their third year of university in Battambang town in the north of the country told how their primary platform for accessing news and information was Facebook. News sources appearing on their Facebook feeds comprised a mix of international and local news. Both students valued social media for keeping them informed, and they told of assessing news and information for possible manipulation. The students described their verification strategies, which included checking names, locations, and dates of reported events, and also assessing the credibility of sources sharing information. Manipulated information was an old phenomenon, they said. 'A lot of people distort news and create news,' as one of the students said.[26] In a period when 'fake news' and social media manipulation has taken centre stage in debates regarding the undermining of democracy in developed liberal democracies (Moore 2018), interviewees in Cambodia revealed a keen awareness of information distortion on social networking platforms. Themes of *trust and credibility* of news and information accessed online were not only the concern of younger, better-educated, urban and rural interviewees. They were also concerning for poorer and less educated social media users interviewed. Though limited in his online access owing to the expense of even modest data costs of just a couple of dollars, a sexagenarian village chief in Kompong Cham[8] province told how he took 'time to consider'

the information he was presented with on Facebook and how he did not 'easily' trust or 'believe everything' he encountered. The village chief told how he would 'check with others' to corroborate information: 'I follow all media, but I always carefully verify information. They are not always right and not always wrong.' Similarly, a 63-year-old farmer in southern Kampot province[15] told of accessing the majority of his news and information from Facebook, including listening to streaming radio via the Facebook app on his mobile phone. While radio was popular, the farmer considered social media to be the most important means of accessing news and information in rural areas such as his own village: 'Without Facebook, our news would come to zero', he said. Information designed to deceive circulated on social media too, he noted. However, attempts to deceive were well known and, he said, it 'happens so often that I don't believe it now.' Also in Kampot province, a fisherman and his wife [22] [23] told how they accessed the majority of their news on social media and were aware that information could not be trusted. Unless seeing something with his own eyes, the fisherman said he remained sceptical: 'We don't know if it is true as we are not there [as witnesses]. We only get news from Facebook.' A comment to which his wife added: 'Some news posted on social media doesn't seem to be reliable, and some is reliable. It is a mix.' Whereas urban, educated interviewees worried about the impact of social media on the less-educated, it was apparent that poorer interviewees in rural areas also demonstrated notable discernment in their social media practices. This may be explained by the presence of what I propose is a customary scepticism toward news media owing to the government's long domination of the country's domestic media sector. Such scepticism was evident in an interview with a 46-year-old female owner of a small goods business in Kampot province[21]. The woman told of accessing news primarily on Facebook on her smartphone. She spoke of the ease social media afforded for staying in contact with relatives and being informed of events as they unfolded almost in real time owing to breaking news. Previously, news was only available hours after events had occurred. Now, she logged on to Facebook more than she watched TV or listened to radio. Yet she was unable to use email and was unfamiliar with the internet—all her online activity was via Facebook. Despite a deeply amateur understanding of online technology, the woman was still keenly aware of information distortion on social media. Telling how she did not 'easily' believe the material she encountered on social media, the woman told of needing to 'think critically' if something appeared on Facebook that seemed to be out of step with 'what I see in reality, in society'. This demonstration of sensitivity and awareness of media manipulation was not entirely the result of new capacities developed in response to the arrival of a new media technology. Rather, this study proposes that Cambodians are accustomed to media

manipulation owing to the historically authoritarian context of their society, which has manifested as more recent caution toward online material. From the first newspapers in the French-colonial era of the 1920s to the present day, 'successive regimes saw the media primarily as a tool to spread propaganda', according to Cambodian human rights group Licadho (2008, p. 3), and business and political interests continue to maintain a 'stranglehold' on media. As a result, it could be argued that people have developed a customary scepticism towards sources of domestic news and information, particularly on matters of political importance, which has transposed to social media. A naïve relationship may have existed owing to the novelty when social media was first introduced and popularised around the time of the 2013 election. However, themes identified in 2018 resonate with themes in 2017 to indicate that a naïveté towards social media platforms has transformed into caution. This perspective is informed by Livingstone's (2018) argument that narratives of 'media power and panic' around issues of 'fake news, internet addiction, filter bubbles and echo chambers' have recently re-emerged, and audiences are again cast in problematic and pejorative terms. This 'alienation of the audience' has impeded responses to understanding social media, cutting the audience off from the significance of their own lifeworld and everyday experiences. As Livingstone states: 'audiences are not so gullible as popularly feared' (p. 173). Being social entities with unique histories and experiences, audiences are 'embedded in society and history in many more ways than they are through their relations with the media' (Ibid., p. 179). The audience for and users of social media platforms in Cambodia are similarly embedded in the lifeworlds of local communities with their own individual and community histories, interests, insights, and concerns. While interviewees valued access to more credible news and information via social media, they were also aware of possible manipulation, and had concerns and fears associated with engaging openly on social media and the possible consequences for doing so. As the Kampot businesswoman recounted[21]: 'I don't touch politics. I only follow it and keep it in mind. I don't give my opinion.' There were also positives associated with not expressing true sentiments on social media, such as the importance placed on not alienating friends and angering employers. Thus, *fear and opportunity, surveillance, sanction and reward* associated with social media usage emerged as key themes in the 2018 data and which chimed with themes identified in 2017. These themes will be explored next.

6.2.2 Fear and Opportunity: Actively assuming silence on social media

Being Cambodia's largest industry with some 700,000 employees, the garment production sector was the primary focus of voter canvassing by Hun Sen in 2018. Visits to factories and factory workers featured prominently in the prime minister's social media activity. Thus, a second interesting subset of research participants in 2018 were the four women and one man working in garment-producing factories in Phnom Penh. And it was among these interviewees that the strategic negotiation of social media usage was demonstrated in terms of themes of *fear and opportunity, surveillance, sanction and reward.* A 39-year-old female factory worker[13] told how she valued increased access to news and information afforded by social media. Her praise for social media was tempered, however, by the unreliability of some content, and her fear of sharing or publicly commenting on issues related to the government and politics. Cambodians on social media who remained outspoken were mostly members of the diaspora living overseas and beyond the reach of authorities, she said. Remaining silent on social media, however, did not mean a lack of private engagement with matters of a political nature. She accessed news and information on social media, and: 'We put it in here', the woman said, gesturing with a finger to her head. 'We don't speak out', she explained. News accessed on social media was taken offline for discussions at home and in her workplace: 'We speak face-to-face more, not Facebook', she said. Similarly, two female garment factory workers in their mid-20s[17] [18] told of moving from rural areas of Cambodia to work at factories in Phnom Penh. Both believed that social media had benefitted society by making people more knowledgeable. Neither, however, commented on news articles and they were careful of the news they shared, pointing out how personally and financially vulnerable they were as factory workers. They received all their news via social media but complained that some news was unreliable. Both women said they were generally sceptical of all news as a result. When a particular item of news was of interest or concern, one of the women told how she would raise the issue with colleagues in her factory: 'When we encounter some news, we bring it to talk to co-workers, and we share opinions…. We can't believe it, and we don't know if it is true, so we talk about it at the factory…we discuss.'[18] The woman described an experience of staying personally informed and remaining silent about being informed: 'I'm afraid. I think I don't want to get involved in politics at all. We do not dare to get involved…. I know about it [the political situation], but I just keep it in my mind. I don't want to share.'[18]

A 20-year-old employee in a factory's administrative staff [16] recounted how people received more varied news than ever before on social media and how they could 'express their opinions about particular issues there'. However, the woman also told of not being 'free to comment' on social media, describing how her greatest concern was how she might be perceived by friends and her employers if she shared views and material of a political nature. Instead, she stored her opinions away for personal, private reflection: 'So we don't share. We keep it just to ourselves, that's enough…. We just keep ourselves informed and safeguard ourselves too. I don't want to get in trouble.' Though she still discussed political matters, she never did so on Facebook for fear of leaving behind a digital footprint that could one day be used as evidence against her. Political discussion continued in person and among friends whose political sentiments aligned: 'I never talk about sensitive issues on Facebook, but when we gather, we talk about it too. With close friends whom we know closely and what party they side with. If they have similar opinion to us, then we talk about it.'

The necessity and utility of limiting personal and political views in public on social media was echoed by other interviewees in 2018. Civil servant interviewees described how their views and true political sentiments had to be hidden in order to successfully advance in their careers. Similarly, students and private sector workers interviewed also described the importance of masking their political sentiments on social media to avoid official sanction or unofficial repercussion in their employment, or ruptures within friendship circles. A trainee high school teacher in Battambang province[28] thought it reckless that people would willingly share their views publicly on social media. Discussing politics on social media was dangerous, particularly 'for those who speak out', she said, noting the inherent contradiction in such a practice. The public nature of Facebook activity was the very reason it was unwise to comment publicly on the platform as 'everyone could see it', she said.

Avoiding professional and personal conflict by concealing one's views online was crucial, said the Ministry of Planning staff member[1] who told how he only discussed politics with close friends and family and only at trusted locations, such as his home. He never expressed his political opinions on social media. Political discussion in public could lead to arguments 'and this kind of argument is not like we [can] discuss to find the solution', he said. The Ministry of Education staff member[3] said he was 'brave enough' to discuss political matters on a one-to-one basis with trusted individuals, but he never addressed sensitive subjects on social media. Two concerns informed his decision to conceal his sentiments on political matters: fear of being

accused of harbouring views not entirely supportive of the government—what he described as the accusation by government of 'trying to destroy peace'. In the narratives of government, Hun Sen and the ruling party bequeathed peace and those supporting other political parties were, therefore, against the continuation of peace. His second reason was out of concern for people he cared for and who might be alienated by his opinions; people who might be 'emotionally hurt'. The staff member at the Ministry of Finance[4] also expressed concern that his social media activity might inadvertently harm the 'feelings' of others through possible misinterpretation of meaning: 'I need to put myself in other shoes, I need to – let's say if I post this one [and] others read, how do they feel? Can they interpret my message?' Most of his peer group were now much less active on social media, he said, and the politicisation of Facebook was evident in that his friends who held pro-government views still engaged online while those who supported the opposition 'they just keep it silent'. Though political discussion on social media had been curtailed, real world support for the opposition remained, he noted: 'They just don't oppose [the government] publicly.' The theme of potential loss of *opportunity* associated with social media usage was also evident in the case of the two Ministry of Education staff members[2] [3]who told of becoming members of the ruling party in order to not be ruled out of job advancement in the ministry, explaining how ability and aptitude was less important than party allegiance in determining promotion. Less qualified people would inhabit all the important positions if they did not join the party, they said, noting that political control over access to civil service jobs explained why the ruling party had millions of members—and why they disguised their own political sentiments.

Though his support for the ruling party was lost long ago, one of the Education Ministry staff members[3] said it was necessary to keep silent about his political views on social media: 'It doesn't mean that I have to close my mouth when I see something wrong happening. I will still open my mouth. But the problem is, I still don't want to share in Facebook.' Silence here is reserved for online while the potential for action remains offline. The Ministry of Finance[4] staff member also spoke of the influence of the ruling party on the civil service, explaining that the requirement of party membership was subtle, not forced, and likely played a role in job promotion. Commenting on his own use of social media, he said that he was neither pro- nor anti- any political party though he noted that working in the ministry he was 'exposed' to the ruling party's position, and that it had likely influenced his views. He also kept his political views private on social media explaining that those 'brave enough to share' only did so 'because they don't know the dangers.'

This study identified the *performance of allegiance* to the ruling party as a theme—a process in which research participants kept personal opinions and political beliefs private through what I describe in the meta theme of a strategic *practice of active silence* on social media. The theme of *active silence* was also evident among the garment factory workers; a process that was both necessary and desirable in terms of Bourdieusian habitus, doxa and the field of power where repertories of social media usage were shaped by concerns encapsulated in the themes of *fear and opportunity* and *surveillance, sanction and reward.* Interviewees internalised what could be described as 'the rules of the game'—pursuing party membership—and the illusio of 'what was at stake in the game' in terms of the importance of promotion to more senior positions where it was believed they could be of more use to society. As the education ministry[3] official explained:

> If you want to have a chance to use your knowledge, your skill, for decision-making, you have to be in a high position. If not, you are still [a] simple, ordinary official, you will never influence others. You will never be approached to participate in making decisions. That's why I said, okay, I'll join' [the party].

The 'durable and transposable dispositions' that constitute habitus (Bourdieu 2002, p. 72) and doxa elucidate this position-taking of interviewees regarding their public presentation of self on social media vis-a-vis the field of power (particularly in terms of the political field). Flexibility of accommodation to the field of power was demonstrated in the doxic fluency of agents who incorporated the rules of the game in their position-taking and their sense of illusio in the value they placed on career advancement in the commendable belief of improving society. This description of social media practice—and the *logic* of such practice (Bourdieu 1990)—testified to the crafted and calculated version of agents' interests, concerns, and views online; a *performance* of self on social media marked more by *active silence* than public participation. In the next section, themes of performance and dissimulation on social media are explored and expounded.

6.2.3 Social media and the performance of self

Interviewees told of pressure to perform in a particular manner on social media, which was described as a 'social media self' by a female website developer.[15] Providing an example, the website developer imparted an anecdote involving a male friend with whom she had discussed

the government's role in illegal logging of the country's forests. The friend had agreed and was energetic in criticising the government. Yet the website developer noticed that, on Facebook, her friend only ever praised the government and was never critical. Attempting to describe her friend's Janus-faced offline and online character, she referred to the HBO series *Game of Thrones* and the political cunning of the character *Petyr 'Littlefinger' Baelish*: 'He's a flexible person…he's like Littlefinger. You can't really know what he's thinking,' she explained. Where some might see duplicity, hypocrisy, or worse in such characters, the web developer recognised 'flexibility'—an ability to accommodate, to hide sentiments and change stance depending on the audience and potential outcomes. To follow a strategy of flexibility, and not only on social media, was more likely to lead to career success in Cambodia, the website developed estimated, adding that she believed many people currently in government also performed loyalty in the same manner. Such people hide their contrary or critical views and opinions and, instead, focused on what they believe is possible to achieve in their positions:

> I guess a lot of people in the government are like that too. Like, on the outside they're all for the government. But, maybe on the inside, they know some of it is not as good as they say it is, and then they try to change it in their own way, without appearing to be critical.

The flexible persona that the web developer described mirrored in ways the civil servants who performed loyalty by becoming members of the ruling party in order to not be ruled out of promotion. Similarly, an investment in illusio*,* what Bourdieu describes as belief that the game is worth playing, was evident in the web developer who did not appear to consider the flexibility of people 'who can go both ways' as a cynical exercise of one mask disguising another mask. Rather, her description was of an individual whose habitus had adapted to the existing field of power, and whose position-taking was in coordination with other agents who had assumed other positions within the field of power. She had faith that one day her friend's disguised 'good' side might emerge when he was in a position of authority and that he might then become a bridge of transition from current political figures to a future generation of younger, altruistic leaders: 'I think people like him who are flexible, who can go both ways…. They are like the bridge between the sides.' Regarding her own activity on social media, the web developer described her own social media self:

> I guess people are afraid of voicing their opinion. Even my parents told me to never comment anything on social media about politics. They are, like, whatever you think, you can think it. But don't voice it out. So, I guess I don't voice it out much.

Assuming silence on social media was described as a means to 'hide our face' [to mask true sentiments], by a 26-year-old working as a manager in the hospitality sector in Kampot province.[19] Never sharing content related to politics on social media because he feared the consequences, the manager told of hiding his political opinions from friends too, in order to maintain friendships and connections:

> We care about politics, but we don't want to show our face, we want to hide our face, because I have friends working in the government. They work in the ministries. So, if we keep sharing about negative things about Cambodia [on Facebook], it could make our friends know who we are, and we could lose our friendship. I have a lot of friends working in ministries, and they are supporters of the CPP.

The manager's words captured the contingency and contextuality of expression and non-expression of political sentiment in Cambodia and on social media—the careful self-censorship of personal preference in public to maintain important friendships and personal connections which, in the patron-client culture of Cambodia, known as the *khase* (string) of hierarchical connections (Roberts 2001, p. 32), can prove to be extremely valuable to personal and professional advancement, as the manager explained:

> That is why I don't usually share in order to keep my relationship with them. Some people mind about this. If they think we are kind of like a supporter of the opposition party, they will stop having a connection with us. Some friends are like that.

Commenting on Hun Sen's millions of followers on Facebook and the apparent popularity of the ruling party on social media, the manager told how Cambodians were very aware that followers can be purchased, and posts are boosted with payments. Facebook's financial model allowed for anyone with an agenda and money to dominate on the platform:

> For Facebook, I think they are doing business. They don't care where you are coming from as long as it makes them money, they do it. If you have money to pay them, they will just take it. They help to publicise you. They don't care about it.

The *Faustian pact* theme identified in Chapter 5 is evident here in terms of social media's value in accessing sources of news and information but at the cost of surveillance, monitoring, and the need to perform online. For students, private sector workers, garment factory staff and farmers, fishermen and fisherwomen, there was an adaptation on social media that was also

present in society—a way of *acting* and living that was required owing both to fear of official sanction and the opportunities of compliance and maintaining valuable relationships. Accompanying this performance on socially networked platforms, small acts of resistance were also occurring in terms of engagement with critical narratives. Social media, as a social process, cannot be extricated from the histories and communities in which people and technologies are embedded (Sterne 2003). This was also evident in decision-making regarding the 2018 election and whether to vote or boycott.

6.2.4 Voting and demonstrating loyalty on social media

Though uncorroborated by independent observers, the government's National Election Committee reported a more than 80 percent turnout for registered voter on election day in 2018. Though 8.5 percent of votes were deemed spoiled or invalid (Reuters 2018), Hun Sen claimed election success and poll credibility based on the allegedly large participation of voters. With their party banned and leader in jail, opposition members in exile used social media to call for a vote boycott under a 'Clean Finger Campaign', which referenced the ink voters dipped their fingers in at polling stations to identify as having voted. Hun Sen had declared the vote boycott illegal (Rathavong 2018; Radio Free Asia 2018; Asian Network for Free Elections 2018) and former members of the opposition were even charged for posting a photo to Facebook holding their fingers in the air – a subtle reference to the Clean Finger Campaign (Vida 2019). Interviewees in 2018 told how personal issues such as a fear of direct repercussions or indirect sanctions in terms of access or denial of livelihood opportunities was of greater influence than social media and mediated political messages in their electoral decisions. Themes evident in interviews in 2018 also resonated with themes in Hun Sen's political messaging on social media, which will be addressed in Chapter 7, such as *peace and development,* and the threat of *conflict and war.* Two Phnom Penh-based post-graduate students[6] [7] told how they no longer engaged in activity on social media that might be considered critical of the government and how few people now dared to comment or share on social media. One of the students explained how she altered her views for particular audiences on social media based on what she perceived as their political persuasions. Reflecting on her acquiescence in self-repression on social media, the student told how warnings of repercussion for not voting in the election were circulated on social media, including warnings of diminished career and job prospects in the civil service and private business: 'If you want to work in the government sector, they will not allow you if you have not voted in the election,' she said.[7] Such warnings, circulated on social media, had

an important influence on the election result, she maintained. Her male post-graduate colleague in the same university told how social media as a channel of expression had been narrowed by the arrest of online critics, repressive new laws, and the government and opposition using 'social media as a weapon'.[6] He now 'observed' content on social media rather than engage publicly. Neither student identified social media as central to their decisions to vote or not in the election, though both spoke of the significance of Facebook users changing their profile pictures to show support for the ruling party ahead of the election. The profile change entailed a stylised frame (see Figure 9) added to a Facebook user's profile image, which carried Hun Sen's campaign message that a vote for the ruling party was a vote for 'peace and stability'. The post-graduate students told how such initiatives changed the election's meaning from a matter of partisan politics to one of a shared national interest in preserving peace amid the threat of war.

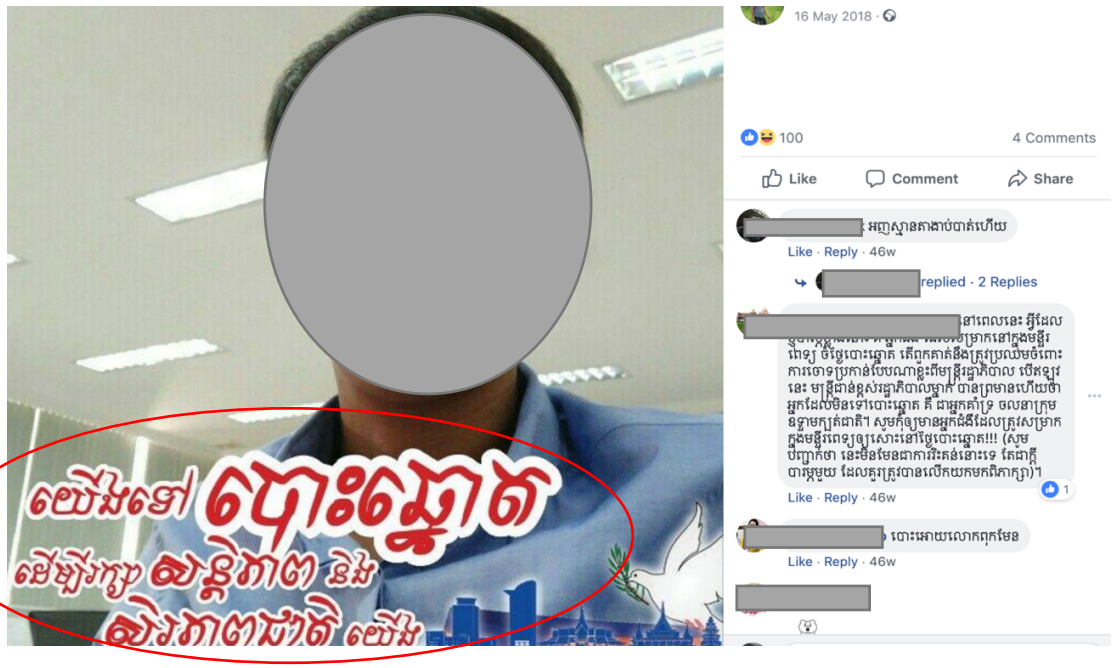


Figure 9. Example of the Facebook profile frame disseminated ahead of the 2018 election. The caption in red reads: 'We all go to vote to maintain our nation's peace and stability.'

The election was no longer about voting for parties, instead it was a 'vote for our safety—peace, security, and development for our country. It's not only about me or my party. It's about us', the male student said.[6] Though already aware before voting that the ruling party would win the election, the female student told how she participated because voting was both her 'duty' and she did not want to be accused of supporting the boycott. The male student said he did not vote on principle as there was 'no balance' in the election and because the government had used social media to mislead people that not voting was illegal: 'They tried to provide information that is not reliable at all,' he said.[6] Demonstrated here is an example of a counter-

reading of a media message, in that the student did precisely the opposite of what he was being encouraged to do by authorities.

A counter-reading was also evident when a 27-year-old online advertising strategist[8] told how the ruling party's social media focus on 'peace and development' featured new roads and high-rise buildings but did not show 'slums' on 'the other side of the street'. However, the election boycott campaign suffered, he said, because people were too fearful of showing their support for the opposition. Though fear of authorities was one reason, there were also more subtle repercussions such as potentially losing a job for being identified as someone critical of the government. People 'are scared not to get fired or something', he said. Political discussion still continued, though 'behind closed doors. Not on the Facebook chat', he said, adding that his own decision to vote was based primarily on the economy and social media was not as important as personal experience. The Ministry of Education civil servant[3] recounted a personal battle he fought with himself on election day as he wanted to boycott the vote. Ultimately, however, he needed to be seen to be a loyal government worker and the stain of voter identification ink on his index finger was needed as proof that he had cast his ballot, though he felt participating in the election was similar to 'destroying democracy':

> I am working at the government office. I don't want to be a stranger. I want to be given opportunities to help my people. So, what should I do? Honestly speaking, I really don't want to go and vote. When I was on the bus [going to vote], I almost cried. Yes, I wanted to come back. I almost cried.

6.2.5 Obligation and voting — The price of the *gift* of peace and development

The psychic weight of known and unknown repercussions and rewards permeated the election decision-making of interviewees in 2018. There was acute pressure, personally and socially, to be seen to perform loyalty by participating in an election considered unfair and discredited. Adding to the themes of *fear and opportunity, surveillance, sanction and reward*, the theme of *duty and obligation*, of being duty-bound to vote in the election, also emerged. Though the vote in 2018 did not bear a resemblance to previous elections, two female garment industry workers said that voting was necessary to fulfil an obligation.[17] [18] Both had attended a pre-election visit to their factory by Hun Sen and received $5 in cash from him. Workers accepted the gifts given to them but that did not mean the government was popular, they said. Hun Sen's factory visits were described as 'a show' by a third garment worker,[13] and the factory administrative staff

member[16] told how workers were well aware of what was taking place in terms of the distribution of cash gifts before the election. Her own decision to vote, however, was based both on 'duty as a citizen' and concern for her livelihood if she did not vote:

> Speaking candidly, I didn't want to vote. Like I said, even if we vote or not vote, they will still win the election. So, I just let it be. I don't want to go to vote. But because I work [in a factory], I don't want to do something odd or different from the others.

For two university students in Battambang province, the notable role of social media in the 2018 election was in providing news on the ambiguous subject of whether it was legal or illegal to boycott the vote as the political opposition requested. As one of the students explained: 'Those who did not want to go to vote felt forced to go because news on social media said that those who boycott the election would be arrested and fined.'[26] The students also spoke of voting as an obligation as no country could 'live without' a 'suitable leader', a leader 'who can develop our country.' The Ministry of Finance staff member[4] and the trainee high school teacher in Battambang province[28] also mentioned obligation in their voting decisions and neither rated social media highly in terms of influencing their political preferences. Expressing what appeared to be pro-ruling party sentiments, the trainee teacher said people were obliged to vote for a leader who could develop the country, improve living conditions, and maintain peace. The ministry worker spoke of electing political leaders who had already accomplished 'concrete' results with feasible policies in the 'current situation' and at Cambodia's present stage of development.

The theme of *duty and obligation* articulates the doxa of an established political order that commands the '(national) common sense' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 54) and where any other variation is considered unfeasible and, therefore, unnatural—possibly even dangerous in that peace will not be guaranteed. This expressed sense of obligation to choose a leader who prioritised development, maintained peace and delivered practical economic outcomes that were 'workable', 'feasible', and 'achievable' for Cambodia in its current situation resonates with key themes in the social media activity of Hun Sen that will be presented in Chapter 7. Bourdieu posits that habitus, as a product of history that produces history on the basis of history, tends to generate 'reasonable' behaviours that were made possible by the regularities of history and were 'likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field' (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 55-56). Thus, there was a 'reasonableness' to voting for Hun Sen in 2018 compared with other options. Bourdieu's

concept of symbolic violence is valuable in understanding such reasoning, and the sense of obligation and duty experienced by those participating in an election that undermined the original foundation on which the obligation was founded—a democratic exercise. Phelan (2011) notes that symbolic violence as a concept assists in understanding how repression passes unnoticed as repression (possibly even as 'reasonable'). Symbolic violence, the violence that goes unrecognized as violence, requires the dominated to be complicit by inscribing 'a relation of domination into the body' whose dynamics are so culturally omnipresent that they obscure 'their contingency as politically structured dispositions' (Phelan 2011, p. 137). The disposition of circumscribed possibilities was articulated in the following passage by the Ministry of Finance worker[4]: 'We need to analyse our current situation and say, for Cambodia at this stage, what you can do and what you cannot do.' As Brickell (2020) notes on the normalization of structural violence in Cambodian society, there is a 'powerful sense of obligation…cynically pressed upon Cambodian citizenry' by government officials in an effort 'to make the rejection of human rights more widely shared' (p. 65).

Interviewees in 2018 spoke of their voting decisions not so much in relation to social media or media messaging but in themes related to *fear and opportunities*, *surveillance, sanction and reward*, and *duties* and *obligations*—their 'sedimented history' (Sterne 2003) as citizens, as friends, as employees, and the everyday imperatives of maintaining friendships and providing for families. Voters could choose between not voting with unknown repercussions on personal and family life or voting for more predictable and likely outcomes. Bourdieusian analysis would describe this as the agent's ability to choose when there is no choice in the field, and the infinite and limited generative capacity of habitus to assume positions within fields. Technology is not determining (Scharff and Dusek 2014) and neither is technological practice independent of habitus (Sterne 2003, p. 383). In the next section, findings from the media-diary exercise are presented.

6.3 Social media diaries — presentation of findings

A diary-keeping exercise was untaken as a qualitative research method involving 32 participants. The participants were asked to keep diaries of their use of social media during a one-week period prior to the July 29 election. Ranging in age from 18 to 32 years, the diarists were located in the capital Phnom Penh, and in the provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang, Pursat, and Ratanakkiri (see Table 3). As a means of eliciting a more ethnographic perspective, the media diary exercise involved participants self-recording their social media practices and reflecting on those practices in a diary format. Berg and Düvel (2012) refer to media diaries and their 'expressive narratives' allowing for rich insights and reflexivity within a defined temporality. A semi-structured diary format (Appendix C.) was employed and included several queries that each respondent was asked to address, and also provide more detailed explanations regarding their answers. The diaries were coded by topic and theme (Richards 2005): topic coding was used for data in the diaries related to incidence of use and themes were developed from more descriptive characteristics of that usage. The media diaries provided additional insights and supported understanding of the in-depth interviews in that themes that emerged in the diaries were also present in the interviews, including *trust and credibility* in media, the bestowing of *gifts* by the government, and the sense of *obligation* to vote in the 2018 election, and the *fear* associated with not doing so.

1. SR Female 25 (Age)	9. PP M 27	17. BB M 20	25. SR F 20
2. SR Male 20	10. PP M 25	18. SR F 22	26. PP F 24
3. SR F 22	11. SR M 24	19. BB M 29	27. PP F 22
4. SR F 22	12. BB F 32	20. RTK M 18	28. PP F 22
5. PP M 30	13. BB F 21	21. RTK M 18	29. PP F 21
6. SR F 22	14. PP F 22	22. RTK M 25	30. PP F 22
7. SR M 23	15. SR F 20	23. RTK M 26	31. PP F 28
8. SR M 25	16. PS M 25	24. SR M 32	32. SR F 22

Table 3 Media diary participants (n=32) by province/municipality: Siem Reap (SR), Phnom Penh (PP), Battambang (BB), Pursat (PS), Ratanakkiri (RTK), gender and age.

6.3.1 Media diaries: Social media and the cultivation of civic awareness

The first query in the semi-structured media diary format related to what the participants found most interesting on Facebook during each day of the seven-day exercise (Figure 10). In addition to stating what was most interesting on a day-to-day basis on social media, the diary participants were also asked to expound on why their chosen subject was of most interest.

Space was provided on the diary form for the diary keepers to write at length. Data showed that the most interesting items on Facebook for the diary keepers during the weeklong exercise were matters related to social issues, followed by entertainment, education, the election and politics, and international news. Topics under the subject of social issues included poverty, domestic violence, land grabbing from the poor, and the hardship for workers in the country's garment producing factories. That items under the topic of entertainment featured as the second most interesting subjects on Facebook for the diary participants indicated that the contours of the social media field in Cambodia were not entirely different to other countries in terms of the prominence of entertainment and celebrity on social media (Fuchs 2014).

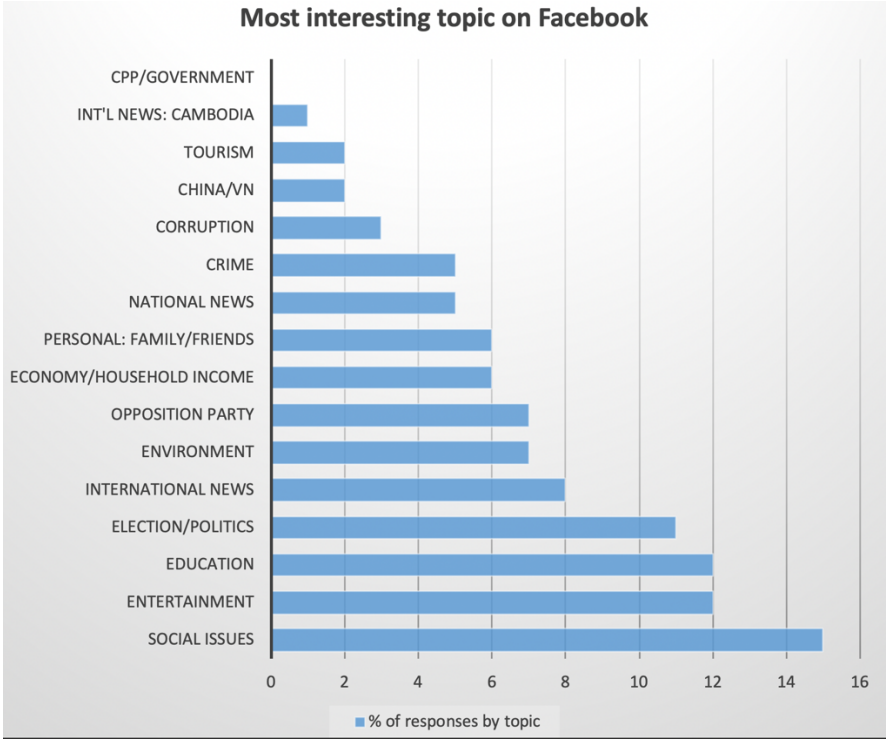


Figure 10. Diary keepers responses grouped by topic on being asked what was of most interest on Facebook for each day over the seven-day exercise.

That topics such as education, social issues, international news, and election and politics featured in the top five most interesting topics on Facebook for the diary keepers appears to indicate that social media was also a site for the cultivation of civic awareness (Boulianne 2016) rather than a platform dominated by the distraction of entertainment. Entertainment was important for the diary keepers, but on a level comparable with educational matters. Focusing closer on some of the reasons given by diary keepers for their preferred topics, the qualitative value of the diary method becomes apparent. For example, a 25-year-old in Siem Reap province[8.SR] recounted that of most interest on Facebook was the case of 100 workers who had fainted en masse in a garment factory. Explaining why the incident was of interest, the diary

keeper indicated that the issue was not owing to the uniqueness of the mass fainting but to the prevalence of such incidents. As the diarist noted: 'This issue often took place'. The deaths of a number of Cambodian villagers by poisoning was also among the social issues mentioned as most interesting by diary keepers. The Ministry of Health claimed the deaths were due to a poisonous form of home-brewed alcohol. However, local authorities linked the deaths to toxic effluent from an industrial mine contaminating a water supply. A 23-year-old in Siem Reap province noted in his diary entry[7.SR]: 'People have lost faith in authorities over the poisoned alcohol. Even the child who did not drink [alcohol] had also been poisoned.' Distrust of the health ministry's version of events was also the item of most interest for a 25-year-old in Phnom Penh[10.PP] who explained that he found this item most interesting because 'the victims reject the Ministry of Health's claim that they were poisoned by tainted rice wine.' For these participants, news and information accessed via Facebook, whether about the mass fainting or mass poisoning, was not merely consumed but it was also critically engaged with; the events were 'read' in the historical context of 'often' occurring and reoccurring from the point of view of the everyday people involved versus the official voice of authority. A critical position is assumed toward such incidents, their cause, and responsibility. This was articulated by the 25-year-old in Siem Reap[8.SR] who noted that different institutions and ministries were apportioning blame to one another, yet none had offered a 'clear reason' for the deaths. He criticised the 'weakness of the royal Government' for not taking 'timely action to solve the crisis for the people'. A 28-year-old in Phnom Penh[31.PP] similarly referred to the case of a medical clinic accused of malpractice as the item of most interest to her on Facebook because: 'It happens again and again, and again, [with] no proper response from the clinic and the Ministry of Health.'

A critical awareness of the continuity and repetition of social ills—fainting of workers in factories, a mass poisoning that might be a cover up for environmental crimes—demonstrates that the research participants not only received news and information via social media platforms but that they consumed such information critically and in the context of their community and society. This critical engagement with social media and social issues mirrored findings from the in-depth interviews, which indicated that trust in domestic pro-government media sources was minimal and that interviewees prized social media platforms as conduits of more independent sources of news and information that were *trusted and credible.* The value of international news media for domestic audiences was underscored during the week of the media diary exercise when Al Jazeera broadcast an exposé on a senior Cambodian official who

it was alleged had hidden assets in Australia amounting to several million dollars. Explaining briefly why the Al Jazeera documentary was the most interesting topic on Facebook, a 25-year-old in Siem Reap[1.SR] recounted how unexpected such revelations about a senior official were. A 22-year-old in Phnom Penh[27.PP] explained her interest in the documentary in more detail: 'Millions of dollars have been laundered in Australia…. I think there needs to be more investigation on that matter.' A 28-year-old in Phnom Penh[31.PP] summed up the reason she valued the Al Jazeera investigation: 'Local media will never be able to produce such a video.' Acknowledgement of the difference in terms of impartiality and balance between local and international media organisations was also referenced by 24-year-old in Phnom Penh.[26.PP] She found a pre-election report, 'Who profits from the death of Cambodia's democracy?', published by London-based natural resources advocacy group *Global Witness*, the most interesting because 'it's another sensitive and critical fact and information about the Cambodian government and its elites exposed to the public by the international institution, which can't be done by local media.' The theme of distrust in domestic media and the value of access to non-state-controlled news and information afforded by social media echoes the same themes in interviews in 2017/18.

When the diary keepers were asked from where they received their most important news, Figure 11. shows that after the platform of Facebook itself, friends and family were the second most significant source of news, followed by the Khmer-language news organisations *Voice of America, Voice of Democracy, Radio Free Asia,* and *Radio France International*. Commenting on why Facebook was her most important source of news, a 24-year-old from Phnom Penh[26.PP] described the domestic media environment in terms similar to that recounted by interviewees: the 'majority of local media publish about pro-government stuff. But on social media we can have the balance of voice, both from local and international media producers.'

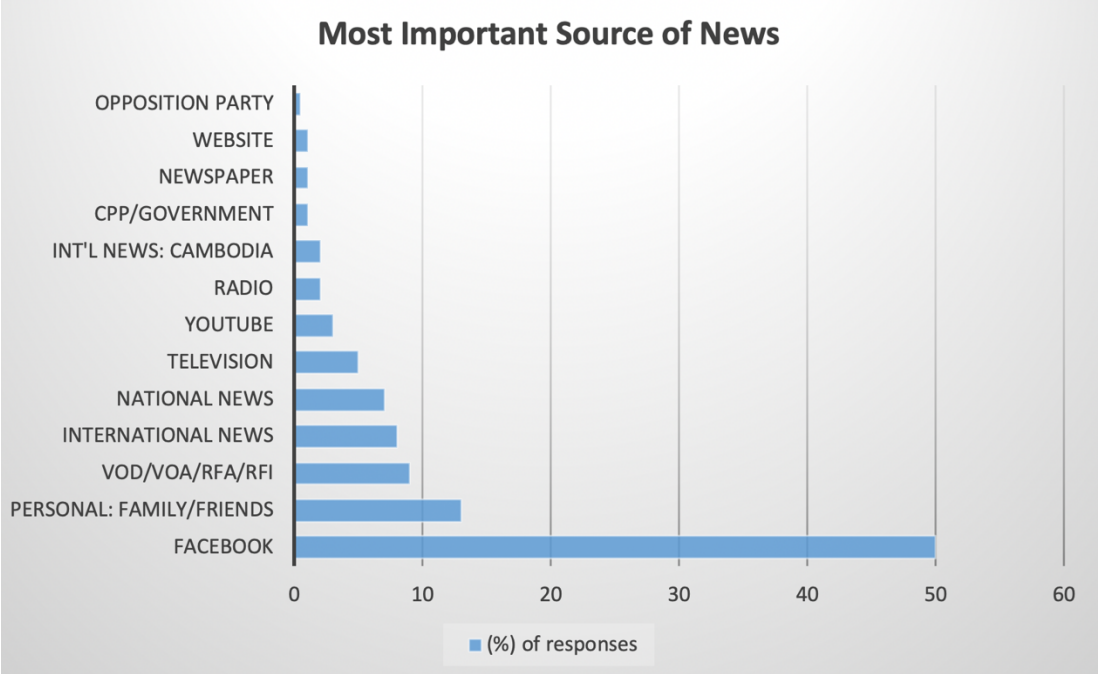


Figure 11. Diary keepers responses on being asked what was their most important source of news.

6.3.2 Resistant readings and the mediation of politics on Facebook

Though the election dominated local media and day-to-day life in Cambodia in terms of political campaigning in towns and villages, the diary keepers' interest and engagement on Facebook with election and political matters during this period was comparatively minor compared to other topics. For example, just one diarist entered a topic related to Hun Sen's CPP party/government as their most interesting daily item on Facebook during the weeklong exercise. While some international media reports warned of the social control wielded ahead of the 2018 national election owing to Hun Sen's large following on Facebook, the implied 'effect' of such dominance was far from certain, as the diaries appear to indicate. For example, a 25-year-old in Siem Reap[1.SR] recounted her interest in the election was due to the vote being held without the participation of the opposition, and a 30-year-old in Phnom Penh[5.PP] who noted that the election was not 'interesting', but it was still a 'massive story' on Facebook owing to the fact that it amounted to a 'ridiculous and wasteful election campaign' in which there was no real competition. Facebook as a platform for crafting, manipulating and distorting public perception was also alluded to by diary-keepers. A 27-year-old in Phnom Penh[9.PP] found online election campaign material of the diminutive League for Democracy Party interesting as it amounted to 'good marketing strategies', and a 24-year-old in Phnom Penh[26.PP] told of a senior

ruling party official delivering ‘a good PR speech for his party’. Such references to the public relations industry and the ‘marketing’ (Savigny and Temple 2010) of a political party to the electorate via Facebook nods to a critical awareness among diary keepers, and the role of social media in supporting and sustaining that awareness. The diary keepers reveal in these comments their awareness and critiques of the field of politics as mediated on Facebook, which they did not appear to divulge in their public activities on social media, and which echoes Scott’s work on ‘weapons of the weak’—the silences and performances, the acts of dissimulation that mask dissenting minds and acts of literal and symbolic resistance in authoritarian contexts.

Fear and *sanction* as themes were also evident among diary keepers, including a 28-year-old in Phnom Penh[31.PP] who was most interested in warnings on Facebook from the Ministry of Justice that those who did not go to vote, but pretended to have voted, would face prison. Explaining why this issue was of most interest, she noted that the government threatening citizens was expected: ‘They never have a better way to communicate with their people’, she wrote. Fear of not participating in the vote was an issue for a 25-year-old in Phnom Penh[10.PP] who referred to seeing on Facebook that people would face criminal charges for advocating a boycott of the election though, he also noted, people had the right to not vote. Facebook is here a site of contestation and conflicting narratives between the state and agents; of resistant reading and strategic appropriation by agents.

Diary keepers were also asked to provide details about their daily activities on Facebook (Figure 12). The open nature of the question was to allow the diary keepers to reflect and draw broadly from all possible activities. Responses indicate that the diary keepers were predominately engaged in activities of what could be described as a personal nature in terms of engaging and communicating with friends and family: chatting, liking photos, posting selfies, etc.

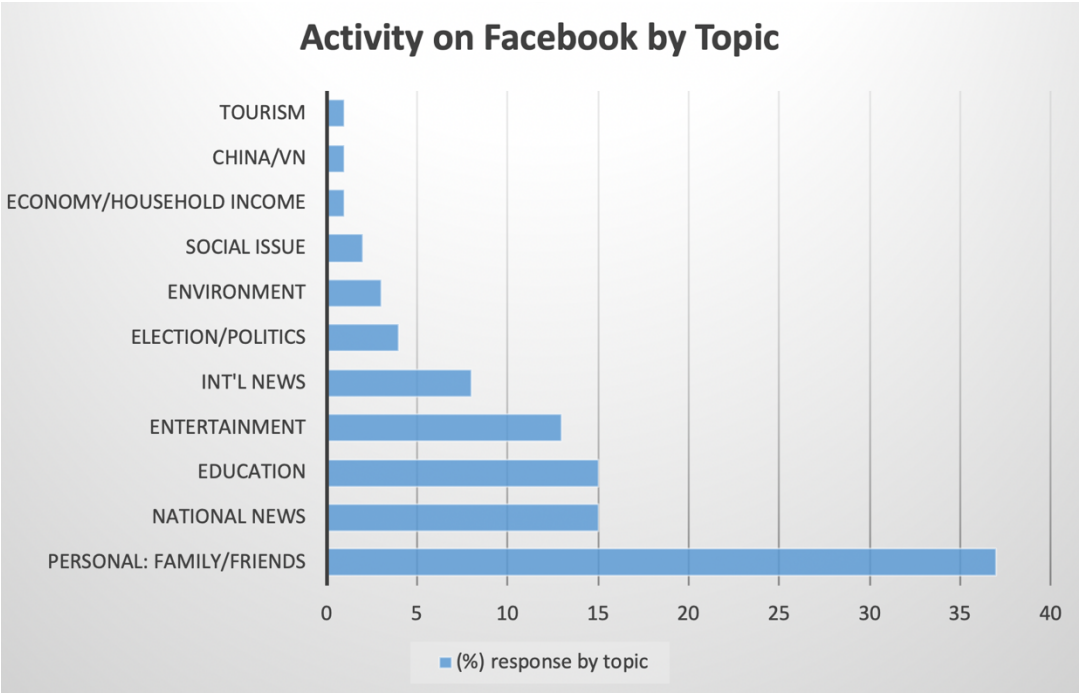


Figure 12. Diary keeper recounted their activities on Facebook by topic

As a 22-year-old in Phnom Penh recounted[14.PP]: 'Mostly, I'm surfing the newsfeed, like some funny memes, videos and pictures of my friends.' A 24-year-old in Phnom Penh[26.PP] described her Facebook activities primarily in terms of friends and family: 'A typical weekend of seeing friends, sharing their activities on Facebook. No comment for today, just replying to old posts/comment to friends.' In another entry by the same diarist, the role of social media in maintaining social bonds is apparent: 'A relaxing Sunday seeing friends, sharing their activities on Facebook, and I just comment on some posts to maintain our communication.' On Monday, her activities change as news media is accessed: 'It's a typical Monday filled with many news articles. Since it is the election period, there is much news to follow up on the election situation and progress. I just scroll and read some of them and scroll to follow up with my friends' activities.' News is consumed, but the diary keeper does not mention sharing or commenting on that news, which is an interesting difference compared to her sharing and commenting activities with friends and family.

Similarly, when the diary keepers were asked to indicate what they had shared on Facebook, a significant proportion indicated that they had not shared (see Figure 13). While not sharing was most evident, topics that were shared related to educational issues, national news, entertainment, and items of a more personal nature related to family and friends, and also international news. Items related to the election and politics were lower on the list of items shared by topic.

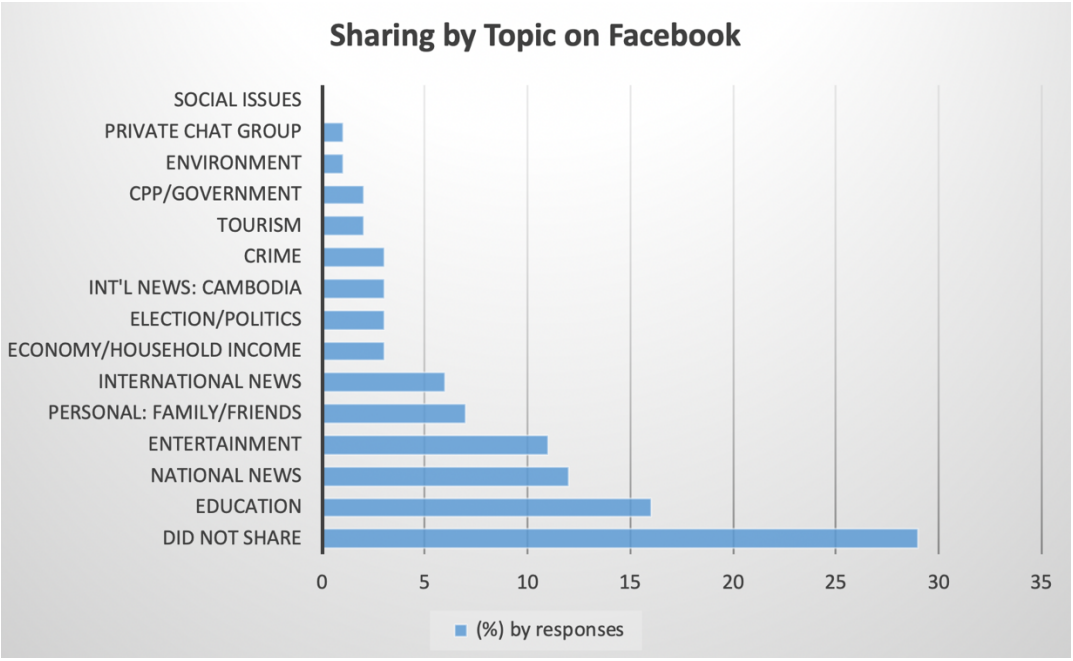


Figure 13. What participants shared on Facebook by topic.

A similar pattern is evident in Figure 14 when diary keepers were asked to recount what they had commented on each day on Facebook.

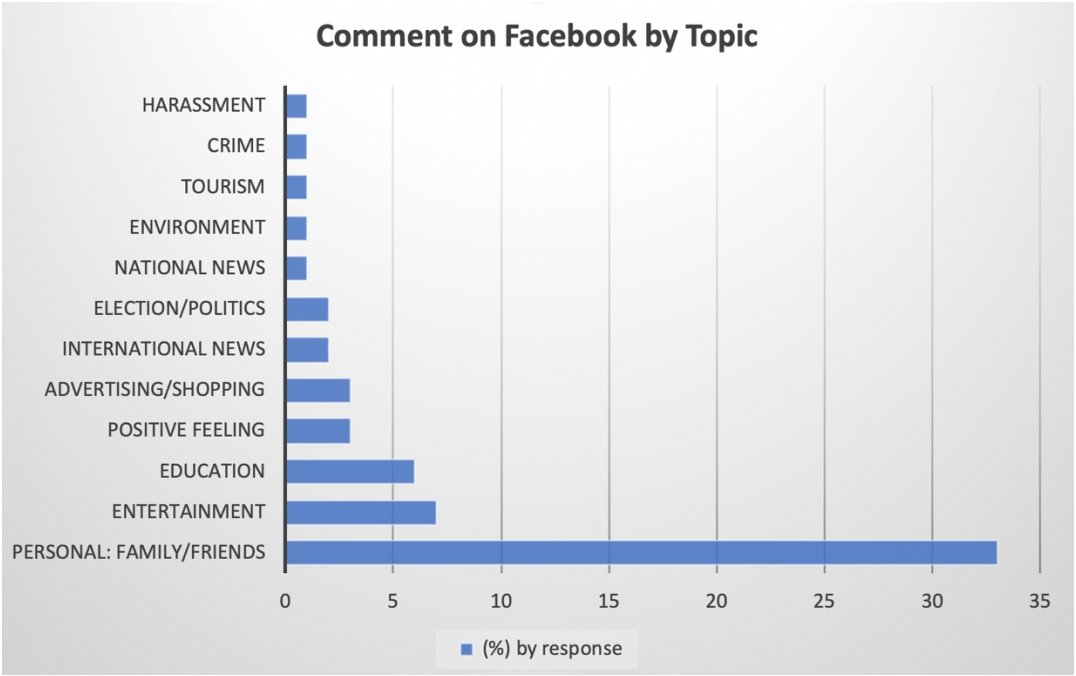


Figure 14. Diary keepers primarily commented on matters of a personal nature related to friends and family on Facebook.

The most reported commenting was in relation to personal matters such as family and friends, followed by matters related to entertainment and education. Commenting on news, and election and political topics was much less reported, which is a stark contrast to the expressed interest in social issues recounted by the diary keepers in Figure 10. What one sees here is the difference

between the private and public on social media—what was of most interest (social issues in Figure 10) was not what was commented upon or shared (Figures 13 and 14). Findings of the diary keeping exercise appear to echo interviews in 2017 and 2018 where participants told of their small acts of resistance (Scott 1989, 1990) in accessing and silently consuming independent sources of news and information; of not commenting publicly on social media for fear of revealing their true dissenting sentiments, and of the need to maintain a public persona not antagonistic to the ruling party owing to concerns of repercussion in terms of sanction or loss of opportunity.

One diarists to record that they had commented on political and election issues was a 24-year-old in Siem Reap[11.SR] who recounted expressing his support for the election which, he said, was his *duty* as a Cambodian citizen. As he recounted: 'I commented on Facebook today: As a citizen, we have to cast a vote to choose the leader we prefer and whose policy we love.' What is interesting about the diarist's clear public expression of support for the election is that the same diarist also recorded that his most important sources of news during the weeklong diary exercise were independent news entities traditionally critical of Hun Sen, including *Radio Free Asia, Voice of America,* and *Voice of Democrac*y radio. Stories from these media organisations that the diarists found most interesting included the detention of former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on corruption charges, contradictions in the Ministry of Health's claims about the mass poisoning of villagers, and the arrest of a Cambodian police officer who claimed he was targeted for pursuing a powerful drug dealer. The diary keeper did not appear to have commented on or shared the news items that he had accessed online. While this diarist expressed his support publicly for the election and, by default, Hun Sen, his news consumption interests were certainly on the side of what supporters of the prime minister would characterise as pro-opposition media. This expression of support for the flawed election in public on Facebook and the silent consumption of critical, independent news media sources (not commenting or sharing) mirrors in ways the online activities of civil servants interviewees, and fits with the theme of an *active silence* on social media as a small act of resistance in terms of staying informed and remaining quiet about being informed.

Engaging primarily with friends and family in terms of personal interaction was also evident when the diary keepers were asked what they had liked and disliked on Facebook. Figure 15 shows that topics related to friends and family were those most 'liked' by the diary keepers followed by entertainment, education, and election/politics. However, a larger number of diary

keepers also indicated their dislike of the election and politics, and forms of online harassment were the least liked of all. What the diary keepers liked and did not like on Facebook paralleled in ways findings from interviews in 2017 and 2018 where interviewees spoke of the politicised and polarised (*intolerant*) character of communication on Facebook and of repercussions—*fear and opportunity, sanctions and rewards*—either from authorities or circles of friends and acquaintances if opposing political sentiments were revealed in public. As a 30-year-old in Phnom Penh[5.PP] recounted: 'I like my friends, family and personal posts and I do not like the election campaign or political messages to encourage people to go to vote.' Similarly, a 27-year-old in Phnom Penh[9.PP] liked celebrations for the World Cup which contrasted with his dislike for the 'CPP campaign appearing all over my newsfeed on my Facebook account.' A 24-year-old in Phnom Penh liked that here was 'much news to read and follow up on the election situation/tension.' However, she disliked that 'some articles are too propagandist to read.'[26.PP] Again, the personal, the mundane, and the civically and politically aware mix in everyday activity on social media—social media users choosing and being discerning with news and information that is considered appealing and of value to their lives.

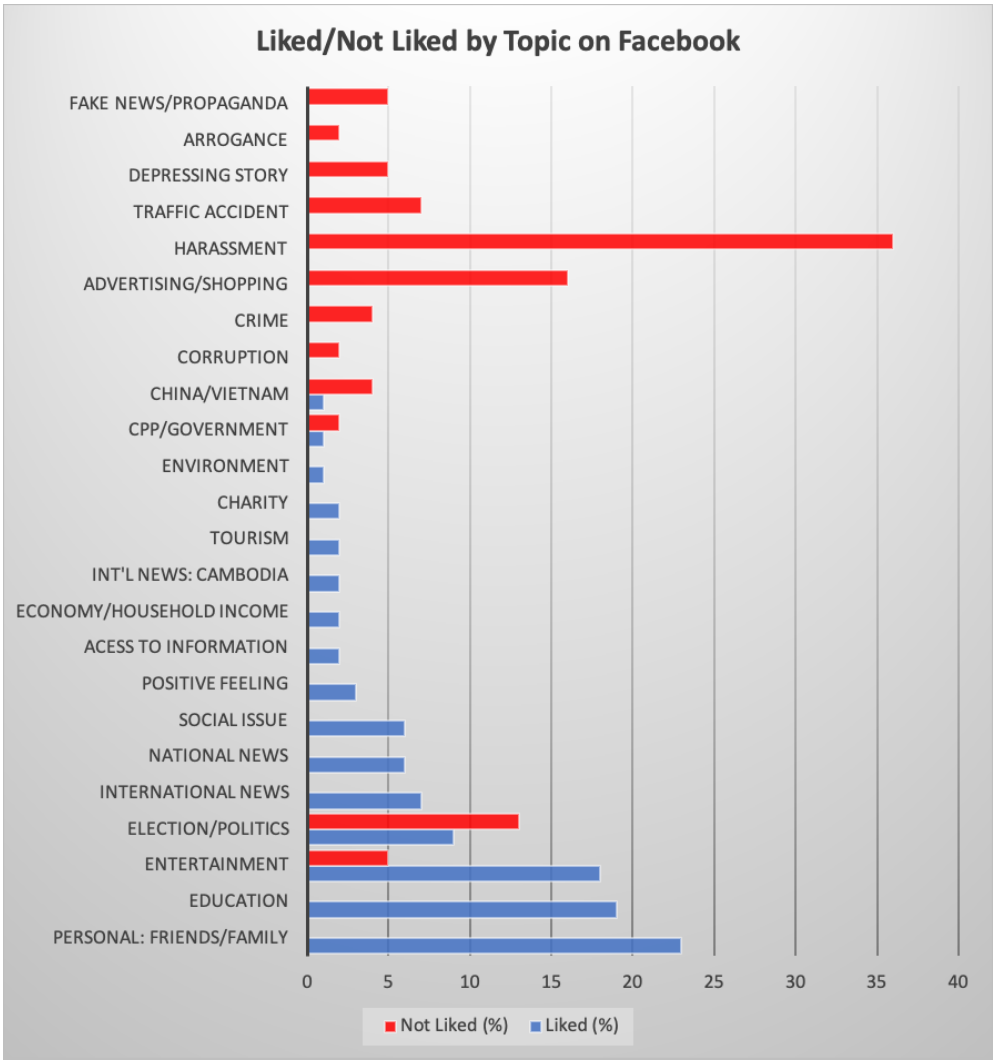


Figure 15. What the diary keepers liked and did not like on Facebook by topic during the week of their diary keeping exercise.

What is evident among the diary keepers and their recorded behaviours and expressed motives is that repertoires of engagement on Facebook were employed in the context of specific communities within a society and history. Siapera et al. (2019) speak of active audience members positioning themselves via media based on preferences and needs, and of not only consuming media but appropriating media forms in order to position themselves in the social world through certain media based on life experience. In the media diary exercise, there is evidence of an active and critical audience engagement with news and information on Facebook; engagement which is 'informed by social history and concrete political, economic, and socio-cultural circumstances' (Siapera 2010, p. 77). Diary keepers valued topics related to social issues on Facebook, yet when it came to commenting and sharing—communicating in public on social media platforms—the diary keepers reverted to topics related to friends and family. What the diary keepers revealed was the contradictory role of social media as a means

of access to independent sources of news and information, and a site where certain information, thoughts and opinions are not shared publicly or commented upon. Facebook, therefore, was a platform where public activity was largely an *empty indicator* of true user sentiments, particularly of dissent. In the next section, a focus group discussion with six people conducted in the northern city of Siem Reap adds further understanding to the complex relationship with social media that both enmeshed and emancipated users.

6.4 Focus group discussion – Presentation of findings

A six-person focus group discussion in which young people, four women and two men aged 18 to 28, agreed to participate was conducted in Siem Reap city, see Table 4. The discussion topics were informed by the experience of the in-depth interviews and the media diary exercise. I was concerned that the group nature of the discussion might limit rather than expand expression. However, the discussion was candid, robust and playfully animated in that the 'un-natural' setting of the focus group chimed with Morgan and Hoffman's (2018) proposal that such scenarios might actually encourage opportunities for expression.

Reaksar	**Female**	**Age:**	**28**
Kelvin	**Male**		**24**
Keith	**Male**		**20**
Mai Ly	**Female**		**20**
Kolab	**Female**		**20**
Thyvee	**Female**		**20**

Table 4. Focus group participants (n=6) by chosen pseudonyms, gender and age.

For example, Kelvin (participants adopted pseudonyms) told the group of no longer commenting publicly on social media, which he then contrasted with the focus group:

> Sometimes we want to talk like that [on social media], but we have no chance, or we have no topics to discuss. Like today, if we did this every day, or one day per week, maybe the youth can improve and share [ideas].

Themes that emerged in the interviews and identified in the diary exercise were also found to be present in the focus group discussion, including *fear and opportunity* associated with social media platforms, which both increased and stifled expression; a distrust of domestic media and greater *trust* in the Khmer-language services of foreign-backed media. The discussants

believed that all media required critical reflection and assessment, particularly information accessed via social media. There were qualifications too, as the discussants provided personal context and examples as a means of clarifying their points. Consensus was reached on topics discussed and also an important instance of dissent emerged when one of the discussants disagreed strenuously with a view being expressed among other members of the group that social media had changed Cambodian society in a positive manner. This dissent was an example of assessments of some in a focus group leading to a reassessment by others (Morgan and Hoffman 2018), and in this case echoed both the theme of the *imagined affordances* of social media and its *Faustian* bargain, which was introduced in Chapter 5. The group discussion concluded with a debriefing session where the participants reflected on their experience, which was unanimously positive.

6.4.1 Social media in 2018—a '*prison without walls'*

Focus group participant Thyvee said the situation with social media was such that people had access to platforms, but laws made it impossible to use such technology freely. The situation was similar to being in a 'prison without walls' where all she could do on social media was to hit 'like', and even that innocuous action could be deemed illegitimate if the government so decided: 'Sometimes hitting "like" might be deemed wrong as well,' she said. Echoing findings in the interviewees and the media diaries, Thyvee told how she only commented now on 'normal things' with friends, 'but we do not comment on politics'. Mai Ly described a fissure in perceptions of social reality between youths of her generation and the view of society disseminated by a domestic media industry that 'broadcast only good news and they hide the bad news'—what she described as a national TV programming schedule that consisted mostly of music concerts and sports: 'They do not broadcast any crisis in Cambodia'. Kelvin and Mai Ly spoke of the government's near total control of traditional media and distortions in news and information that had resulted in a deeply partisan view of society. The government was solely featured in a positive light in this media environment, which Kelvin described as a culture of 'misleading and partial' news, where the 'withholding' of critical information was the norm. Mai Ly said educated, younger people were well aware of the situation and media was actively evaluated by her generation who expected a pro-government bias. The need to 'evaluate', to 'think critically', to 'take into consideration' sources of news and information disseminated by media, particularly on social media, was a priority for the discussants who told how Facebook, and to a lesser extent YouTube, was their primary source of news and

information. Concern that older and less educated people were more susceptible to media manipulation was raised among the group, including by Kolab and Thyvee who expressed concern that people with 'limited knowledge' believed what they encountered on social media, whereas younger people were better educated and better positioned to determine what was true and false. The discussants saw a role for themselves as young people in assisting their elders in ways of online verification—practices that could give 'obvious results' to the veracity of information, said Kolab. Adding to this description of a deeply distorted media environment, Kelvin spoke of the value of the Khmer-language news services of international news organisations as they could neither be manipulated nor silenced. 'We need to listen to them,' he said. In Cambodia's manipulated media environment, Keith said it was necessary to evaluate news at all stages and from all sources, adding that people at all levels, from fish sellers in the market to taxi drivers, actively shared news and information informally and were accustomed to consuming news within a critical frame of reference. Thyvee told how she did not trust any media entity and, instead, trusted her own judgment to interpret the news and information she encountered on social media: 'I trust myself instead. I take information into consideration to judge it for myself'. Kelvin and Keith also had reservations about international news organisations who could 'mostly be trusted' but not 100%. Though preferring news from non-domestic media organisations, Keith also said he did not 'accept that everything is true' from such sources, and it was important to consider the 'current social context' when assessing news media. Information manipulation and distortion extended beyond simple lack of critical awareness, Keith said, explaining that deeply-held partisan preferences and bias meant that people wanted to believe and disbelieve information in line with their political beliefs, and 'even though the information is true, we still feel it is untrue.'

Kelvin and Keith noted the agenda-setting and framing affordances of social media, particularly in the context of a government being capable of refocusing public attention on one issue to deflect from another more important issue. Keith described Facebook being used to manipulate attention away from issues of national importance and on to mundane matters: 'They can lessen the size of the issue through raising other issues to gradually eliminate the political issues, so the people think about other issues,' he explained. This echoes the theme of social media distorting public perception identified in the media diaries and the importance of access to *trusted and credible* sources of news and information. Thyvee described social media as allowing a 'surveillance of the people's consciousness' and of people needing to remain conscious of information in order to check the spread of so-called 'fake news.' Data here

provides evidence of everyday forms of critical engagement with social media, which resonates with data presented in preceding sections of this chapter and Chapter 5. As this study proposes, decades of repressive governments and firm control over both state and private media in Cambodia has nurtured resistant readings of news and information. In a media environment marked traditionally by 'partisan ownership, institutionalized political bias, and fear' (Licadho 2008), I propose that customary distrust and critical media reading developed and have transferred to audience interaction and understanding of social media as the latest information and communication technology. Thus, to understand social media requires moving beyond binaries of effects and uses and gratifications, and to consider mediation and contexts, communities and histories of resistance, appropriation, and accommodation.

6.4.2 Contesting the 'imagined affordances' of social media

Though awash with distorted information and monitored by authorities for even innocuous activities that could lead to sanction, Facebook still had power to restrain the government, though not in predictable or knowable ways, members of the group said. Kelvin told how, with the arrival of social media, people were better able to scrutinize their elected representatives, and, in turn, officials paid more attention to the public. Kelvin described the experience of Facebook in Cambodia as 'like riding a horse without holding the reins', in that prior to social media the government was totally unconstrained and could 'do whatever they want without anyone's input'. Facebook, while as uncontrollable as an un-reined horse, had placed constraints on the government as it was now a factor in making the government act with restraint: 'Like in 2008 and 2009, the government just did whatever they wanted to do because very few people used and understood Facebook.' Social media, Kelvin proposed, had now tamed a runaway government and 'to some extent, it is helpful'. Similarly, Kolab, Keith and Thyvee described social media as having changed Cambodian society through the affordances of access to information, which had improved people's 'knowledge' and the speed with which people became aware of issues and events. Social media platforms had also made people more technologically capable. The degree to which social media had reined in the government appeared to be relative, however, as focus group participants also described their silencing through the affordances of social media and their technical disenfranchisement through fear of surveillance and the technology of a distorted election process. Keith described the contradiction in that Facebook ensured the speedy dissemination of information and, conversely, social media allowed the government to re-direct public attention away from

information that was important to know.

Presenting a strong counterpoint as others in the discussion addressed the positive, if qualified, aspects of social media, Reaksar described social media as diminishing public debate and political participation. Political discussion had been jettisoned for live-streamed political broadcasting and the ability to self-promote on social media drowned out the bad behaviour of politicians, she said. 'In the current political context of Cambodia, it is bullshit since the introduction of Facebook,' Reaksar declared. She described how social media's popularity coincided with the election in 2013 when people joined platforms to express political opinions, to follow news, and to generally engage on topics of social importance. Five years on from 2013, millions of Cambodians had Facebook accounts, but few people expressed their opinions publicly, she said. Reaksar described a contradictory relationship between social media platforms and people—where surveillance had led users to hide expression of their true sentiments. With parallels to the *Faustian pact* theme that was referenced earlier in this chapter, Reaksar said a psychological price was being paid by Facebook users:

> People also feel afraid of expressing opinions. If they speak out with one word, social media can track that one word. When it comes to social media, they dare not tell the truth on Facebook. They use false information. It is not different from people laughing outwardly but inwardly their feeling is sad. I feel that since the emergence of Facebook, many youths have mental problems.

Reaksar contended that social media had not solved pressing social issues and politicians were more focused on the spectacles of performance than actual implementation of policy, using Facebook to promote positive images of themselves. Social media gave only the mediated appearance of providing solutions. Facebook was being used to monitor and control users, and to promote a single political perspective, Reaksar continued, accusing Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg of responsibility for creating a technology that distorted more balanced representations of political and social matters: 'Sometimes the good activities of people on Facebook are false, including the government', she said.

6.4.3 Social media and voting in 2018 — escaping obligation

Talking among themselves regarding their decision to vote or not to vote, the six members of the focus group joked about ways people had 'escaped' from the electoral process. Thyvee told of people choosing to vote in order to receive the indelible ink on their fingers as a marker of

having voted, and also spoiling their ballot papers at the same time. Kelvin told of neighbours in his village being personally called on by the village chief and being 'mobilised' to go to vote on the morning of the election: 'They have no choice, but to go.' Parallels with earlier findings from interviewees were evident in Mai Ly's recounting of public servants in Siem Reap being compelled to both campaign for the ruling party and to also vote on election day:

> Public servants, they have to go to vote. Even though they don't want to, they have to vote. Also during the election campaign, they have to join. Otherwise, they will be noticed. They must show up.

Asked if social media had influenced her voting decision, Kolab equated her election experience to Thyvee's earlier description of social media being an invisible prison where people were fearful and public performance masked truer sentiments. The election and voting, for Kolab, represented no choice among the available choices. Thus, as with the experience of social media usage, voting followed what Bourdieu (1990) describes as agents' actions taken in pursuit of an anticipated better outcome from all possible anticipated outcomes—the habitus of agents adapting in respect to the lesser of undesirable outcomes in an authoritarian context.

Data presented in this section demonstrates the value of a six-person focus group discussion as an additional qualitative method in the triangulation of findings from fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. Themes identified in interviews and media diaries emerged once again in the free-flowing discussion between six young people over 90 minutes, including social media being valued for the access to independent sources of information it provided but also feared owing to monitoring and surveillance. Information and news accessed via social media provided greater knowledge—what has been described in the theme of enhanced *civic awareness.* However, social media embodied a contradiction in the fear it engendered for users, its use as a means of distorting information, and deflecting audiences from pressing social concerns and issues. Discussants stressed the necessity of a critical engagement with information and news on social media, yet also recognised the limits of media literacy (and rationality) when ideological and partisan consideration and intolerance outdid claims to truth and veracity. Paralleling the theme of *imagined affordances* of social media vis-à-vis authoritarian actors, focus group participants felt that social media had placed reins on a traditionally unbridled government. However, for one participant, the belief that social media had changed Cambodia society was evidence of the distorted representation of reality that a platform such as Facebook propagated: A politics of spectacle that only existed in its mediation. Reflecting on the role of

social media in their electoral decisions, the participants told of offline fears and concern compelling their choices more than online considerations, and voting being as much a performance as were their social media activities—neither reflected true sentiments but were strategies of choice when there were no real choices to choose from.

Conclusion

In this chapter, findings from fieldwork conducted in 2018 were presented including key themes such as public activity on social media being marked more by absence than presence of true sentiment—what I describe in the meta theme of an *empty indicator*. The theme of *active silence* was evident in social media users protecting personal views from public scrutiny to avoid official sanction from authorities, the suspicion of colleagues and superiors in work, or the opprobrium of friends and peers. Such a studied silence, however, did not represent apathy resembling more Scott's small acts of resistance: 89% of interviewees valued social media for affording access to independent news and information, primarily from *trusted and credible* (another key theme) news media sources not controlled or influenced by the government. The theme of a *performance of self* on social media, including through absence, masked this underlying critical and *civic awareness* as news and information was consumed in private. This *practice of active silence* was evident also in the media diary exercise and focus groups discussion. Research participants adopted strategies of verification and critical comparison of social media sources. Manipulation of information was expected by research participants and, therefore, social media influencing opinions and actions appeared less influential than embeddedness in a community and society with its own histories and experiences. With a keen sense of the 'rules of the game' of politics and life in Cambodia, research participants assessed the 'objective chances' that were permitted in the context of electoral possibilities in terms of either voting or boycotting. A 'reading' of the potential future by the interviewees corresponded with what Maton (2014) describes as the outcomes that agents believe are most likely for them based on an 'unconscious sense of the possible, probable and, crucially, desirable' (2014, p. 57). To be seen to vote, even when it was against the interviewee's convictions and interests, ensured they avoided possible sanction—personal, professional, or political. As with their decisions regarding social media usage, to consider boycotting the election was to entertain the unknown—the agent's choice that left little choice. The role of social media in the political process in 2018 demonstrated a *logic of practice* based

on agents' estimated expectations of outcomes measured by the experience of past outcomes—technology embedded within a community and history (Sterne 2003). The possible societal consequences of this dynamic are addressed in a meta-analysis in Chapter 8. Analysis of Facebook activity by four political figures is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

Facebook data analysis 2017-2018

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, findings are presented from a thematic analysis of public posts on the Facebook pages of four political figures over a 15 month period (May to July) that encompass Cambodia's 2017 local election and 2018 national election. The four subjects of this study were Hun Sen, his son Hun Manet, and the opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. Written posts to the Facebook pages of Hun Sen, Sam Rainsy, and Kem Sokha were coded by topic as a first step in identifying themes. Written posts to Hun Manet's Facebook page were sparse while images were posted in abundance. Therefore, images posted to Hun Manet's Facebook page were coded by topic and from which themes were developed. Analysis of the Facebook posts of the four political figures involved both inductive identification of new themes and deductive identification of themes already documented in the analysis of data from in-depth interviewing, the media diaries, and the focus group discussion. This approach, a pillar of the triangulation of methods and data presented in Chapter 4, corresponds with Patton's (2015) observation that qualitative research is usually inductive in its initial stages and that a deductive approach may be present in confirmatory stages of analysis. Thus, interviewing in 2017 and 2018 provided inductive entry points of understanding to the subjective use and meaning of social media in Cambodia and the objective, structural conditions of this socio-technical activity within the field of politics. Themes identified in interviews were extended and complicated by themes, inductively and deductively, identified in the media diary exercise and the focus group discussion.

Political actors	**Key Themes**	**Description**
Hun Sen	Sacrifice	The privations Hun Sen endured for his political cause.
	The Gift of peace	Hun Sen's claim to have bestowed and preserver of peace.
	A threat of war	That peace is fragile and conflict is ever present.
Hun Manet	Political celebritisation	The project of being both a politician and a celebrity figure among the public.

Sam Rainsy	Moral right to leadership Enemies Within	The opposition leader's morally superiority to Hun Sen and suitability to leadership. The ruling party represented the political interests of others, specifically Vietnam.
Kem Sokha	Positive political change Reconciliation not revenge	A message that political change does not need to involve conflict. That revenge should not be exacted against the ruling party should it lose power in elections.

Table 5. Themes identified in the Facebook activity of four political leaders.

Findings from the examination of Facebook posts presented in this chapter represents the final point of analysis in this triangulated enquiry. Ditchfield and Meredith (2018) note the research value of Facebook in terms of the platform providing a 'preserved archive' of naturally-occurring data that exists independent of the researcher. Echoing Flick's (2018) classification of documents as 'traces', Braun and Clarke propose that such data, including online, constitutes social and communicative practices that should be thought of in terms of 'cultural fragments' (2013, p. 153) imbued with socio-cultural meanings and ideas, and for which thematic analysis is well suited to identify. However, for qualitative research to 'make sense' of a culture, the researcher must go beyond the visible and tangible data points and must also 'make sense of the ephemeral connections and entanglements that exist between and beyond such data points' (Markham and Gammelby 2018, p. 462), and it is in the 'interpretation' of the data 'where we should be focusing our attention,' according to Markham (2018, pp. 512-513). Therefore, it is important to note that the analysis of Facebook posts in this chapter is not a process of quantification and referencing the preponderance of particular topics does not attribute importance due to frequency of occurrence alone. Rather, occurrence, re-occurrence and absence offers a useful map for understanding the meaning-making at play in the social media activities of the four political figures, and the saliency of certain data can be important without appearing frequently, as Braun and Clarke argue.

7.2 Hun Sen on Facebook: protocol and the personal

Posts to Hun Sen's Facebook page (n=2,812) during the 15-month period of analysis pertained primarily to his official duties as the head of government. The majority of posts involved briefly written accounts of Hun Sen's activities illustrated with photographs or video clips. Such posts could best be described as referring to the official procedures and protocols of a prime minister, such as documenting meetings with foreign dignitaries and delegations, attending to government work, and travelling on official duties domestically and overseas. Though new digital and social media platforms allow for new forms of hybrid political communication (Chadwick 2013), Hun Sen's Facebook page was primarily populated by posts about the mundane, quotidian activities of his official duties, (see Figure 16). Still, the mapping of topics on the prime minister's Facebook page and the themes identified and developed provided insight to his political communication and election campaigning during the 2017-2018 period. Posts relating to garment factories and garment workers were in the top five of topics for nine months and, overall, were among his most prevalent topics on Facebook. This period coincided with Hun Sen personally visiting garment factories to deliver speeches, election promises, and distribute the equivalent of a $5 cash *gift* to every worker in the industry at an estimated cost of $3.5 million (Kann 2018). Hun Sen placed garment workers at the centre of his election campaign strategy, and his Facebook page, during the research period. Preliminary themes identified in Hun Sen's Facebook posts pertained to *peace and stability*, *economic development, prosperity,* and *the possibility of war.*

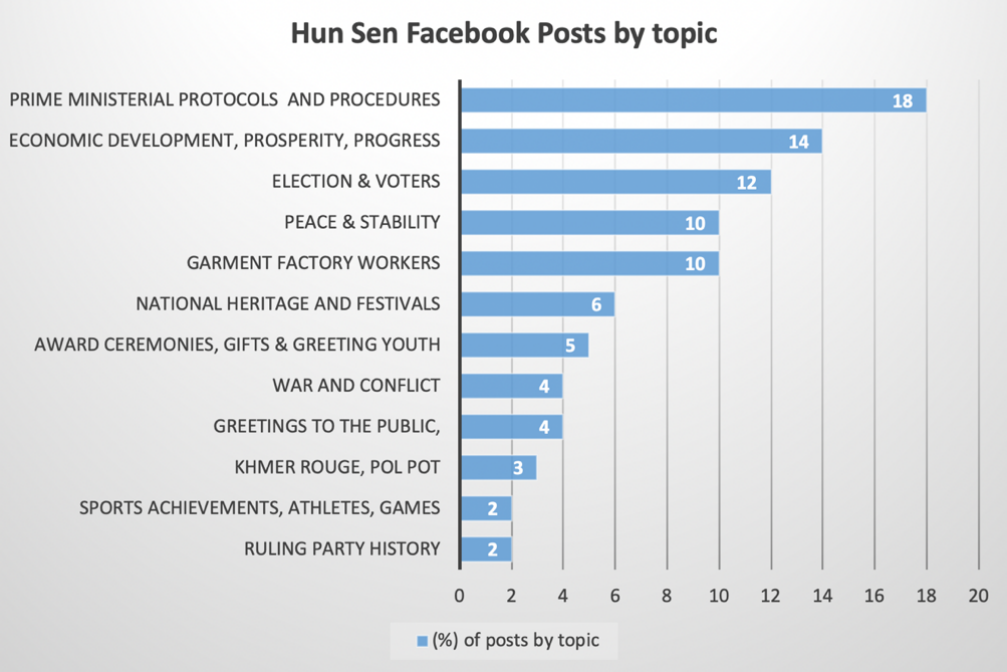


Figure 16. Posts between May 2017 and July 2018 on Hun Sen's Facebook page grouped by preliminary themes.

Themes pertaining to conflict were both present day in his warnings about contemporary dangers of instability, and historical reminders of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot periods. References to Cambodia's revolutionary past by Hun Sen involved recounting his hardships in surviving the Pol Pot regime and drawing comparisons with the comforts and peacefulness of contemporary times. Hun Sen's personal role, and that of his party (though less prominently), was emphasised regarding the demise of the Khmer Rouge regime and the revival of Cambodian society. Thus, an additional preliminary theme was identified in a Hun Sen *sacrifice* and resurrection narrative. The identification of preliminary themes in Hun Sen's Facebook activity of *peace and stability*, *economic development and prosperity,* and the possibility of a return to *war,* provided a conceptual bridge to the key themes of *the gift of peace* and *the threat of war,* which were linked by the theme of his personal *sacrifice*. Thus, it is proposed that the key themes of *sacrifice, the gift of peace* and the *threat of war* were part of constructed symbolic discourse evident in Hun Sen's social media activity, which was not arbitrary but a strategy to generate public support for the prime minister—attended by the undercurrent of threat—through the creation and conversion of Bourdieusian symbolic capital on and through social media.

7.2.1 Hun Sen's *Gift of Peace* and *Threat of War*

On April 30th 2018, a post to Hun Sen's Facebook page noted his presence at the graduation ceremony of students at the National Institute of Education in Phnom Penh. The ceremony was the fifteenth that Hun Sen had attended at the institute—one instance of many where thousands of graduates have received their diplomas and degrees directly from Hun Sen's hands. The importance of promoting his attendance was evident in the focus on such events on Hun Sen's Facebook page (see Figure 16). In the text of a Facebook post from an award ceremony on March 22, 2018, Hun Sen reminded his audience of the destruction of Cambodia during the war years in the 1970s and compared the past when 'human resources were virtually destroyed from the country' with society's contemporary comforts, which were made possible by his party who had 'tried to build our country and human resources from scratch'. Ahead of the June 4, 2017 local election, Hun Sen focused on youth and educational opportunities in a Facebook post stating that: 'Young people need to learn the most important things'—that his government was responsible for building the schools in which they studied (May 24)[1]. The 'CPP is the future of youth', Hun Sen declared in a post the previous day (May 23), noting that opportunities to study were due to the peace 'preserved' by the ruling party. Other political parties could not be trusted, Hun Sen declared in a post on May 26, and a vote for his party would ensure peace:

> People across the country are living in peace. The nation is also advancing. No one wants to go back to the old regimes because Cambodia was full of war and people cannot risk supporting inexperienced and incompetent political parties to build the country. We all continue to vote for the Cambodian People's Party so that our people can live in peace!

Educational opportunities for young people are presented here as the outcome of the development that Hun Sen and his party have presided over since the removal of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. Yet, the freedom and opportunity to learn remains contingent as the threat of war continues, though it can be averted by supporting the established political order. Voting for Hun Sen is, therefore, a vote for stability that allows educational opportunities to continue for young people. What is not stated or explained is who or what threatens the peaceful conditions in Cambodia. Hun Sen also used Facebook to compare peace in Cambodia with turmoil elsewhere in the world, particularly in the Middle East and North African, as a reminder

[1] Denotes the date of the Facebook post.

of what things were once like in Cambodia and might yet be again: 'While Cambodia is enjoying a great deal of benefits from peace, neighbours in some areas are facing civil war and destruction that Cambodia experienced in the past' (May 4, 2017).

Days before the June 4 local election in 2017, Hun Sen exhorted people to vote with short posts on Facebook that included the refrain: 'The People's Party wins, the people live peacefully in peace and prosperity', which again begs the question—what would happen if the ruling party did not win? Themes of *peace and development* are presented as exclusively bestowed by Hun Sen, and those with an investment in preserving peace, prosperity and their personal well-being should, thus, vote for his party. The question becomes not so much who will win an election in Cambodia as what will happen if Hun Sen does not win an election. Thus, voting becomes a choice between choosing the unknown and the fear of possible turmoil, or the continuation of the political order and the opportunities that the ruling party has afforded.

Following the 2017 election and his party securing the majority of local leadership positions, Hun Sen thanked voters in a Facebook post for choosing peace by voting for 'Samdech Techo Hun Sen who brings complete peace and development that we see with our eyes today' (June 10). In the following days, Hun Sen posted messages of thanks to youths for participating in national 'peacekeeping' by voting for him (June 11), while reminding that it was he who had provided their educational opportunities at home and abroad. Themes of *youth, education, economic opportunity, and peace* are bound together in Hun Sen's Facebook posts, and the looming alternative to his idyll of harmony is never far away: 'Without peace, there is no improvement' (June 14). In a June 15 post summarising his attendance at another student graduation ceremony, Hun Sen told the graduates they were lucky compared to previous generations of Cambodians who were 'formerly hostages of war'. Describing the good luck of contemporary youth, Hun Sen made several references to his role in preserving peace in Cambodia, the tranquillity of which could be 'destroyed' in 'just one blink' of the eye (June 17). The country's workers were similarly reminded by Hun Sen on Facebook that they had benefitted from his peace and prosperity. Mirroring his presentation of degrees and diplomas to university students and the documenting of such events on Facebook, Hun Sen gifted thousands of garment workers cash payments in the 11 months prior to the 2018 national election. Facebook posts detailing Hun Sen's gift-giving at factories also linked to peace, job security, and the 2018 election. Having distributed his cash gifts ahead of the election, Hun Sen stated what he required in return: 'In order to ensure the safety of a well-paying, long-term

job, you must vote for the CPP' (June 5, 2018). Thus, the key themes of *the gift of peace* and *the threat of war* are useful for the interpretation of meaning in Hun Sen's social media activity. *Peace and stability* have been bequeathed by Hun Sen as a gift, which has led to social and economic opportunities (education for students and employment for garment workers). The cash given pre-election and the schools and classrooms built for students are personal gifts bestowed by Hun Sen—gifts born of the peace that Hun Sen gives to the nation. However, Hun Sen's *gift of peace* to Cambodia and its people remains contingent on positive electoral outcomes and his continuation in power. If Hun Sen's *gift of peace* is rejected, in that voters choose to vote for another party, the price to be paid for such ingratitude would likely be renewed conflict—the *threat of war.* As he warned: 'If peace is dissolved, everything will be destroyed' (July 17, 2017).

7.2.2 Sacrifice and the debt of obligation

Hun Sen and his party are conceived in the Facebook posts analysed as having gifted peace and economic development to Cambodia in an act of selflessness. The gift had come at a cost, however, in terms of personal self-sacrifice: 'There is no other party except the CPP which sacrificed blood and flesh for the sake of peace while the country plunged into the killing fields' (June 29, 2017). Hun Sen's personal sacrifice was even more absolute: 'Every citizen is well aware that Samdech Techo Hun Sen has sacrificed everything, including his life and family for the sake of peace' (Sept 24, 2017). Hun Sen was the one 'willing to sacrifice his own life for the return of peace for the people without remorse' (June 17, 2017). There is continuity in themes of Hun Sen's *sacrifice* in liberating the country from the Khmer Rouge 'which has led to peace and prosperity to this day' (July 2, 2017) and the *obligation* on citizens that results from the *sacrifice* that gave 'birth' to a new country by leaders who 'dared to give up their life' for the people, and who remained with the people through 'fiery warfare' to the present day (July 3, 2017). Hun Sen's *gift of peace* and the economic development brought about by his *sacrifice* imposes, however, a *debt of obligation* on Cambodian citizens, which must be repaid in loyalty—a key theme identified in Chapter 6. Thus, the price for the *gift of peace* is repaid in votes for Hun Sen at election time. The cost of defaulting on this debt of obligation is potentially war.

Bourdieu's reflection on the genesis of states is instructive here in that the state is constituted through the unifying of different fields—social, economic, cultural, educational, political—

which occurs in tandem with the progressive 'state monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence' (1998, p.33). *Peace* and *development* are the *gifts* given by Hun Sen and *war* is the potential consequence for those who fail to recognize the debt bondage of Hun Sen's generosity. Hun Sen's gifts are also the misfortune that Bourdieu speaks of: 'The initial act is an attack on the freedom of the one who receives it. It is threatening: It obliges one to reciprocate, and to reciprocate beyond the original gift' (1998, p.94). The gift, ultimately, 'is a misfortune' because it creates obligation and 'is a way to possess' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 94). Norén-Nilsson's (2016a) exploration of gift giving during Cambodia's 2013 national election is insightful in that the political act of giving gifts includes 'an element of menace'. Respondents in Norén-Nilsson's research told of receiving gifts from the ruling party ahead of the 2013 election, yet the majority viewed the practice negatively. Gifts were not simply gifts, but also markers of an exchange for their votes. Menace was present in that 'failure to accept gifts would result in the accusation of being anti-CPP: a prospect that frightened respondents' (2016a, p. 809). The *gift of peace* and the *threat of war* were key themes bound together by the theme of *sacrifice* in Hun Sen's Facebook posts.

There were other dimensions to Hun Sen's Facebook activity which involved matters of less obvious political substance. Such posts were revealing of a lighter side to Hun Sen in the glimpses he allowed into his personal and private life on Facebook, including posing for photos with his grandchildren; posts related to his physical exercising routine; reminiscing about his youth, including meeting his wife, his children being born, and their struggles as a family during the years of conflict. Hun Sen also leveraged the technical affordances of Facebook to cater to interests beyond politics, such as broadcasting live football matches and rebroadcasting the popular TV singing talent show *The Voice – Cambodia* live on his page. Hun Sen also posted regular greetings to his followers that, for example, wished them good luck and good health, and safe travelling over weekends—these short, personal addresses were among the most commonly reoccurring topics on his Facebook page during the period analysed. In Chapter 5, it was proposed that Hun Sen had sought to accrue 'emotional capital' (Illouz 2007) and a closer relationship with the public through the crafting of a new online persona, which echoes with the work of Savigny and Temple (2010) and Scammell (2015) on marketing strategies and branding approaches in political communication. Emotion, and the expression of an emotional attitude, are building blocks of social interaction, Illouz proposes, noting that where Bourdieu's cultural capital is central to the signalling of taste and status, emotional capital is central to the development of networks of relationships. Illouz also posits that

accumulation of social capital through networks built of emotional capital can be converted into other forms of capital, such as social and professional advancement opportunities. In the case of Hun Sen, this study proposes that emotional capital was accrued via social media with the intention to convert to political capital. Thus, in the place of his traditional 'strongman' persona, there is now the dedicated family man as revealed in the intimate pictures shared on this Facebook page; a prime minister who poses for selfies with female factory workers and gifts them envelopes of cash. Rather than an autocratic ruler whose policy decisions traditionally favoured foreign direct investment and factory owners, Hun Sen now strikes the tone of grandfatherly protector of factory workers, as in this post from September 6, 2017: 'Hun Sen has decided to continue leading the country to protect peace, protect factories, and protect workers' welfare for two more terms'…. 'Samdech Techo is like a grandfather' who cares for 'workers everywhere' who are his 'grandchildren'. And as a post on September 1 declared: 'Whenever Samdech Techo Prime Minister meets the workers, it is only fun'.

7.2.3 Facebook and counter-framing a 'colour revolution'

Announcing that his Facebook followers had exceeded 9 million on November 13, 2017, Hun Sen declared that such a large number reflected his popularity both within and outside the country, and that his page was the most accurate source of information about his activities and policies. Revisiting argument in Chapter 2 on social media being a valuable tool for autocratic stability (Gunitsky 2015), we see in Hun Sen's Facebook posts attempts at reframing discourse around the arrest of CNRP leader Kem Sokha and counter-mobilising with an imagined threat against the nation in terms of a so-called 'colour revolution' led by 'treasonous' political figures in the opposition 'who want to destroy the nation' (Sept 12, 2017). Similarly, the discredited election in 2018 also afforded Hun Sen a new means of discourse framing on social media. As the election approached, and with Kem Sokha in prison and the opposition party banned, calls were made by opposition figures in exile for Cambodians to boycott the vote. Though voting is not a legal requirement in Cambodia, Hun Sen posted on May 4, 2018 that it was illegal for anyone to encourage another person to not vote. A post on June 26 noted 'the duty of good citizens' to vote, a reference that resonates with the theme of *duty and obligation* identified among interviewees in Chapter 6. In a Facebook post on May 12, Hun Sen wrote of young people having no experience of war and conflict and, as a result, many did not believe how bad things were and could still be. Hun Sen's post sought to remind young people of what had and could happen again: 'When he or she grows up and does not see what Cambodia has

been through in the past, such as the war and genocide, some do not believe'. A subtle shift of emphasis occurred as the election moved closer with Hun Sen pivoting from reminders that he brought peace to Cambodia to exhortations that the 'best option for maintaining peace' was to stick with his party. In a post on June 27, 2018, Hun Sen described himself as the 'steering wheel' of the party who ensured 'that Cambodia does not return to war'. People could be in no doubt that it was in Hun Sen's hands as to which direction he could steer Cambodia—toward peace or back to war. Findings presented in this section demonstrate how key themes identified in the Facebook activity of Hun Sen, such as the *gift of peace*, *the threat of war,* and the debt of *obligation* owed by citizens for *sacrifices* made by Hun Sen formed a mediated discourse around the election in which voters were imbued. This discourse resonates with the key themes of *fear and opportunity, surveillance, sanction, and reward,* and *duty and obligation* identified in the in-depth interviews, media diaries, and focus group discussion presented in chapters 5 and 6. Data is now presented from the Facebook activity of Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet,

7.3 Hun Manet on Facebook: Selfies and political celebritisation

Hun Manet is a senior military commander though he also campaigned for the ruling party during the 2017 and 2018 national elections. Hun Manet posted a large number of photographs (n=2,398) and several video clips to his Facebook page between May 2017 and July 2018. These images were primarily taken of Hun Manet and not taken by him, indicating that photographers were assigned to document his public appearances and engagements. This visual imagery provided a rich narrative of Hun Manet's official activities and the elements of his public persona that were chosen to be presented on social media. Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) write of visual images being 'materially in the world' and embedded socially and historically in social and human relations. Images have authors. They are 'attributed with agency and affect the agency of others' and they are 'documentable and can be isolated for analysis and comparison' (2015, p. 166). Thus, analysis of Hun Manet's Facebook page involved categorising images by topic in order to develop preliminary themes (see Figure 17). The most common visual topics posted were images featuring Hun Manet at public events; images which emphasised his demeanour, primarily in terms of smiling, laughing and exhibiting happiness. These images were accompanied by images of Hun Manet in close physical contact with young and old members of the audiences at the public events he attended. The images often focused on tactile displays of affection involving Hun Manet being hugged, kissed and warmly greeted

by the public. The second most prominent imagery by topic were selfies. However, the selfie genre was transformed in that rather than being a self-image, the imagery posted was of Hun Manet posing for the taking of selfies with others.

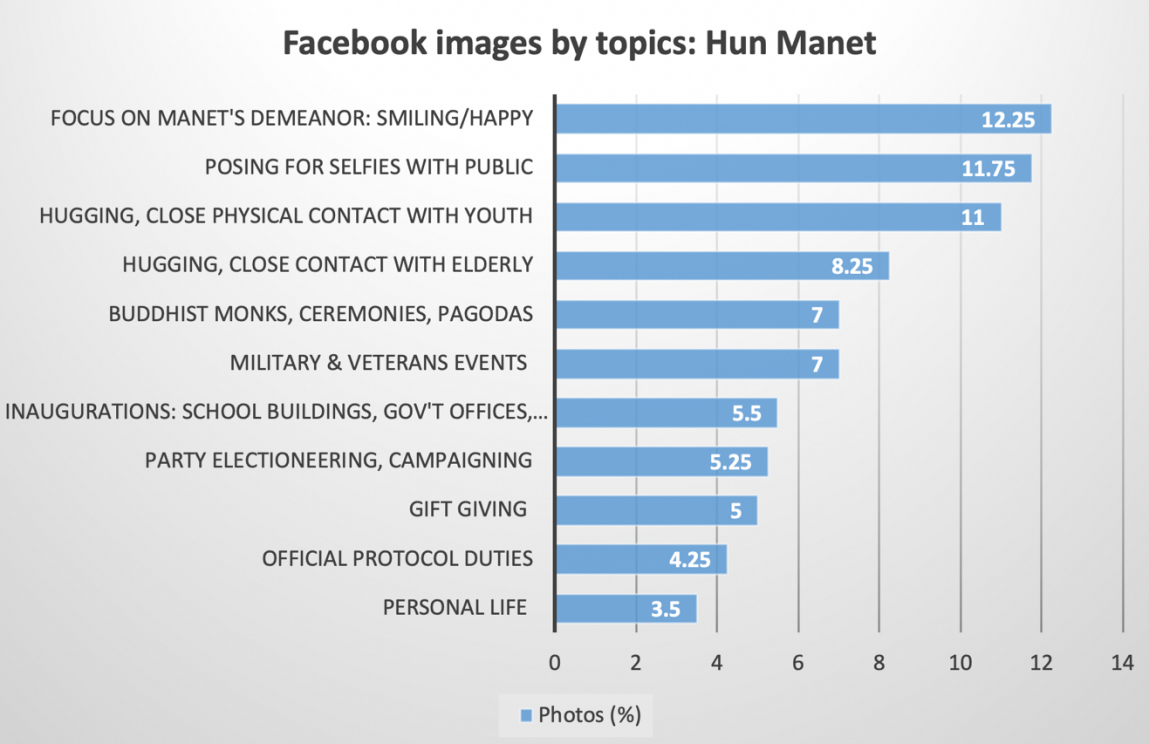


Figure 17. Images by topic on Hun Manet's Facebook page.

This visual documenting of Hun Manet posing for individual and group selfies with diverse audiences appeared designed to attest to his public popularity. It is valuable here to consider Brager's (2017) proposal that the selfie speaks to a new technological iteration in a long history of self-portraiture and self-representation, which requires of selfies the same concomitant discourses and critiques, as in self-portraiture, in terms of class, race, gender, access and visibility. On Aug 31, 2017, of the fifteen photographs posted to Hun Manet's Facebook page from a Buddhist pagoda inauguration ceremony, seven were photographs of Hun Manet posing for selfies (as against featuring in selfies) with groups of young and old people. On September 2, 2017, of the twelve photographs taken at another pagoda inauguration ceremony, seven of the photographs also focused on the practice of Hun Manet posing for selfies with people attending the event. On October 27, four of twelve photographs posted to his Facebook page from a military installation visit involved Hun Manet, again, posing for selfies in the selfie-taking by others. Kuntsman (2017) proposes that understanding selfies as digital artefacts requires scrutiny of the practice that moves beyond mere visibility and spectacle and considers also questions of citizenship and politics. Sharing selfies on social media is a form of social

capital, according to Kuntsman, which involves visibility and privilege that can be mobilised and capitalised upon and, conversely, which must also involve negation. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the complexity of the selfie as being also 'a field of potential violence and contestation rather than that of playful celebration' (2017, p. 17-18). Brager (2017) develops a comparable theme in arguing that the selfie is not constrained solely to those who pose in them, but also involves those who are the audience for selfies, and the context in which selfies exist and are consumed. It is thus necessary to consider the selfie from where we are looking, at whom we are looking, and how we are looking in terms of 'political frameworks of visibility, hyper-visibility, erasure and misrepresentation' (p. 162). Similarly, chiming in ways with Stanyer (2013) and Metz et al., (2020), Ekman and Widholm (2017) refer to the 'performed connectivity' of selfies in political communication and the incorporation of selfies in the strategic communications of politicians and their use value in political identity making. In Hun Manet's Facebook activity, particularly the curation of imagery on his page, we see an example of Ekman and Widholm's 'political celebritisation' via the focus on Hun Manet's posing *for* selfies. Selfies are not simply self-managed modes of photo opportunity, they are also performances of connection, sociability and the perception of 'intimacy, authority and access' (Ekman and Widholm). Enchantment too is at play. Images of selfie-taking subjects, in the act of selfie taking, emphasise the 'regularly enchanted subjects' and their 'palpable sense of the presence of celebrity' (2017, p. 69). The focus on Hun Manet posing for selfies with apparently enchanted publics emphasises his political celebrity and personal appeal. To this observation there is value in again considering the creation and accumulation of emotive capital (Illouz 2007) afforded by social media as the imagery on Hun Manet's Facebook page emphasises themes of physical *accessibility*, his co-presence and *popularity* with everyday citizens, see Figure 18.



Figure 18. Images of Hun Manet featuring in selfies with members of the public and his audience at official events (Source: Hun Manet's Facebook page)[2]

Authenticity and ordinariness are central themes in the co-opting of selfies for political communication, according to Ekman and Widholm, including representations of the private lives of politicians, which are strategically managed in 'performing ordinariness' and respectability. Hun Manet's Facebook page has correspondingly assisted in the branding of his public persona and of public-impression management as described in Abidin's (2017) observation of a younger Singaporean politician's use of social media to differentiate from older colleagues, as addressed in Chapter 2. Preliminary themes identified in the imagery on Hun Manet's Facebook page related to his convivial demeanour, the emphasis on his personal appeal, and the demonstration of his popularity through the act of selfie taking, which are encapsulated in the key theme of *political celebritisation*. Similarly, the theme of *gifts and gratitude*, which mirror his father's leveraging of symbolic capital in the *gift of peace*, were also identified.

[2] Clockwise from top left:
Posted February 18, 2018: https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1615920791826375
May 13, 2018: https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1703463276405459
May 20. 2017: https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1359307157487741
May 18 2017: https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1357305537687903 (Images accessed August 29, 2019)

7.3.1 Gifts and gratitude

Both Hun Sen and Hun Manet participated in the ritual of posing for selfies to signal their appeal to youth and their continued political popularity in a technologically-changed Cambodia. Like his father, Hun Manet shared family photographs of his children and wife on his Facebook page, which allowed public access to his family life. Whereas the themes of *peace, sacrifice, gifts and threats* to oblige allegiance and to create and accrue emotional capital were identified in the posts of Hun Sen, the themes of *personal authenticity* and *public accessibility* were evident in Hun Manet's posts where his *political celebritisation* is emphasised. On Facebook, the lens of Hun Manet's photographer is directed toward emphasising a smiling military commander who, like his father, also bequeathed gifts to a national audience. For example, Hun Manet attended a primary school in rural Stung Treng province, which received a new three-story building 'as a gift from Samdech Techo' Hun Sen (August 18, 2017). In posts on Hun Manet's page on September 3 and 4, sixteen wooden dwellings were provided to military veterans, also as 'a gift from Samdech Techo Hun Sen through the Cambodian Veterans Association'. Though presented personally by Hun Manet, the gifts originate with Hun Sen and, therefore, the son is a conduit of the benevolence of his father.



Figure 19. Gift-giving as a theme was evident in Hun Manet's Facebook posts on May 11, 2017, (photo 1.) where he was featured presenting a symbolic key to homes donated to military veterans in Battambang province and (photo. 2) on January 9, 2018, in Oddar Meanchey province.[3]

[3] Posted May 11, 2017 https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1350233795061744 Poste January 9, 2018 https://www.facebook.com/482663735152092/photos/a.780908705327592/1574281719323616 (Images accessed August 30, 2019)

There are notable similarities between the gift-giving activities of Hun Manet as documented on Facebook and the gift-giving practices of his father, Hun Sen. Facebook, therefore, would appear to play an important role in Hun Sen's dynastic strategy as it affords the platform and potential for the creation and accumulation of symbolic capital for Hun Sen's heir-apparent, and for the exchange of emotional capital for political capital between father and son ahead of what is expected to be a real-world power transfer one day. As we shall see, opposition leader Sam Rainsy also used Facebook as a tool of political communication during the 2017-2018 period.

7.4 Sam Rainsy on Facebook: Social media and remote resistance

Sam Rainsy's Facebook page demonstrated the practical means to which social media can be used for political communication in an authoritarian society, particularly in providing access to independent news at little cost and technical complexity. The primary topic in 15 months of posts (n=998) on Sam Rainsy's page (Figure. 20) related to keeping his followers informed of news media coverage of Cambodia, which was achieved by the hosting of a daily video news show on his Facebook page. Closely resembling a TV format with two female news readers in a studio setting, the show lasted around 30 minutes in length and content was based primarily on news items from organisations such as the Khmer-language services of *Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, Radio France International* and local newspapers *Phnom Penh Post* and *The Cambodia Daily*. Sam Rainsy also addressed followers on Facebook with public-announcement-style video messages, as well as posting video clips from his interviews with other news media, and speeches given at events he attended. His daily news show on Facebook focused on critical media scrutiny of the Cambodian government which punctured the bubble of positive coverage afforded by Hun Sen's control and influence over the majority of domestic media and increasingly social media. Categorising posts by topics, preliminary themes that developed included the *internationalisation* of Cambodian domestic political affairs and the desire for foreign (Western) *intervention and confrontation* of Hun Sen's regime, and the *personalisation of political competition* between Sam Rainsy and Hun Sen.

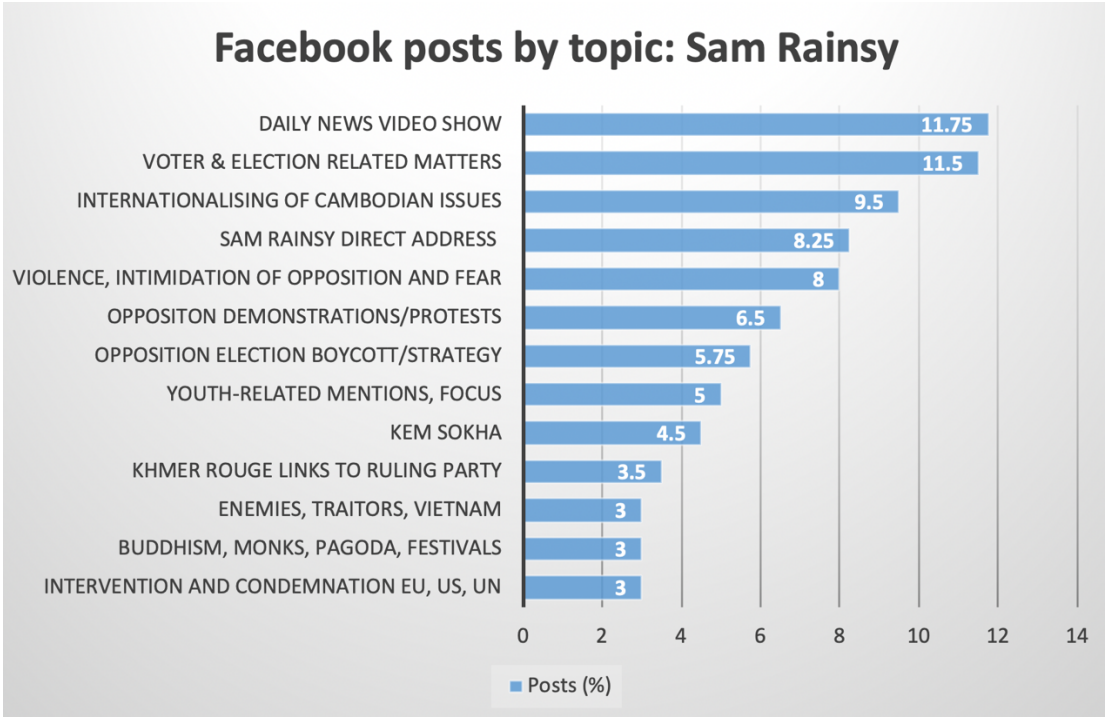


Figure 20. Posts by topics on Sam Rainsy Facebook page May 2017-July 2018

Developed further, two key themes were identified in Sam Rainsy's Facebook activity: the notion of *enemies within* Cambodian society and Sam Rainsy's *moral suitability* to leadership. Whereas Hun Sen leveraged the emotive capital of *sacrifice* alongside his *gift of peace* and the *threat of war* as a means to appeal to (and compel) old and new audiences of support, Sam Rainsy leveraged moral capital through themes associated with Buddhism as well as appeals to ethno-nationalism through themes focused on a putative enemy 'Other' within the midst of Cambodian society and politics. The theme of *enemies within* channelled traditional prejudices in Cambodian society by juxtaposing patriotic Khmers supporting the opposition and in confrontation with domestic quislings working in the interest of neighbouring Vietnam and their own self-enrichment. Posting news and information related to international criticism and condemnation of Hun Sen's government, Sam Rainsy's Facebook posts also presented a blunt counterpoint to Hun Sen's narrative of an international community approving of his government's social, economic and political direction. Sam Rainsy's *internationalisation* of Cambodian affairs was extended in the themes of *intervention and confrontation*, as evident in November 2017 when Robert Mugabe was removed from power in Zimbabwe—an opportunity for Sam Rainsy to urge for a similar confrontation in Cambodia:

> Today the population in Zimbabwe joyfully celebrate the fall of dictator Robert Mugabe who had been in power for more than 30 years. In 2018, the Cambodian

> people will similarly celebrate the fall of dictator Hun Sen, who has also been in power for more than 30 years. Like in Zimbabwe, the armed forces in Cambodia should side with the people and stop obeying order from the dictator. He is finished! (posted Nov 22, 2017)

In a post on November 20, Sam Rainsy remarked that Mugabe was removed from office when the people and armed forces stood together and, 'now the eyes of the world are fixed on Hun Sen, waiting to see when the Khmer people will force the dictator to step down like Robert Mugabe'. The twin forces of symbolic international intervention—'the eyes of the world'—and internal confrontation were also invoked in a December 17, 2017 post where Sam Rainsy, in a direct video message, appealed to the armed forces to not fire on 'innocent people who peacefully demand freedom and justice'. He wrote that his address via Facebook to the Cambodian military was necessary owing to the 'unprecedented international sanctions' that 'will make the Hun Sen regime collapse if it doesn't reverse its current repressive policy'. Assisting in the demise of the Hun Sen regime will be Cambodian people, according to Sam Rainsy, who 'must not allow Hun Sen to hold them hostage' and 'must stand up to push for democratic change and get rid of an anachronistic dictator,' he wrote.

Sam Rainsy referenced Romania, Egypt, Tunisia and Zimbabwe as examples of countries where the armed forces had stepped aside and allowed for dictators to fall without intervening. His message was that change occurs when people 'stand up' and the armed forces side 'with the people in their peaceful fight to get rid of dictators' (December 1). In the months ahead of the 2018 election and as calls were made by exiled opposition politicians for people to boycott the vote, Sam Rainsy again linked the international to the national, citing the case of elections in Venezuela in May 2017 where less than half of all registered voters participated. The boycott of the Venezuelan election had led to condemnation of the result by the international community and further sanctions, Sam Rainsy noted. Prominent also as a topic in his Facebook posts was the fear and repression being experienced by opposition supporters inside Cambodia and concerns for the safety of government critics and civil society activists. Yet, Sam Rainsy continued to attempt—remotely—to rally resistance to Hun Sen and the election as it approached in July 2018. From April 2018 onward, his posts contained plans for opposition supporters in Cambodia to boycott the election as a means to deny Hun Sen and his party the legitimacy of a well-attended vote. On April 23, Sam Rainsy declared that without the participation of the opposition party 'anyone who goes to the polls is voting just to keep Hun Sen in power'. In posts in May 2018, Sam Rainsy announced his tactic of electoral 'abstention'

as a means to remove the government. Voter abstention, he noted, is 'a strategy of passive resistance' and 'the people's most effective weapons to peacefully bring down the current dictatorship' (May 6, 2018). Staying at home on election day 'means voting in our hearts for the CNRP', he wrote (May 15). Though Hun Sen had publicly declared it illegal to discourage voting, two days before the July 29, 2018 vote, Sam Rainsy posted a call on Facebook for people to fight their fears and participate in the boycott: 'Once we win the fear, then we have the courage to not vote this Sunday' (July 27). Only voters whose lives were threatened should enter polling stations, and only then to spoil their ballots, Sam Rainsy recommended: 'But without the threat of death, don't vote!' (July 12). Counterintuitively given Hun Sen's historic repression, Sam Rainsy declared in a post on May 27, 2018: 'If we don't go to vote, what can they do against us?' A post on June 13 captured the paradox of Sam Rainsy's exhortations 'Live from Paris' for Cambodians to 'stand up' and confront the government; a disconnect between the reality on the ground for opposition supporters and the opposition leader's conceptualisation of that support from the safer distance of exile. This disconnect was evident in the latter part of July 2018 when Sam Rainsy shared the templates for more than a dozen 'electronic leaflets' featuring images and text highly critical of the government and the election process, and asked followers to reshare to make the leaflets go viral. Encouraging Facebook users in Cambodia to share such incendiary material in the fraught atmosphere of the pre-election period demonstrated the remove between the opposition leader, the situations faced by his supporters in Cambodia, and the repression faced by dissenters from an increasingly technologically adept government. As noted in Chapters 5 and 6, contrary to public spectacles of resistance, this study found that research participants engaged in a *practice of active silence* on social media as a strategic adaptation to the political context of 2018.

7.4.1 Facebook as terrain of symbolic battle between Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy

In the key themes of *enemies within* and the *moral right to leadership*, Hun Sen and members of his ruling party are set in opposition to Khmer patriots and the *moral right to leadership* that Sam Rainsy embodies. The theme of *moral right* was evident in posts related to the national religion, Buddhism, and Buddhist practices evident in Sam Rainsy's posts, such as in July 2017 when the opposition leader shared a photo from 2001 in which his head is shaved and he had briefly joined the monkhood. In the photo, Sam Rainsy is wearing saffron robes and walks with other monks on a Phnom Penh street seeking alms from the public. The text accompanying the post of the politician-as-monk calls for 'high standards of moral conduct' among government

officials (July 30). Similarly, on September 9, Sam Rainsy is featured in a photo surrounded by attentive monks with hands pressed together in supplication. In the accompanying text, the opposition leader states that he is devoted to bringing peace to Cambodians through the adherence to the Buddhist principles of tolerance and good deeds. In a January 2018 post, a Buddhist monk in France is featured explaining that the opposition party's 'mission to rescue the nation' aligns with Buddhist teaching. A claim to divinely-ordained leadership is evident in a July 2017 post where Sam Rainsy notes that attempts to erase his popularity as the 'central figure' in Cambodia would fail: 'As in any religion, legend or myth, the more you strive to kill the central figure, the more the latter remains alive and becomes more and more vibrant and popular' (July 10, 2017). The assertion of Sam Rainsy's moral fitness is attended by the theme of physical fitness. Photos and video of the exiled leader on Facebook feature him engaged in outdoor activities such as skiing, swimming, practicing yoga, driving a speedboat, and in the case of one sketched cartoon, being prevented from entering a boxing ring as a muscled pugilist to confront an overweight and gloved Hun Sen who, supported by security forces, declares 'Don't let him enter the ring' (June 14, 2017).

Enemies within as a theme in Sam Rainsy's posts presents historical continuity between Hun Sen, the Khmer Rouge regime, the Vietnamese Communist Party of the 1960s, and individuals in contemporary Cambodian politics serving Vietnamese interests. The theme posits that if Vietnamese Communists had not assisted Cambodian communists in the 1960s, the Khmer Rouge would not have come to power. If the Khmer Rouge had not come to power, neither would the current government. Therefore, at the root of what ails Cambodia is Hun Sen and Vietnam:

> Until now (2018) those who serve the interest of foreign aggressors continue to persecute Cambodian patriots—assassinating them or putting them in jail—in order to divide and weaken Cambodia so as to maintain our country under Vietnamese military and economic colonialism (January 4, 2018)

'History is actually the CPP's most critical weak spot' Sam Rainsy declares in a post on August 20, 2017, as the history of the foundation of the ruling party reveals that it was 'created, infiltrated and commanded by the Vietnamese' (August 3, 2017). Cambodia's current leaders are said to retain the mindsets of 'brutal war-mongers' and intimidation and violence are necessary for Hun Sen as he needs to maintain a permanent 'culture of war' an 'atmosphere of war' in order to discourage members of his own party joining forces with the opposition 'for the sake of our country' (July 25, 2017). There are echoes here of my proposition in Chapter 1

of contemporary politics in Cambodia being not the cessation of warfare but the continuation of warfare (Foucault 2003) by more subtle means, either as the negative corollary of the *gift of peace* in the case of Hun Sen or Sam Rainsy's *enemies within*.

Data presented in this chapter supports the contention that social media has become the *new digital terrain of an old conflict*, the site of a de-temporalised and de-spatialised symbolic struggle between the opposition leader and Hun Sen. Sam Rainsy manifests as the leader of a 'just cause' with religious sanction, and the 2018 election becomes a contest between 'true' Cambodian patriots challenging a 'traitorous party' serving a foreign power. Those choosing to participate in the 'fake election' were participating in the Hun Sen government's 'plan to kill our Motherland', according to a post on June 28, 2018. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, choices (or lack thereof) for voters ensured the election in 2018 could never be a binary proposition of voting or not voting; of choosing one side in the morality play as portrayed on Facebook, where Hun Sen presents his *gift of peace* with a *threat of war* and Sam Rainsy calls for resistance to Cambodia's *enemies within*. Findings in this study demonstrate that Facebook was a symbolic battleground between two radically different interpretations of Cambodian history and contemporary society. Co-opposition party leader Kem Sokha's Facebook page, discussed in the following section, presents an interesting counterpoint to both Sam Rainsy and Hun Sen.

7.5 Kem Sokha on social media: Promotion of 'reconciliation not revenge'

Activity on Kem Sokha's Facebook page (n=614 posts) mirrored the ebb and flow of both the election campaigns and his tribulations with authorities (Figure 21). Following Kem Sokha's imprisonment by the government in September 2017, an average of one post per day appeared on his Facebook page. A senior member of the opposition party interviewed in 2017 told how posts to Kem Sokha's page were more often the work of members of a small social media team, which were signed off by Kem Sokha before posting.

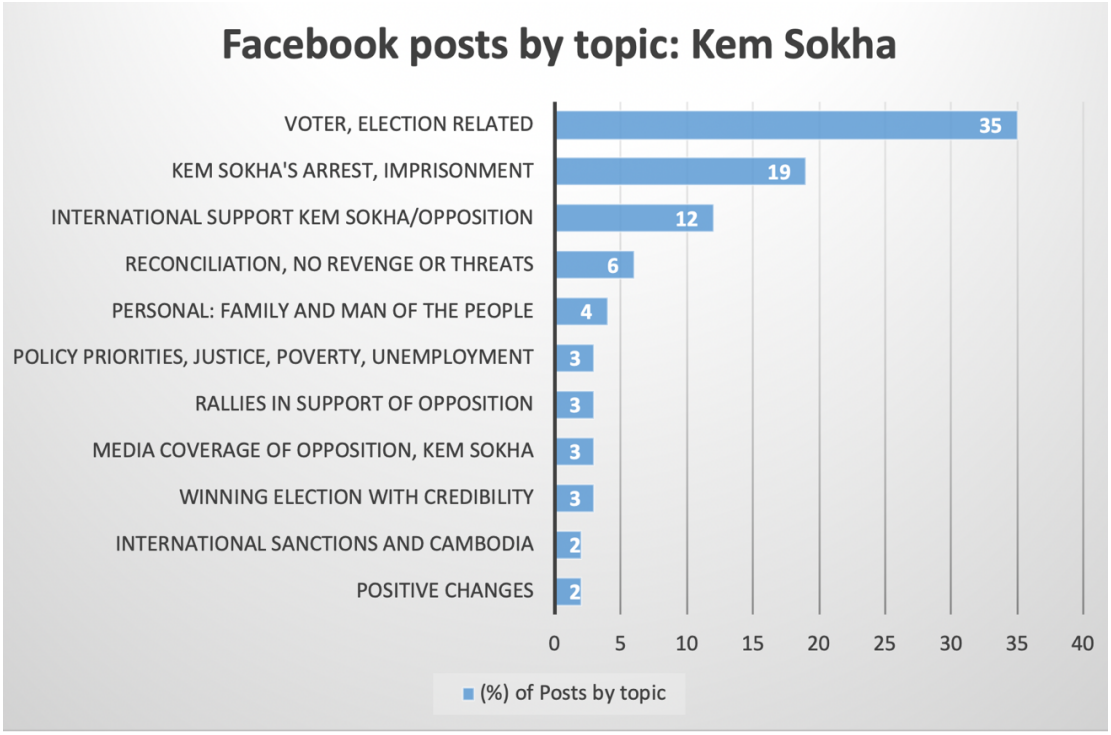


Figure 21. Posts by topic on Kem Sokha's Facebook page, May 2017-July 2018

Prior to his arrest, the most predominate topics posted to Kem Sokha's Facebook page related to voting and his participation in the local election campaign. Voting and election-related topics were followed closely by posts related to Kem Sokha's overseas visits to the Cambodian diaspora, as well as the diaspora's support for the opposition in Cambodia. Following Kem Sokha's arrest and as the 2018 national election approached, the internationalisation of Cambodian political affairs became a prominent topic. Such posts related to protests among the diaspora over Kem Sokha's arrest, international condemnation of his imprisonment, the threat of sanctions being brought against the government, and the 2018 election being considered illegitimate internationally. Noticeable also were posts that emphasised the need for reconciliation in Cambodian society and the healing of division between political partisans. Prominent were posts referring to political change being positive for society, and the need to win elections fairly. Thus, a key theme that was identified included *reconciliation not revenge*, and people being empowered through positive change, and the need to win elections with honour.

The opposition party and their supporters had adopted the word 'change' as a political mantra during the 2013 national election. Signalling an interesting modification, the precursor word 'positive' was added to posts regarding political change on Kem Sokha's Facebook page.

Rather than change being negative, the theme of *positive change* appeared to imply that transformation in Cambodia's political culture could be of net benefit rather than gross loss for those involved. The key theme of *reconciliation not revenge* was also evident in posts where voters were implored to see themselves not in terms of party supporters, but as citizens who should elevate the national interest above partisan considerations. Ahead of the 2017 local elections, posts to Kem Sokha's page called on people to 'come together' for 'positive change' and for all political parties to conduct peaceful election campaigns, free of threats and intimidation. Posts referred to 'a better future for our nation' (May 20, 2017) where people could feel secure and 'live without fear' (May 24, 2017). Countering Hun Sen's repeated warning that war could return should he lose power, Kem Sokha posted that war was far from inevitable:

> Our nation is born of Khmer division. The recent division was driven by political anger and the use of armed forces to suppress or threaten one another. Therefore, the future of Cambodia, under the leadership of the CNRP, is no war between Khmer and Khmer (May 27, 2017)

Kem Sokha's posts announced that his party was committed to no retaliation or repression of political rivals: 'No violence, no threats, no war between Khmer and Khmer' (May 30, 2017)—such themes that were strikingly different to both the peace or war theme of Hun Sen and the patriots versus traitors themes of Sam Rainsy. In the days after the June 4, 2017 local election, Kem Sokha called on his party's elected candidates to work with the representatives of other political parties 'to serve their local people' and to not discriminate based on whether someone supported the winning or losing side (June 7). A post noted that 'a new culture of mature politics' was required for the country (June 12). Kem Sokha's posts also referred to 'ending repression and reaching national reconciliation' (June 28) and of the importance of winning elections with 'honour' and not as a result of threats, intimidation, and fraud. Supporters and opposition party leaders were exhorted to maintain their 'righteousness' in order to win the 2018 national election with 'dignity', which would ensure the legitimacy of the result in the eyes of the defeated political party (June 28) as Cambodian voters wanted to see their political representatives compete in elections in a 'fair and honourable manner' (August 3, 2017).

Bourdieu is again instructive in that he views honour as a form of social capital to the extent that honour exists through repute in that others recognise certain practices and conduct as being honourable or dishonourable (1998, p. 47). Thus, when Kem Sokha's refers to winning with honour in his social media posts he, directly and indirectly, challenged Hun Sen on a symbolic

level of contest. As proposed in chapters 5 and 6, the creation, accumulation and conversion of symbolic capital was central to the repertoires of social media usage by political figures in Cambodia. Where Hun Sen had sought to accumulate emotional capital on social media, Kem Sokha leveraged the capital of honour. Similarly, the theme of *reconciliation* evident in Kem Sokha's posts does not fit comfortably with the *enemies within* theme of his opposition party colleague Sam Rainsy. Ironically, when Hun Sen ordered Kem Sokha's arrest in 2017, it was on charges of treason for planning a so-called colour revolution.

In a fateful post earlier in 2017, Kem Sokha noted how Cambodian people had greater agency and power owing to new media technology: 'Because Cambodian people have access to more information, they will make their decisions according to their will. No politician or political party can force, lure, and intimidate them' (June 1, 2017). Within a few months, however, Kem Sokha would be in jail, his party dissolved, and his colleagues and daughters forced to flee Cambodia. Similarly, Sam Rainsy noted in the same month that 'truth and justice' were concepts that social media and the internet could disseminate and instil. And owing to the affordances of information and communications technology 'nobody can prevent anybody from sharing information, opinions and ideas with a significant political impact', he wrote (June 29). However, in the case of the information affordances of social media, the situation between 2017 and 2018 in Cambodia was one where the regime did not so much constrain as encourage a form of expression—expression that decoupled social media from activism in both the digital and physical world. Mejias (2013), citing Gilles Deleuze, is instructive at this juncture in noting that 'repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves' (p. 107), which Zdebik (2012) reinterprets as 'repression is not constraint…. The forces of repression do not prevent, they encourage' (p. 38). Patterns of communication in Cambodia parallel this paradox and what Mejias describes as the fault lines in the 'logic of the network' (p. 90) where information sharing becomes the end in itself and not a means to an end of further action, and where informational abundance may actually symbolise the effectiveness of authoritarian control over the 'channels of communication'—and not the opposite (Ibid., pp. 104-105).

Conclusion

In this chapter, themes were identified and addressed in the Facebook posts of four leading political figures. The *gift of peace*, a *threat of war*, and Hun Sen's personal *sacrifice* were identified as key themes which had symbolically saved and indebted Cambodia and its people. This debt necessitated repayment in loyalty to Hun Sen, which incurred *duties and obligations* at election time—themes that, alongside *fear and opportunity*, *sanction and reward*, were also identified among research participants in Chapter 6 when explaining their social media usage and voting decisions in the 2018 national election. This chapter also described how posts on the Facebook page of Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet, appeared to mimic his father's social media presence in terms of performative intimacy and the cultivation of an emotive persona accompanied by spectacles of *gift-giving* as a means of accumulating symbolic capital, which could be converted to political capital. Hun Manet's Facebook activity differed in important ways too, such as the focus on his friendly demeanour, his physical accessibility to members of the public, and the emphasis on him posing for selfies with adoring audiences. *Political celebritisation* (Ekman and Widholm 2017) was identified as a key theme in Hun Manet's Facebook posts. Sam Rainsy's Facebook page was a platform for news and information critiquing Hun Sen and his government, and where themes involved the *internationalisation* of and *intervention* in Cambodia's political affairs. Sam Rainsy's page was also the site of a symbolic contest with Hun Sen where the exiled opposition leader's *moral right to leadership* was asserted and the dangers of *enemies within* Cambodian society were highlighted. The key themes of *moral right* and *enemies within* were based on traditional tropes of anti-Vietnamese sentiment which, as Norén-Nilsson (2016) notes, permeate contemporary Cambodian nationalism. Co-opposition leader Kem Sokha's social media posts were marked by their difference to those of his political colleague Sam Rainsy, and Hun Sen. The key themes of *reconciliation not revenge,* and *positive political change* were identified in Kem Sokha's posts and were unique in the polarised political atmosphere during the research period where social media was a terrain of symbolic struggle between political opponents and a site of persona presentation and political strategizing. Key themes identified in the Facebook posts of the political figures presented in this chapter intersected with the themes that emerged among both elite and everyday users of social media and presented in chapters 5 and 6. The intersecting strands of this research are now brought together in the next chapter, where meta themes developed over the course of this study are presented as a means to elucidate the role of social media in Cambodia's political process.

Chapter Eight

Meta-analysis of Research Findings

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter the preliminary analyses of fieldwork findings presented in chapters 5 and 6, and the analysis of Facebook activity in Chapter 7, are drawn together in a meta-analysis of the key themes that emerged in the triangulation of data from the four research methods employed as a means to answer the research questions. The objective of this chapter is to thus to provide understanding in the form of a nuanced assessment of how research participants in Cambodia used social media and the meanings attributed to such use in terms of agentic affordances and constraints, personal and public, political and social, literal and imagined. Key themes identified through in-depth interviewing and their correspondence with themes present or absent in media diaries, among focus group discussants, and in the Facebook posts of four political figures, were further analysed to develop meta themes, which are presented in this chapter and interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory and related Bourdieusian concepts.

Meta-themes	**Description**
Empty indicators	That public activity on social media was not an true indicator of personal sentiment particularly as it related to important social and political matters.
The practice of active silence	Assuming a stance of silence on social media but engaged in the accessing independent sources of news and information as a means to remain critically engaged with events.
Civic awareness	The growth in awareness regarding matter of civic and public concern owing to people remaining critically engaged with independent sources of news and information in an authoritarian context.
Illusory agency	The belief that the informational affordances of social media provided a counterweight to the hard power of authoritarian actors.
Potentiality-in-waiting	That growing civic awareness resulting from critical engagement with sources of independent news and information present a future potentiality in the context of Cambodia's authoritarian politics.

Table 6. Meta-theme and descriptions.

In Chapter 5, interviews in 2017 with influential social media users in such fields as national politics, civil society, and activism, identified the key theme of social media affording the political opposition a new channel of news and information and providing the public with *access* to *trusted and credible* sources of news and information not dominated by Hun Sen's government. For ruling party political figures, key themes such as the *performance of authenticity,* the *personalisation of politics,* and demonstration of *gift-giving* were identified in relations to social media usage. For civil society actors, key themes related to social media involved *surveillance, sanction and rewards* in terms of their concerns related to social media usage and, conversely, the opportunities it also presented. A corollary of this theme was the key theme of the *imagined affordances* of increased communication and information in challenging authoritarianism. Research participants also identified social media with the crafting and curation of online personas, of positive self-images which I addressed in terms of the accumulating and converting of species of Bourdieusian *symbolic capital*—another key theme. In Chapter 6, interviews in 2018 with everyday users of social media, the diary keeping of social media users, and a focus group discussion, inductively led to new themes and deductively identified existent themes, including themes of distrust of domestic media controlled and influenced by the government, and the value in terms of *trust and credibility* placed in independent sources of news and information made accessible by social media. The key theme of *fear and opportunity* also emerged regarding social media usage and users' repertoires of public activity on platforms in relations to particular social and political topics and contexts. Key themes identified in 2017 and 2018 indicated that social media was both a site of performance and of dissimulation, of surveillance and information access, of fear and also opportunities to be explored and exploited. *Duty and obligation* rather than choice and preference also emerged as a key theme in the reasons social media users gave for voting in the 2018 national election. In Chapter 7, themes in the Facebook posts of Hun Sen, his son Hun Manet, opposition leader Sam Rainsy, and his colleague in opposition political leadership Kem Sokha, provided insights regarding the political and personal narrative woven on social media. Themes included Hun Sen's personal *sacrifice*, his *gift of peace* to Cambodia, and the *threat of war* should his power be removed. The key theme of *political celebritisation* of Hun Manet was evident in the construction of an online political persona that was non-intimidating, physically accessible to the public, and popular. Sam Rainsy's focus on *enemies within* and his *moral* suitability to leadership contrasted with the conciliatory theme identified in the posts on Kem Sokha's Facebook page, such as *reconciliation not revenge* and *positive political change*.

8.2 Developing meta-themes from key themes

In Chapter 4 (Figure 2), the progression of topics and themes from preliminary stages of thought through to key themes are presented. Developing the key themes further, several original insights emerged in the form of meta-themes that allowed greater conceptualisation and deeper understanding of the social, historical and political processes involved in social media usage in Cambodia. The *practice of active silence,* a meta-theme*,* demonstrates how public activity on social media was for everyday users an *empty indicator,* another meta-theme, of their true social and political sentiments in that research participants were actively present but publicly silent, strategically, on networking platforms. It is proposed that people engaged in a *practice of active silence* on social media as a means to conceal critical social and political opinions, which were simultaneously nurtured through accessing independent sources of news media and information that were largely unavailable to a large audience in Cambodia prior to the popularising of social media. Among both elite and everyday users of social media, there was also what I describe as investment in an *illusory agency,* also a meta-theme*,* regarding the politically-transformative potential of social media technology. *Illusory agency* develops the concept of *imagined affordances* (Nagy and Neff 2015) of social media in terms of a belief in access to increased flows of information and communication as a means to affect socio-political change in an authoritarian context. The meta-theme of *illusory agency* manifested in research participants reporting that social media had changed Cambodian society in terms of forcing greater accountability from authorities. However, for all the purported change, Cambodian society had in fact regressed in terms of democratic accountability in 2018, and everyday users of social media were increasingly fearful of engaging publicly on social media in 2018 compared to 2017.

Though social media did not affect significant socio-political change during the period of this research, it is proposed that a longer-term transformation may be underway in Cambodian society. Social media has afforded access to sources of news media and information not previously available, which has led to levels of increased personal awareness and critical observation of society neither experienced nor possible for any previous generation. Thus, increased *civic awareness,* a meta-theme, has emerged in the curtailed political environment of authoritarian Cambodia owing to an interest in and access to independent sources of news and information. Consequently, to understand the role of social media in Cambodia's political process requires consideration of a final meta-theme in terms of what could yet be—a

potentiality-in-waiting resulting from increased *civic awareness*. In the following sections, key themes are discussed as a conceptual route to understanding of this study's meta-themes including the proposition that a *potentially-in-waiting* has been born of increased *civic awareness* and what that may mean for Cambodian society.

8.3 Mediated witnessing and *civic awareness*

A key theme that emerged in interviews with research participants involved the mediating role of social media as it afforded access to *trusted and credible* sources of news and information not controlled by government, state media, and business elites who collaborate with, profit from, and are subservient to the ruling party. Social media had from the election period of 2013 onward shattered the government's control over the flow of information and news. A key finding in this research was the value of social media platforms in accessing the work of traditional news media organisations on Facebook. Data from 2018 presented in Chapter 6 shows that 89% of 28 interviewees used social media to access news media, the majority of which emanated from traditional news entities with a social media presence; 71% of research participants interviewed told of preferring to access news media organisations not controlled by the government or media entities supporting a pro-government position. Research participants with differing political allegiances and from different demographic groupings attested to social media's value in unlocking access to independent sources of news and information, which had deleterious consequences for the credibility and authority of Cambodia's pro-government broadcast media. The selective reality sustained by domestic broadcast media was destabilised by social media's mediation of social and political contestation, such as rallies, demonstrations and protests, and the violence inflicted on peaceful protesters by state authorities. Mostly small-scale public protests had occurred prior to the popularisation of social media and were largely ignored in media coverage. The popularising of social media, however, allowed access to richly-mediated depictions and accounts of contentious social issues such as deforestation and the forced evictions of the poor from their land in urban and rural areas. Sounds, images and video not controlled by the state circulated with a growing audience on social media platforms. Research participants told in Chapter 5 how domestic television's loss of popularity was due to the disjunction between the unreality of national broadcasting compared with contentious social events, known on a personal basis but now made accessible to a growing audience by social media. The demise of the state's

monopoly over information resulted from the access that social media afforded to counter-narratives, which encouraged more critical appraisal of societal realities. The situation was described by one research participant in terms of traditional domestic media inflicting self-harm through its adherence to propaganda. This study found that peaceful demonstrations and the violent suppression of such protests by authorities was recounted as among the most emotive examples of information and news afforded access by social media. Interviewees recounted how contentious events in Cambodian society were rendered tangible and accessible via networking platforms. This included, as addressed in Chapter 5, illegal logging of forests, rural evictions (land grabbing) by the powerful, and the activism of groups such as the Boeng Kak lake protesters—a community group comprising primarily of women fighting their eviction from what had become valuable real estate in the capital. Growing awareness of social injustice in the moving images and sounds mediated by social media platforms was a theme that emerged among research participants, one of whom described in 2017 the feeling that 'their country' was 'in danger' based on the information available on social media. (Interviewee 7, Table 1).

Being a witness to evidence of injustice speaks to the assertion by John Ellis (2009) that the broadcast of moving images transforms citizens into the witnesses of their era, and the weight of bearing witness to the events of our time producing a 'sense of responsibility' in the witness. Luc Boltanski (1999) similarly addresses the role of media in making known the 'distant suffering' of others, though he also notes a 'crisis of pity' (p. xvi) that can accompany mediated suffering and proposes that a commitment to action starts with voice—'someone who speaks to somebody else about what they have seen'. Thus, voice must progress to avoid it remaining 'merely verbal' (Ibid.)—the progression from spectator to witness. Whereas mediated witnessing may be commonplace in societies accustomed to more unfettered forms of news media and information access. In Cambodia, social media allowed the first, widely accessible and richly mediated witnessing of contentious politics not authored or editorialised by government influence. Paddy Scannell (2018) notes that 'witnessing is a claim to truth' and events for witnesses not only involve different meanings, but '*are* different things'—and people may also bear false witness. Data in this study suggests that the popularising of social media and the ensuing access to new information flows—images, sounds, video, text—were unprecedented in creating new witnesses in Cambodia to social injustices and contentious politics. Ellis proposes that 'awareness is the first element of the experience of witness' (2009, p. 83), which induces a sense of cognitive involvement and acquaintanceship that does not

demand action but does call for 'both empathy and analysis'. As Zuckerman (2020) notes in Chapter 2, new streams of information made available by new technology such as digital cameras are only efficacious when harnessed to power. Thus, while the affordance of information technology alone may be unable to stop an abuse of power, what information is capable of achieving is increasing a collective awareness of abuse of power—and it is people made aware, in their 'shock' and 'outrage', who may 'mobilize…to demand systemic change'—the social at the centre of the technological—which Zuckerman proposes 'is the reason to keep filming'. Considering Ellis' proposal that the awareness born of witnessing is a phenomenon of mass broadcast news, a position that Ellis likely considered in the context of Western developed societies, then the consequences of mass witnessing should be considered significantly intensified in the context of authoritarian Cambodia where state-dominated broadcast media for generations eschewed negative portrayals of authority—a situation that changed radically with the popularising of social media. For example, the assassination of political analyst and government critic Dr. Kem Ley in 2016 (Peter and Ouch 2016) saw him in death 'exalted and reduced' in ways similar to what Kraidy (2016) describes as posthumous 'mythical status' through the collective experience of his murder and ensuing nationwide mourning mediated through social media. Kem Ley became a symbol of martyred heroism. Images of his slain body circulated widely on social media and viewers became 'witness to injustice and the breathing clamour for dignity' (Kraidy 2016, p. 19). The assassination was met with revulsion and propelled Kem Ley—a casualty of politics-as-war presented in Chapter 1—to the status of 'icon of democracy', according to Norén-Nilsson and Bourdier (2019). As many as two million people were estimated to have participated in Kem Ley's funeral procession (Norén-Nilsson 2019) and with no real coverage by domestic broadcast media of the funeral (Mech and Handley 2016), social media was the platform for the sharing and recording of this national expression of sorrow (Niem 2016). Kem Ley's death echoes in ways the experience of Neda Agha-Soltan, a female protester killed during Iran's Green Movement protests in 2009. As addressed in Chapter 2, Rajabi (2015) writes of social media transforming the moment of Neda's death into a political memory with the power to alter national consciousness and identity. Social media became the site of Neda's re-memorialisation that allowed for the 'act of bearing witness' (Rajabi 2015, p. 243) to occur, and for the creation and redefinition of collective memory and social consciousness in a 'third space' of commemoration and contestation that gave 'voice to the silence that emanates from' Iran (Ibid.). Social media served a similar function of mediated witnessing in Cambodia where official sensitivity over Kem Ley's memory remains and was demonstrated on the third

anniversary of his killing in 2019 when police arrested a youth activist who had simply produced t-shirts bearing the image of the slain analyst's face (United Nations 2019). The experience of 'bearing witness' was also compellingly evoked by female research participants in Chapter 5 who told of finding a sense of 'voice' in engagement with society and social issues through digital authorship, even when disguised. While the projecting of voice was increasingly curtailed between 2017 and 2018, the 'authorial subjectivity' (Siapera 2008) of research participants such as the female social media users in Chapter 5 continued, though in silence. This was, however, an *active silence* with concomitant judgements, evaluations, thoughts and actions that were self-instituted and self-assessed—what Hannah Arendt describes as the dialogue that arises in solitude, 'because even in solitude there are always two' (Arendt cited in Brinkerhoff, 2012) and which echoes Albert Camus' stance that 'silence in not a negative position' (Blackman 2020).

8.4 *The practice of active silence* as a small act of engagement

This study found everyday users of social media in 2018 no longer commented openly on political matters and many no longer shared material out of concern for possible repercussions should something shared be considered contentious by authorities. Innocuous posts such as liking a friend's photo or sending birthday wishes continued in public on social media. In private, social media was valued for providing access to independent sources of news media and information as a means of what I propose in the meta-theme of enhancing *civic awareness*. Data from media diaries in Chapter 6 similarly suggests that public commentary on sensitive topics on social media was circumscribed in 2018, yet the value of being civically aware was also found among the diary keepers who reported that social issues were among their most interesting topics on Facebook (See Figure 10). Such issues included household poverty, domestic violence, land grabbing from the poor, and the hardship for workers in the country's garment factories. However, asked what topics they had commented on during the week of their dairy keeping exercise, almost 35% of diary keepers who responded noted that it was on matters of a personal nature on social media (Figure 14) such as remarking on family or friends. Commenting on topics of news and politics accounted for less than 5% of responses. This discrepancy in terms of personal interest in social issues though only publicly commenting on personal matters, suggests the difference in public and private practices that were also evident among interviewees and focus group participants: Research participants consumed social and political issues but commented on personal matters. This observation has implications for

understanding the role of social media in Cambodia's political process, which for interviewee in 2018 was marked more by absence than by presence of what many might consider observable political activity and debate. However, as addressed in Chapter 3, what constitutes engagement with 'the political' in Cambodia requires a contextual understanding. Identifying forms of political participation requires consideration of the 'intentions and aims of citizens', as noted by van Deth (2014, p. 362), which chimes with Frangie's (2009) Bourdieusian interpretation of the possibility of political action being located, firstly, in 'the ways social agents perceive and comprehend the social world'. Political participation emanates from reflexivity and socio-analysis that alters established modes of vision and division of the social world, and the conditions for political change beginning with 'change in one's worldview' (p. 218).

Findings in this study indicate that news media was not just consumed but was engaged with critically and historically by research participants, analogous to the proposal by Siapera et. al. (2019) that audiences position themselves in the social world through the appropriation of certain media forms and based on life experiences. The suggestion that social media afforded valued news media access and also increased civic awareness in Cambodia is in keeping with research by Boulianne (2016) regarding the influence of online news on engagement in political life. Though based on a study of Canadian students, Boulianne's findings are instructive in that news media consumed through social networking sites was not found to have a direct effect on political engagement but did have 'a strong and significant relationship with civic awareness' (p. 1848), and such awareness developed through access to 'news sources can contribute toward building the knowledge required to engage in civic and political life' (Ibid. p. 1853). Data presented in Chapter 6 regarding the 2018 national election suggests that social media did not facilitate direct political engagement. However, the *practice of active silence* and nurturing *civic awareness* through informational access was evident and could be argued to amount to 'small acts of engagement' (Picone et al., 2019)—acts that do not reach the level of produsage (Bruns 2008) yet involve the user's energy and investment 'relative' to their 'capacities', such as continuing to access independent news and information in an authoritarian context. Small acts require the researcher's gaze to move from observable traces on social media to the 'diversity and nuances hidden behind something seemingly small, as well as their potential for resistance' (Ibid., p. 2019) (Scott 1989, 1990). The value of activities not seen on platforms was noted (Markham and Gammelby 2018) in Chapter 5 in that absences contain valuable components of communication, such as engaged 'non-actions'; the not visibly

observable acts such as, thinking, and 'listening, interpreting, sitting with, being with, changing one's mind about the content of digital media' (Ibid., 2018, p. 452). This study posits that public activity on social media in 2018 was often an *empty indicator* (meta-theme) of users true sentiments which required the researcher to consider secreted and surreptitious small acts of engagement, such as *the practice of active silence*, which allowed social media users to self-position as witnesses, through 'investment and intention' (Picone et. al. 2019) in news media witnessing (Ellis 2009).

Participants in this study bore silent witness as their opportunities to publicly testify to what was witnessed, either online or offline, were stifled in 2018. The need to internalise civic awareness was attested to by three female factory workers in Chapter 6 who described a process of remaining quiet about being informed through news and information accessed on social media: 'I know about it, but I keep it in my mind', said one; 'We just keep it to ourselves, that's enough…we just keep ourselves informed', said another. That social media assisted in building subjective civic awareness (a form of empowerment) by affording the experience of witnessing (Ellis 2009) resonates with the theme of finding 'voice' for female social media users in Chapter 5. Growing civic awareness resulting from mediated witnessing does not, however, directly challenge existing power structures. Rather, the meta-themes of growing *civic awareness* engendered a *potentiality-in-waiting*—the self as a site of cognitive contestation with potential for resistance in a repressive society.

8.5 Social media and *Illusory Agency* as Meta-Theme

This study identified the meta-theme of *illusory agency,* which extended the concept of imagined affordances of social media (Nagy and Neff 2015) in terms of a belief in increased information and communication being capable of delivering more democratic accountability. *Illusory agency* was evident in the belief that critical mass on social media could animate a reform response by authorities and, eventually, a more democratic society. Research participants in chapters 5 and 6 told how state authorities were unable to insulate themselves from public opinion owing to social media, which had led to reforms resulting from the need of authorities to assuage a youthful, online public—the most remarked on case being Hun Sen's amending of a traffic law in 2016. Presenting an optimistic perspective on the 'everyday politics' of micro-activism by Cambodian youth and their Facebooking activities, the work of Vong and Hok (2018) presented in Chapter 2 argues persuasively that social media has

animated government responses to issues acquiring viral prominence on networked platforms. The authors, alas, reserve caution for their final paragraphs in acknowledging that government responses to online micro-activism 'may simply be quick fixes that paper over deep-seated institutional and structural challenges' (2018, p. 231). The latest iteration of social media's viral power influencing reforms in Cambodia was evident in Vorn and Ly's (2020) pilot survey of 150 Facebook users in determining how the platform could promote better governance in Cambodia, also presented in Chapter 2. Reading against Vorn and Ly's somewhat optimistic interpretation of data, I would argue that their survey findings demonstrate not the ability but the limits of Facebook to promote governance or substantive reform, as the instances offered in their report where public pressure on Facebook elicited a government response were related to mundane matters, such as the cleaning of a dirty road, and an official being removed from his position—though he was promoted shortly after to a higher position by Hun Sen. Though 95% of respondents in the Vorn and Ly's survey believed that government must listen to citizens, the majority thought the government does not listen. As the authors note, though under emphasise, complaints from citizens on Facebook that government officials do respond to depend 'on the scale of the problems' and those 'linked to politics or the affairs of powerful governmental officials might not be resolved effectively' (2020, p. 119). Nevertheless, the authors conclude in the imagining of Facebook as a means for citizens 'to hold their government to account'.

That social media was unable to slow, stem or cushion Cambodia's rapid authoritarian turn since 2017 speaks to the continuing appeal of social media's *illusory agency,* and to the salience of Gunitsky's (2015) argument that the expression of sentiments on social media by members of the public allows regimes to respond, selectively, to crises. Such targeting of individual issues followed by sectional reforms by regimes reduces pressure for fundamental structural change. Hun Sen's approach, as noted in Chapter 2, mirroring China's control of online activity by curation in mobilising support for sanctioned issues (Zheng 2014, pp. 95-96) and silencing those threatening the state's fundamental interests. Hughes and Eng (2018) similarly argue that increased circulation of news and information afforded by ICTs in Cambodia has not resulted in the physical 'emergence of an emancipatory sphere of protest'. However, the authors valuably contribute to an understanding of the repertoires of online political activity in terms of a 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat 2013) by Cambodia's marginalised on cyber space, which may have future implications for electoral politics. Their proposition that information regarding key social struggles reached rural areas only largely due to social media plays a little to the

mythology of social media and overlooks the long established and important role of radio in Cambodia, particularly channels such as the popular US-backed Khmer-language entities of *Radio Free Asia*, *Voice of America*, and local radio broadcasting by civil society groups. This study supplements Hughes and Eng's highlighting of the 'quiet' in Cambodian political space through the meta-theme of *active silence* as a small act of engagement that might go unnoticed compared to the spectacle of protests. Yet, which may have valuable accumulative potential.

Further supporting the meta-theme of the *illusory agency* of online micro-activism, research participants in 2018 no longer expressed their true sentiments openly on social media for fear of reprisal, which negated the informational affordances of such platforms as a means of 'everyday politics'. Social media users who participated in this study rarely expressed opinions openly on social media and, therefore, authorities had little to respond to in terms of micro-activism. Government officials did respond to social media's amplification of social issues, though selectively and arbitrarily, and the condition of virality alone did not automatically engender a government response, particularly on central, structural issues such as the continued existence of an opposition party, the holding of credible election in 2018, or finding credible justice and identifying those behind the assassination of Dr. Kem Ley in 2016—his killing and funeral being amongst the most viral of social media stories ever in Cambodia. Thus, the meta-theme of *illusory agency* was evident among interviewees who felt that Cambodian society had undergone 'unbelievable' changes. However, beyond ease of access to information and new modes of communication with friends and family, research participants often struggled to identify what had improved when asked to specifically identify particular socio-political changes resulting from social media. This chimes with Nagy and Neff's (2015) joining of imagination and technology in a socio-technical relationship and the 'expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge' (p. 1). Thus, to think about technology requires thinking about not only what it is, but also what is imagined of technology by those who use it, and in terms of 'their fears, their expectations, and their uses' (Ibid., p. 4). The meta-theme of *illusory agency* captures the contradictory sense of social media as enhancing a sense of transformation, of personal freedom, while individual users curtailed their engagement with social media platforms owing to fears and concerns over monitoring and surveillance by authorities.

Hun Sen co-opted and invested in social media as a central strategy for countering the opposition party and increasing his personal appeal with young voters. And yet, the prime

minister was compelled to revert from technology to more traditional tactics—his 'resort to the political thuggery of the past' (Hughes 2015, p. 15)—to secure victory in the 2018 national election. The theme of *illusory agency* again elucidates Hun Sen's investment in the political efficacy of social media while his actions and those of his authorities (banning the opposition party, arresting critics, etc.) reveal the intuitive cognisance that the putative 'effects' of social media are not assured i.e. that dominating social media platforms could determine an election outcome. *Illusory agency* is apparent in the contradictions of belief, practice and outcomes regarding social media platforms. Thus, the affordances of social media require nuanced consideration and conceptualisation in the case of Cambodia where growth in *civic awareness* born of social media witnessing equates to small acts of engagement 'which, on an aggregate level, have the potential to become powerful acts of resistance' (Picone et al., 2019, p. 2011)—in that a *potentiality-in-waiting* (meta-theme) is existent within Cambodia society.

The following section will address the symbolism (analysed as themes) resident in the social media posts of the four political leaders included in this study. As Hun Sen wielded the greatest hard power offline alongside efforts to cultivate softer political capital online, special focus is given to his activities on social media.

8.6 Social media and the battle of symbolic representation

Key themes that emerged in this research suggest that social media platforms were equated with weapons of symbolic representation; a new arena of political conflict, as described in Chapter 5 and 6, where some cultivated symbolic capital and popularity, and others lost approval and possibly suffered the consequences for their online activities, including intimidation, imprisonment, loss of employment, ostracization from social circles. Symbolic representation was constructed and contested on social media, and the creation, accumulation and conversion of symbolic capital emerged as a key theme among members of three political parties interviewed in 2017 and presented in Chapter 5. Symbolic capital accumulated online was believed capable of conversion into political capital offline in terms of building personal popularity and, ultimately, mobilising electoral support. Data in this study suggest that social media platforms were sites of performance for political leaders (Stanyer 2013; Metz et al., 2020) and everyday people (*the practice of active silence*) as well as stages for symbolic capital creation, and the reinvention and recalibration of new political personas that were more

emotive (Illouz 2007), more family orientated, more friendly and publicly accessible, and more morally worthy of leadership.

Interviewees told how Hun Sen had created a more accessible and emotive identity through his Facebook page, repositioning from self-styled 'Strong Man' ruler (Mehta and Mehta 1999) to what was described during fieldwork as the 'Facebook prime minister' who embodied a message of traditional family values in the many photos posted to his page of relaxed moments with his family, particularly his grandchildren. We can see in Cambodia what has occurred in the West in terms of what Williams and Delli Carpini (2010) describe as the porous boundaries between hard news and genres of entertainment; the hybridization (Chadwick 2013) of political communication through online technology which has injected 'familiar genres and routines into new and unfamiliar information environments' (p. 13), and, as addressed in Chapter 2, marketing and branding strategies informing on the practice of politics (Savigny and Temple 2010; Stanyer 2013; Scammell 2015). With social media we witness the strategic transformation of a threatening authoritarian leader into an accessible and emotional political persona online; secrecy and security are traded for a new proclivity for taking selfies with his grandchildren. This study proposes that Hun Sen focused on the creation of emotional capital and his newly acquired displays of emotional tonality on social media were designed to earn new political capital among a younger generation of online voters. This suggestion is in keeping with Papacharissi's (2015, 2015a) work on affective communication building bonds on social media among counter-publics. Though in the case of Hun Sen, affect was co-opted for regime enhancement. Illouz (2007) argues that emotional capital is more potent than other species of capital as emotions connect directly to the pre-reflexive aspect of an audience. Hun Sen's transition from domination of traditional broadcast media to social media as his primary means to connect with audiences has removed temporal and spatial constraints on his mediated interactions. As Hughes (2006) notes, traditional broadcast media depictions of Hun Sen's relationship with the public in the early 2000s portrayed an 'easy camaraderie with villagers' that were 'superficially personal and friendly' (p. 475). Donning a traditional peasant scarf (kroma), Hun Sen would be featured reminiscing 'companionably with villagers about the old days'. Such interactions, however, were 'highly stage-managed', according to Hughes, and Hun Sen was not considered part of local affairs by local people. Despite his claims to humble origins, Hun Sen was considered a member of the upper echelons whose 'traversals of the nation in his helicopter put him outside the scope of village-based interactions' (p. 476); Hun

Sen was a leader who descended occasionally to intervene in local affairs before departing again by air.

This study proposes that the crafting of a new persona on social media has allowed Hun Sen to be both a member of the upper echelons and also the rural 'local boy' to which Hughes refers. Photos on Hun Sen's Facebook page portray a local-ness, such as Hun Sen tending a vegetable garden in the grounds of his mansion and inspecting the harvest with his wife. On social media he is also the grandfather who wears a vest t-shirt while relaxing at home with his grandchildren; and he is the prime minister who takes time out at international fora to take selfies and post messages to his followers telling how much he is looking forward to returning home and how much he achieved while away. Until the popularising of social media around 2013, pro-ruling party broadcasters were ascendant in the mediation of Hun Sen, which was dictated temporally by broadcasting scheduled and spatially by the prime minister's scheduled appearances. With social media, Hun Sen's audience now travels with him, temporally, spatially, and, importantly, emotionally. From the official functions of his political office to visiting the beach with his family, Hun Sen's newly-mediated space on social media has allowed him to craft a newly accessible and emotive persona that was not possible with traditional broadcast media. Through social media, Hun Sen no longer leaves his audience in the wake of his helicopter rotor blades as he departs from an event in rural Cambodia—social media users are also always along for the ride. This desire for proximity to his audience was noted in Chapter 2 in Young's (2021) observation that Hun Sen has attempted through social media to 'connect himself closer to the imaginations of the Cambodian population' (p. 7).

Key themes identified in Hun Sen's Facebook activity (see Figure 16) included his personal *sacrifice*, *peace as a gift* bestowed on Cambodia and, conversely, *the threat of war* the country still faced. The contrasting narrative of peace or war was evident in the prominence of topics such as *economic development, prosperity, and progress* in Hun Sen's Facebook posts (14% of posts studied) and topics related to *peace and stability* (10%), *war, conflict and turmoil* (4%), and the *Khmer Rouge/Pol Pot period* (3%). The theme of *peace and development* was also identified among interviewees in 2017/18, and the potential for conflict should Hun Sen not be re-elected. The prime minister's *gift of peace*, thus, involves a debt owed by Cambodian society for his *sacrifice* and the *threat of war* should people disregard or deny what is owed by a nation that Hun Sen constantly reminds has benefited so much from his *gift*. Such insights are supported by Eng and Hughes' (2017, p. 407) observation that Hun Sen's ruling party were

'invoking the fears of political instability and war in case of an electoral defeat' in 2017, and Bourdieu's conception of the gift as a 'misfortune' that creates bonds of debt and reciprocity (1997, p. 231). Through a Bourdieusian lens, Hun Sen's *gift of peace* has become a 'game of exchanges' that 'constitutes an irrevocable link' between donor and receiver with 'freedoms and obligations' (Mauss 1966, pp. 58-66).

8.7 Hun Sen, social media, and Bourdieu's 'charismatic illusion'

Bourdieu's (1985) concepts of 'social magic' and 'charismatic illusion' assists in further developing the key themes of *sacrifice*, the *gift of peace*, and *threat of war* evident in Hun Sen's Facebook posts. Through the 'social magic' of transubstantiation, according to Bourdieu, something or someone becomes more than they actually are; where a 'mandated representativeness' transforms the representative into the embodiment of 'the group being represented'. In the process of transubstantiation, the representative comes to see themselves as the embodiment of the group and 'for the group, to speak and act as if he *were* the group made man' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 740). Taken to extreme, the charismatic illusion culminates with the representative, a prime minister for example, becoming the sign that replaces the actual group represented and, in the process, he or she who speaks for the group appears to 'himself or herself and others as causa sui'—the cause of itself; the representative becomes 'an entirely real substitute for an entirely symbolic being' (Ibid.). Bourdieu speaks of the charismatic illusion of the minister, the bishop, the union leader, who comes to identify as, and is identified with, 'the People', 'the Nation', 'the Church', 'the Party' (Ibid.). Based on findings from this research, it is proposed that Hun Sen has transubstantiated from political leader to his own personification of the nation—*l'etat c'est moi*; an embodiment of state and self that David Chandler (2019) argues has been present in previous Cambodian rulers as 'proprietor, progenitor and embodiment of the kingdom'. Hun Sen through personal *sacrifice* has undergone the process of transubstantiation—from the personal to the material manifestation of the nation. Hun Sen's *gifting* of *peace and development* to Cambodia is attended by the potential *threat of war* as the Cambodian nation is indebted to his sacrifice in 'saving' the nation. To avoid conflict, none but Hun Sen can be leader as contemporary peace and prosperity is his gift to Cambodia and he demands repayment of his gift with loyalty. In Cambodia's symbolic debt-bondage to Hun Sen, temporal limits such as five-year electoral cycles hold little legitimacy. This research also found that the themes of *peace and development*, *war and*

conflict, *loyalty and obligation* were evident in the media diaries, the focus group discussion, and among interviewees.

Habitus, as Bourdieu (1990) proposes, 'makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production' (p. 55) and the condition of habitus provides an explanatory foundation for Hun Sen's current logic of social media practice and the persistence of peace or war themes. Joining the Khmer Rouge movement aged 18 in 1970, Hun Sen's earliest habitus was informed by experiences in the field of revolutionary warfare. When doxa is the intuition born of experience and the unconscious dispositions that sediment as everyday opinions and practices (Deer 2014) then, for a habitus forged by the experience of warfare, the rules of the game (doxa) of politics will arguably be influenced by forms of battle. The authoritarian nature of Hun Sen's more than 30 years in power testify to his survivalist doxa in the political realm, where competitors and critics are jailed, banished, and where some have met more final ends. Foucault (2003) recognised the pre-modern in the modern in terms of politics not being an end but the continuation of a more sophisticated form of warfare in the contemporary state, as addressed in Chapter 1. Bourdieu also viewed the modern political realm as an evolution from the dynastic to the bureaucratic, and cautioned that modern states still, fundamentally, act in ways similar to traditional societies, though their 'surface structures have to evolve to reflect modern discourses' (Grenfell 2014, p. 253). Though Cambodia has been at peace for more than two decades, Hun Sen remains dispositioned toward the practice of politics as a field of tangible conflict where symbolic weapons are wielded in the first order and material force is threatened in the second—this is a 'negative peace' as Brickell (2020) similarly argues.

Themes identified in the Facebook posts of Hun Manet mirror his father's (see Figure 17). As heir-apparent to Hun Sen's power legacy, Hun Manet's Facebook activity mimic thematic tropes identified in Hun Sen's online activity, including the leveraging of emotional capital, displays of gift-giving, and the posing for many selfies with the public. The key theme of *political celebritisation* (Ekman and Widholm 2017) was evident in the construction of Manet's public persona on social media, which endeavoured to present and promote his personal authenticity, his physical amiability, and tactile accessibility by members of the public. Mimesis (Bourdieu 1990) was presented in Chapter 5 in terms of Hun Sen co-opting the social media practices of the opposition and another process of mimesis appeared evident in the social media strategy of Hun Manet vis-à-vis his father. It would appear that the

construction of a Hun Manet persona that closely mirrors his father on social media is part of a dynastic succession strategy; the mediated transfer of symbolic capital via social media in the conversion of emotive capital to political capital and a precursor to the transfer of real power between father and son one day.

8.8 Sam Rainsy, Kem Sokha and key themes of opposition

Creation and conversion of symbolic capital was also evident in the Facebook posts of both opposition party leaders: Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. In the case of Sam Rainsy (Figure 20), key themes related to ethno-nationalism and threats to the Cambodian state were framed in terms of Hun Sen's ruling party as *enemies within* whose loyalty was allegedly to neighbouring Vietnam. In contrast, the theme of Sam Rainsy's *moral right* to leadership was evident in posts that connected him with the religious symbolism of Buddhism. The theme of spiritual and physical suitability to leadership was also asserted in the promotion on social media of Sam Rainsy's physical exercise routines, including swimming and winter skiing in Europe. Sam Rainsy's symbolic claims to virtuous leadership on his Facebook page contrasted with the suspect patriotism of Hun Sen. Norén-Nilsson (2016) notes that contemporary nationalism in Cambodia has manifested in an near exclusive anti-Vietnamese focus, and those on the democratic spectrum of opposition politics campaign on purporting to rescue a 'victimised' and 'ailing' nation from the grip of foreign interference. While such themes were evident in the Facebook posts of Sam Rainsy, there was a notable absence of racialised, nationalistic tropes in the Facebook activity of fellow opposition leader Kem Sokha. Key themes such as *reconciliation not revenge* among competing political forces in Cambodia and framing political *change as positive* were prominent on Kem Sokha's Facebook page (Figure 21)—themes which contrasted with the peace or war message of Hun Sen, and the ethno-nationalistic denunciations of Sam Rainsy.

This study identified strategies by which political actors sought to co-opt the 'common sense' to their agendas 'by appropriating the words that are invested with value by the whole group because they are the repositories of its belief' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 743). Thus, the power of naming—the 'capacity to make entities exist in the explicit state' by making public that which did not previously exist (Ibid., p. 729)—was employed by Hun Sen against his critics, and by Sam Rainsy against the prime minister and the ruling party. Hun Sen employed symbols and

language imbued with deep historical and cultural resonance—peace, gifts, war, foreign interference, treason and sovereignty, and Sam Rainsy appropriated the symbol of *enemies within* and a rapacious Vietnam—themes that are a lightning rod for xenophobia and militant nationalism. Through social media, Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy engaged in a 'demonology' of naming (Glassman 2011) in a contest of symbolic representation where the authority to name was an instrument of power and a form of domination, which created hierarchies whose reproduction, socially and historically, is the symbolic expression of violence (Schubert 2014, p. 179).

This study posits that Hun Sen, in particular, created a new social media persona that was both warm and threatening, pleasant and dangerous. Social media conveyed Hun Sen's messages that both liberated and imprisoned people with his *gift of peace* and a reminder that such a debt can never be fully repaid. New technological affordances of surveillance and monitoring also worked in tandem with Hun Sen's older tactics of using a politicised judiciary and security forces to silence his opponents. Key themes such as *fear and opportunity, sanction and reward* that emerged in interviews with social media users in chapters 5 and 6 also suggested resonance with Hun Sen's themes of *sacrifice, peace, development,* and *war.* These themes are now explored in terms of voting decisions in the 2018 national election.

8.9 Voting in 2018: *Fear*, *Reward, Duty and Obligation* as Meta-Themes

Key themes of *fear and opportunity, duty and obligation* emerged among research participants in their description of social media usage and of platforms as sites of crafted versions of interests, opinions and views. Research participants told of the *fear* of engaging in activity on social media deemed to not align with the government, and of the *opportunity* that presented in terms of maintaining membership in communities of interests and friendship. Assessment of the opportunity cost of using social media involved, primarily, protecting personal security and economic interests of family and relatives. Consideration was also made of the potential impact that expression of dissenting views might have on the feelings and emotions of others in social circles and among friends. This study suggests that considerations of the key themes of *fear and opportunity*, *surveillance*, *sanction and reward*—personal and professional—shaped the conscious and unconscious social media repertoires of research participants. Themes of *fear*, *reward* and *duty and obligation* were also present in terms of research participants' decisions

to vote in or abstain from the 2018 national election, and the role social media played in that decision-making. This study found that motivation to participate in the election included those who did not want to vote but voted owing to a cognisance of their need to be seen voting owing to current and future position-taking in social and economic fields, particularly in terms of safeguarding employment and the economic safety of family, access to future opportunities (promotion), and keeping within circles of friends and valued acquaintances. There was a *common sense-ness* in supporting the established political order that motivated some who told of their *obligation* to choose a leader who could 'develop' the country, maintain 'peace' and deliver practical economic outcomes that were 'feasible' and 'achievable' for Cambodia in its 'current situation'. Recognition of the prevailing political doxa was evident among interviewees, their repertories of social media usage and voting choices in the repressive atmosphere of 2018. Data in this study suggests that a common sense-ness that elections are good, and good citizens are duty bound by an obligation to vote, obscured for some the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991)—forms of violence that go almost unrecognised owing to their omnipresence (Phelan 2011)—that underpinned the unfair 2018 electoral process in which research participants were implored to participate in, and with little real choice. Yet, as Foucault (1982) notes, power is always accompanied by resistance. Thus, there was also a substantial increase in the number of spoiled ballots papers in 2018 (8.4% compared to 1.6% in the 2013 general election). This suggests that voter dissimulation may have occurred in what one commentator described as a 'cunning yet legitimate protest against the powerful' (Reuters 2018), and which was addressed in Chapter 2 in Scott's (1989, 1990) work on small acts of resistance as weapons of the weak in authoritarian contexts. A small number of interviewees intimated that they had gone to vote to signal loyalty to the government but then spoiled their ballots in the privacy of the voting booth. This is in keeping with what Bourdieu (1990) refers to as double-game strategies of acts of invention and improvisation where agents appear to be obeying and following the rules while all the time acting in accordance with their interests. The defacing of ballot papers in the privacy of the voting booth could be seen as a more literal form of the *practice of active silence* observed on social media where agents were neither reduced to automata nor elevated to overtly revolutionary action. Social media strategies and electoral practices could be said to reflect what Bourdieu refers to as the points of position (*prises de position*) occupied by agents in fields, the relationship between the positions that constitute a field, and the points of view from those positions, which ultimately form 'the reality and evolution of that space' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 734)—the 'realistic knowledge' involved in the making and unmaking of the social world; what agents can hope to do within a field as seen

from the position the agents occupy within fields. As this study found, against their own better judgement and desires, and despite having acquired a new critical, *civic awareness*, research participants went to vote in an election they did not believe in. They adopted a position, participated, and acquired and displayed the indelible voter ink to demonstrate they had voted. They masked truer political sentiments on social media in order to continue their nonconfrontational presence in work positions and friendship circles and environments politically antithetical to their views. Social media was one element in this complex interplay of fields comprised of varying economic, social, personal, and political interests during the 2018 election. Cambodian voters assessed in their electoral decisions the 'unconscious sense of the possible, probable and, crucially, desirable' (Maton 2014, p. 57). Their decision on voting day was a practice based on expectations of outcomes measured by the experience of past outcomes.

Conclusion

Data in this study demonstrates how people engaged in a logic of practice based on contingency and pragmatism. Themes of *fear and opportunity*, *duty and obligation* suggest that research participants were aware of the possible consequences of engaging with social or political issues publicly and exercised circumspection of true sentiment both in their online activity and everyday lives, including voting. Themes identified in this study support the view that disguised and silent forms of symbolic dissent are occurring in Cambodian society and a growing civic awareness is developing at a time of increased authoritarianism through access to independent sources of news and information. The practice of active silence on social media might one day have the potential to become vocal public denunciation; where 'Aesopian language may give way to direct vituperation and everyday forms of resistance to overt, collective defiance' (Scott 1989, p.58). Such collective defiance occurred most recently during the 2013 election when the field of politics and agents experienced a hysteresis effect, what Grenfell (2006) describes as the accelerant of social crisis that forces a re-conceptualisation of the doxic order of understanding and an ensuing reinvention of a logic of practice for agents and fields. The field of politics responded in Cambodia with the soft power of social media and the hard power of repression. Doxa may shift again in Cambodia as the habitus of informed and civically-aware agents find themselves increasingly 'out-of-sync' with an entrenched and intransigent field of power. Therefore, social media has played a role in Cambodia's political

process in important, contradictory, less immediate, and still impending ways that are not yet obvious. The meta-themes proposed and concepts addressed in this chapter will now be drawn together to answer the three guiding, research questions in Chapter 9.

Chapter Nine

Synopsis of Study, Revisiting the Research Questions, and Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

In this final chapter the central research question of this thesis is addressed: *RQ.1. What role has social media played in Cambodia's political process?* This chapter also addresses two ancillary questions in order to deepen understanding of the affordances and limitations of social media for progressive social actors in an authoritarian context: *RQ.1a. How did Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling party respond to the challenges posed by a new ICT?* And, *RQ.1b. How influential was social media in the 2018 national election*? Additionally, a synopsis of the key findings to have emerged from this research is presented regarding the use and meaning of social media in Cambodia's political process. Acknowledgment of the limitations of this research and recommendations are also made as to possible pathways for further study that may supplement the omissions, overcome the limitations, and extend the contribution of this dissertation to understanding the personal, social, and political processes involved in social media usage in Cambodia. Continuing study of social media remains vital as social networking platforms maintain a commanding position in Cambodian society as sources and conduits of information and communication, and as new platforms are adopted by news audiences—the increasing popularity of TikTok being the most recent case in point (Sonyka 2020).

Importantly, this study should assist in deepening understanding regarding networked digital platforms as used and understood by everyday people amid narratives that continue to portray such technology in binary tropes of liberation and domination, either enabling *or* constraining (Mejias 2013). This was most recently evident in the portrayal of mass protests in Belarus where the Associated Press (2020) declared a 'Telegram revolution' was underway and, again, in Cambodia where the role of social media was highlighted in a criminal case against the activist Buddhist Monk Luon Sovath (Beech and Sun 2020). In the case of the former, technology usurps the Belarusian people participating in mass action against a reviled dictator. In the case of the latter, the Cambodian government's political control over the police and courts is obscured by a focus on the technological means of mediating spurious evidence against a critic. Herasimenka, Lokot, Onuch and Wijermars (2020) describe the focus on

'digital tools as the *main* drivers of mobilization' in Belarus as 'overly simplistic' in that such pronouncements overlook the motivations and emotions that drive people to protest, and to creatively use all resources at their disposal to do so. As addressed in the literature in Chapter 2 that situates this study, technology continues to be portrayed in popular narratives in terms of constituting a deterministic power, a 'force of its own' (Scharff and Dusek 2014) where changes in technology are understood in terms of expected corresponding changes in society; where technology determines rather than serves. Technology, however, is not determining in society and yet society is also not entirely autonomous of technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999)—the relationship is reciprocal and relational, and also non-determined or determining. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Sterne (2003) posits that 'technologies are little crystallized parts of habitus' (p. 376) and the most fundamental questions of technology are 'always social questions' as technologies are socially located and, therefore, 'always implicated in social struggle' (Ibid., p. 383). This research in Cambodia has sought to return focus to social agents and their ability to act and reason in ways not solely determined by technology, and to also acknowledge that technologies are not neutral, as Green (2002) Fuchs (2014, 2017) noted in Chapter 2, in that they embody a distinct political and economic character and express the priorities of those who own, invest in, and champion them—though outcomes are always contingent and never predestined in terms of the material and imagined affordances of technologies for their users.

9.2 The basis for investigation

It was observed in Chapter 2 that the scholarly debate regarding technological determinism had persisted for so long that it was now considered passé (Cherlet 2014). In the academic community, a truce of sorts had been reached in recognition of the reciprocal and mutually constitutive nature of society and technology (Mejias 2010; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). Though academic enquiry may have reached a modicum of détente on the matter, the theme of socially transformative technology endures. Examples offered of most relevance for this study were events during the Arab Spring when social media platforms were depicted as the catalysts of social and political transformations. Popular media narratives elevated the affordances of Western technology above the activities of communities and individuals embedded in complex histories and experiences with conflicting and coalescing motivations (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Esseghaier 2012). Narratives of digitally-afforded liberation, however, flattened

understanding and transformed participants into recipients and consumers, and in the process replaced the 'body as the indispensable political medium' with the fascination for electronic gadgetry (Kraidy 2016). Reworkings of the mythos of 'sublime technologies' (Carey 1988; Nye 1994; Mosco 2004) was evident in the narrative of a new 'digital age' of activism where social media promised embattled groups a new means of mobilisation; horizontally-networked organisations capable of weakening and vanquishing authoritarian regimes (Castells 2010, 2012). The 'mini fables' of technology (Smith and Marx 1996) that had previously obscured the inequities of access to and literacy with technology, as well as the economic imperatives of owners, obfuscated the contradictions of social media as affordance for both reactionary as well as progressive actors. Authoritarian regimes regained control and in part were assisted by co-opted social media platforms (Morozov 2011; Tufecki 2014; Gunitsky 2015). In just a few years, social media completed a transformation from utopian to dystopian technology, a narrative arc from Sullivan's (2009) *'The Revolution Will be Twittered'* to Brooking and Singer's (2018) *'War Goes Viral: How social media is being weaponized across the world'*. Winston (1998) offers a useful description of media narratives that fluctuate between pontification about 'techno-glory or apocalypse' and where the same phenomena regarding technology is the source of dichotomous arguments. Similarly, a surprise election result in 2013 provided evidence in Cambodia for some observers to declare an iteration of social media as a transcendent technology responsible for transforming the field of politics on behalf of the democratic side of the partisan spectrum (Woodside 2013; Greenwood 2013; Finsen 2015).

9.3 Interpreting the key findings

Availing of the dual election period of 2017 and 2018 when Cambodians voted in both local and national elections, this qualitative research study was undertaken to assess what role social media played in the political process. Findings presented and preliminarily analysed in chapters 5, 6, 7, and the meta-analysis in Chapter 8, challenge linear, cause-and-effect narratives regarding the character and use of social media platforms and their efficacy in the political process. Findings in chapter 5 and 6 demonstrate that social media did not determine the electoral decision-making or political preferences of research participants in 2017/18, and neither were participants entirely agentic in either their voting or abstaining decisions. The popularising of social media around the time of the 2013 afforded Cambodia's political opposition a means to circumvent Prime Minister Hun Sen's domination of domestic media,

particularly broadcast. New and independent sources of news and information were made available and the opposition mobilised and coordinated supporters, which marked an historic change in the circulation of news and information domestically. However, with his power challenged by digital networking technology, Hun Sen adopted and co-opted social media while institutes new laws to prohibit online criticism of his rule. Recounting their social media repertories, research participants in 2017/18 described their embeddedness in communities with complex histories, their involvement in relationships with responsibilities and demands, and both personal fear and the possibilities of rewards attached to social media usage. In the data collected, key themes were identified, including *surveillance, sanction and reward*, *fear and opportunity*, and the *public performance* of self on social media, which illuminated the research participants repertoires of platform usage and the reasons and meanings that underpinned such use. Such themes combined and contradicted with the key themes of valuing access to *trusted and credible* sources of news and information afforded by social media, and through which participants remained critically engaged with events in their society. The mediation (Couldry 2008) of contentious social and political issues that developed amidst the popularising of social media also transformed that which was being mediated. This was evident in the increasing choreography of protest forms, particularly the Boeng Kak lake community who were mentioned by research participants as an important force of online awareness building and personal cognitive mobilisation. With spectacular props and street-theatre-like protests (see Figure 22.a), the number of Boeng Kak protesters would sometimes be outnumbered by the number of local reporters, citizen journalists, activists with smartphones, and human rights groups monitoring and mediating such demonstrations. Such protests were staged on the streets though their impact was designed to be witnessed on screens where, as their placards announced, *the whole world is watching*. Data in this study suggests that empathy was engendered when state violence against such protests was witnessed (Ellis 2009; Zuckerman 2020) via social media platforms. Evidence of a critical appraisal of media and media representation was also present on the streets of Phnom Penh in 2013 (see Figure 22.b) when the government's domination of broadcasting and absence of opposition voices was satirised in the form of a demonstrator with a TV camera fashioned from cardboard boxes symbolically recording events for an imaginary pro-opposition television station – CNRPTV:



Figure 22. a) "The Whole World is Watching" Todd Gitlin's book title and 1960s-era anti-Vietnam War protest movement mantra made an appearance in street protests in 2014 as social media grew in popularity (Pha lina/Phnom Penh Post). b) Protester with a cardboard-box video camera records imaginary footage and his entertaining antics are recorded by members of the public with smartphone and uploaded to social media in 2013 (Kevin Doyle).

Social media did not afford a kinetic counterweight to the power of the Cambodian regime during the research period. As Natalie Fenton (2016) argues, 'political organizations emerge from histories that do not evaporate in the face of technology' (p. 41) and the practice of politics in Cambodia owes more to the men of the *camps* than of the *courts*, to use a Foucauldian description. Engagement with 'the political' (Frangie 2009; van Deth 2014; Wiley 2016) however, was evident in the value placed on sources of independent news and information afforded by social media as a means to critically engage, personally, with important events and issues in society. Highfield (2016) makes the case for the importance of social media as a manifestation of 'everyday politics'. Highfield cautiously notes that he was not making the case that social media can lead to political change. Instead, social media was a personalised space that presented an opportunity for different groups, political actors, activists and ordinary people to engage in diverse types of everyday politics, which could shape informal, personal manifestations of the political. There is merit to aspects of Highfield's argument in that the visibility and tangibility of social media, and the 'awareness' that it may produce, is neither minor nor irrelevant. Increased awareness may lead to a greater impetus on the part of individuals to take action on issues that even mundane practices and content on social media might bring to light (Highfield 2016, p. 158). Under the repressive conditions of 2018, social media was no longer an arena for contesting opinions and political thoughts in Cambodia. However, social media platforms remained important and valued for affording research participants an arena where people quietly accessed independent sources of news and

information to remain civically aware under repressive conditions. Continuing to be personally critically aware in 2018 and eschewing dominant media narratives controlled by an authoritarian regime engages with the meta-theme of *active silence.* This study identified a *practice of active silence,* which involved research participants valuing and increasing their civic awareness through access to independent sources of news and information—bearing 'witness' (Ellis 2009) through social media in private and remaining quiet about that critical awareness in public. Whilst the affordances of social media to directly affect structures of power in Cambodia appeared to have been more imagined than experienced (explained in the meta-theme of *illusory agency*), growing *civic awareness* afforded by access to valued sources of news and information on social media has, I propose, engendered a *potentiality-in-waiting* (a meta-theme) in Cambodian society, in that people are actively and increasingly critically aware in an authoritarian context.

Bourdieu's hysteresis effect introduced in Chapter 3 assisted reflection on the events surrounding the 2013 election, and since, with regard to social media in Cambodia and the potentiality contained in an increasingly civically aware population. This study posits that the increasing popularity of social media from 2013 onward marked a critical breakdown in the established doxic order in Cambodia between agents and fields, rulers and the ruled. The changed habitus of agents was evident in their adopting of a new doxa vis-à-vis social media platforms and their changed practices in terms of information access and the growing civic awareness that resulted. Hysteresis was evident in the temporary bewilderment of the field of power as it was forced to resynchronise, adapt, and co-opt social media platforms to re-establish synchronicity between the field of power and the habitus of an increasingly online population. Thus, the contemporary contradiction in 2017-2018 when 43% of Cambodia's 16 million population were estimated to have active Facebook accounts and the country was also experiencing its most repressive phase in decades. The *performance* of an online self as described by research participants in chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated adherence to the new doxa in public on social media while accumulation of civic awareness continued in silence. Scott (1989, 1990) describes such acts of dissimulation in public as performative weapons of the weak; a 'theatre of the powerless' which is also the essence of resistance. The cultivation of new online personas was identified in the social media activity of political leaders (Savigny and Temple 2010; Stanyer 2013; Scammell 2015; Metz et al., 2020) particularly Hun Sen who leveraged the emotive capital (Illouz 2007) of family values on social media as a means to accrue social capital that would convert to political capital. The key themes of Hun Sen's *gift*

of peace and *threat of war* formed a conceptual bridge that linked the third key theme of *sacrifice* in Hun Sen's social media discourse. Through personal *sacrifice,* Hun Sen had bestowed *the gift of peace* to which Cambodia was indebted—a debt that must be repaid in *duties* and *obligation,* particularly loyalty at election time. *Duty and obligation* was a key theme in the reasons research participants provided for voting in the 2018 election, which lacked even a modicum of credibility. *Fear and opportunity* was another reason for voting—the fear of repercussions for being considered disloyal and the potential loss of access to opportunities that might result. Elements of mimesis were evident in the social media repertories of Hun Sen and his son and heir-apparent, Hun Manet in terms of *political celebritisation* (Ekman and Widholm, 2017), which could be correlated with plans for power succession between father and son—the symbolic preceding the material transfer of power one day. The key theme of *enemies within* identified in Sam Rainsy's social media activity demonstrated the symbolic conflict ongoing between the prime minister and the opposition leader-in-exile—an old conflict on a new digital terrain. Foucault's (2003) conceptualisation of politics as the continuation of war in the modern state, and not its cessation, affords understanding of the character of political competition in Cambodia. Therefore, the theme of *reconciliation not revenge* identified in Kem Sokha's Facebook activity was the anomaly.

9.4 Revisiting the research questions

The central question motivating this study emerged in the aftermath of the 2013 national election as reports attributed the near success of Cambodia's opposition party to the introduction of social media. Alternative narratives that looked to social actors and structural injustices were overshadowed as Western technology assumed centre stage in explaining the electoral decisions of Cambodian voters—'the election Facebook (almost) won' (Finsen 2015). Social media was present in Cambodia and had played a part in the 2013 election, but there was no empirical evidence to sustain the claims that technology had determined a societal outcome and one as fundamental as millions of people voting in the privacy of election booths against a feared regime. This study sought the opportunity of the next scheduled national elections in 2017 and 2018 to test the primary enquiry of this research: *RQ.1. What role has social media played in Cambodia's political process? RQ.1a. How did Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling party respond to the challenges posed by a new ICT?* And, *RQ.1b. How*

influential was social media in the 2018 national election? As each question and answer is woven into the overall study narrative, the central question will be answered last.

RQ.1a. How did Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling party respond to the challenges posed by a new ICT?

Cambodia's opposition party was the first to recognise the political affordances of social media in the circumscribed news and information terrain of authoritarian Cambodia. Opposition politicians and supporters adopted platforms, particularly Facebook, to their advantage around the time of the 2013 election. Surprised by his loss in votes and the opposition's use of social media to circumvent traditional controls over domestic media terrain, Hun Sen responded in 2015 by adapting to and co-opting social media as a political strategy. An analogous process is described by Curran (2002) in the historical emergence of new power centres linked to new channels of communication where the emergence of a new mode of communication creates tension with existing power structures. Competition ensues—for example, the printing press subverting control over knowledge by the Catholic Church in early modern Europe—and the prevailing power responding to the dislocation by adapting to the 'newly mediated space' (Curran 2002, p. 69). Bourdieu's hysteresis effect explicates the asynchronicity between habitus and field evident in Cambodia during this period when the popular use of social media technology spurred a realignment and adoption of a new doxa, first by ordinary people and later by the Hun Sen government. Bourdieu's field theory was introduced in Chapter 3 to elucidate the relationship of individual dispositions and social structures and how both tend to reproduce even amid dramatic changes, and how individuals (agents) and social structures (fields) both oppose and also depend on each other for their replication over time. This mutually-constitutive relationship assists in explaining why societies are marked more by continuities than radical transformations; and continuity is evident in the case of Cambodia despite the introduction of a new information and communication technology and early optimism for associated structural change in society. Through a Bourdieusian lens, 'technology embodies a particular form of practical reason…. They embody in physical form particular dispositions and tendencies' (Sterne 2003, p. 376-77).

Aware that domination of traditional broadcast media was insufficient in a time of growing digital media platforms, social media was seen by Hun Sen as a necessary means to reach younger voters, and that social media platforms afforded unique means of surveillance and

monitoring of audiences both in terms of dissenting views and also divulged preferences. Preferences divulgence could be addressed and satisfied in a limited, advantageous way by the regime and, in the case of dissent, identified and sanctioned through surveillance (Morozov 2011; Zheng 2014; Gunitsky 2015; Tufecki 2017). Thus, Cambodia's ruling party responded to the challenges of social media by seeing in the technology new opportunities and political affordances for extending and deepening its traditional modes of authoritarian control. Findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 explored, compared, and analysed social media use and meaning through themes that emerged in interviews with research participants, in the daily diaries that participants kept of their social media activity, and in a focus group discussion. In Chapter 7, analysis of Facebook posts by four leading political figures completed the triangulation of methods applied in this research and of themes identified and developed as a means to understand how people used social media and the meanings they ascribed to their usage on a personal and socio-political level. The meta-analysis in Chapter 8 suggests that members of the government and opposition party worked to accrue symbolic capital in their engagement with social media platforms. Themes of *sacrifice*, bequeathing the *gift of peace* to Cambodia, the economic development that has ensued, and the *threat of war* should Hun Sen's control over Cambodia be challenged were evident in the social media posts of the prime minister. Key themes of *peace* and *economic development*, of personal *fear* and potential *opportunities* and *rewards* associated with social media were also identified in interviews, media diaries, and the focus group discussions. The key theme of *duty and obligation* also emerged in interviews with everyday users of social media with regards to their voting decision-making in the 2018 national election. It could be argued that in the aforementioned themes there is a correlation in discourse, and a complementarity in the communication of power, control, and resistance between Hun Sen and the everyday people who participated in this research.

This study found that social media in Cambodia emerged as a new terrain in a battle of symbolic representation. The theme of *sacrifice* evident in the social media discourses of Hun Sen requires important scrutiny as it imposed a duty of obligation on citizens at election time. Similarly, *the gift of peace* as a theme in Hun Sen's social media activity imposed a symbolic debt on citizens where peace was accompanied by the threat of conflict should the debt not be repaid to Hun Sen in electoral loyalty. For everyday users of social media, a sense of fear permeated in 2018 as well as a cognisance of the opportunity costs and rewards for not (openly) dissenting online or at the voting station. Acts of dissimulation were recounted in this study in the public acts of acquiescence and the *practice of active silence* in private on social media.

This study argues that public activity on social media become an *empty indicators* of much personal and political sentiment in 2018, while, privately, a growing *civic awareness* was being nurtured in the silent activity of access to independent sources of news and information recounted by research participants amid diminishing space for public expression, political participation, and increased repression.

RQ.1b. How influential was social media in the 2018 national election?

This study found that research participants valued social media platforms for the access provided to sources of news media and information not controlled or influenced by Hun Sen and his ruling party. Social media was also central to the political strategies of Hun Sen in mobilising voters to participate in the 2018 national election and, conversely, for disseminating the opposition party's calls for an election boycott. As ubiquitous as social media is in Cambodia, research participants told of more fundamental reasons than information and communication technology impelling their decisions to vote or abstain in 2018. Social factors had a more influential role in electoral choices than social media platforms. Research participants who voted in the 2018 election explained their decision in terms encapsulated in the key themes of *duty and obligations* as citizens; of the need to be seen to be loyal to Hun Sen's ruling party; and of the common sense-ness of voting for the established political order. Truer political and electoral sentiments were subsumed for some under their fear of sanction by authorities and employers, and possible financial repercussions on families and loved ones. There were opportunities and rewards too for suppressing true political beliefs and voting sentiments, this was explained in terms of maintaining continued relations with friends and communities of mutual interest. The dissimulation involved in *the practice of active silence* on social media—a meta-theme of this study—was also evident in terms of voting decisions on election day; where those who were sympathetic to the opposition party feigned support for Hun Sen. Research participants told of performing public acquiescence by attending voting stations and some intimated that they had engaged in private dissension by spoiling ballot papers in the privacy of voting booths; small acts of dissent rather than visible demonstrations of rebellion akin to Scott's weapons of the weak (1985, 1989, 1990) addressed in Chapter 2. Expression of truer political sentiments were reserved for offline, face-to-face interaction with family members and close, trusted friends. This study suggests that key themes of *fear, reward*, *duty and obligation* identified in voter decision-making found correspondences with themes identified in Hun Sen's social media activity. For example, the *gift of peace* and the debt owed

(*the obligation*) by people to the prime minister for his personal *sacrifice* in gifting peace and development. And the *threat of war* as a theme in Hun Sen's Facebook posts finding correspondence with the themes of *fear* and the *opportunity* (in terms of avoiding conflict) evident among research participants who voted in 2018. Ultimately, Hun Sen's party won every seat in the 125-seat national assembly following the 2018 election. People who participated in this research and voted in the 2018 election told of performing loyalty to the ruling party, though their truer political sentiments were and remained contingent. Doxa—'the feel for the game' in motivating agents toward the pursuit of 'actions in accordance with interests' in a 'disinterested manner' (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 82-83) necessitated voting in 2018 and, importantly, the need to be seen voting. More than participation in an online social network, data in this study suggests that the electoral decisions of research participants were predicated on their embeddedness in a 'lifeworld' (Livingstone 2018) of jobs, family and friends, coupled with experiential dispositions and a practical sense of the possible—more than the desirable—in Cambodia society.

RQ.1 What role has social media played in Cambodia's political process?

To assess what role social media has played in Cambodia's politics process we must build on the findings from RQ1a and b, and also consider the potentiality that has been generated. The meta-theme of *illusory agency* was proposed to elucidate the theme of social media's *imagined affordance* (Nagy and Neff 2015) in terms of the belief that access to greater flows of information and communication via social media could redraw the balance of power with authoritarian actors in Cambodia; that access to information and communication could be leveraged to affect socio-political change. Data in this study demonstrates that as access to social media platforms increased during the research period, expression on such platforms decreased and society became more repressive in general. Authorities did not curtail access to social media platforms during the research period. Instead, a combination of threats, legislation, and sporadic sanction against individuals who transgressed on social media ensured that expression on platforms was self-restricted for domestic audiences. Research participants were aware of the Faustian contract that was involved in their use of Facebook—the duality of loss by acquisition (Mejias 2013) in terms of monitoring, surveillance, and access. Research participants were neither entirely constrained nor entirely agentic in their social media usage, and with no obvious alternative they engaged in cautious, dissimulated repertoires of social media usage publicly. In private, however, they were engaged in *the practice of active silence*

by ceasing to comment and share but continuing to access news and information on contentious social and political matters. *The practice of active silence* in accessing independent and trusted sources of news and information constituted a continuing engagement with contested events in an authoritarian context; 'bearing witness' (Ellis 2009) as part of an on-going accumulation of *civic awareness* in a society where expression of that awareness (engagement) was increasingly proscribed. Hun Sen appeared to realise that independent news entities continued to be a source of critical awareness remediated on social media platforms. Thus, while access to social media platforms was left untouched in 2017 and 2018, it was traditional media outlets that suffered the greatest sanction ahead of the 2018 election with radio stations and a leading newspaper closed down (Beller 2017), while a second independent newspaper was co-opted through sale. However, Khmer-language news services backed by the US and France continued their coverage of domestic affairs and were among the most valued sources of news by research participants—71% of participants in 2018 told of accessing traditional, trusted news sources via social media.

The data presented in this research supports the proposition that *the practice of active silence* on social media and the concomitant growth in *civic awareness* afforded by social media has surreptitiously transformed the field of politics at a personal level in Cambodia. This transformation is in terms of everyday social media users continuing to keep themselves informed and civically aware and keeping quiet about being informed under a repressive government. This is an unspectacular but important transformation; a micro-accumulation of countless small acts of engagement (Picone et al., 2019) with independent sources of news and information that has engendered the *potentiality-in-waiting* of an increasingly informed and critically-aware public that may one day challenge the current repression and traditional domination in Cambodia society. Similar to unspectacular repertories of social media practice that contain important seeds of resistance (Picone et al.), Scott (1989) refers to acts of symbolic defiance that are disguised and go unrecognised in situations of domination—everyday acts of resistance that are 'invariably quiet' and publicly invisible. But, such acts are no less effective in their cumulative impact over time. In Cambodia, *the practice of active silence* on social media can be considered one such small act of resistance which, cumulatively, constitutes a *potentiality-in-waiting* owing to the continuing accruing of *civic awareness* and the nurturing of a critical disposition among increasing numbers of Cambodians.

9.5 Unlocking the potential of civic awareness

McCargo (2017) argues that it would be imprudent to place too much faith in the proliferation of 'communication technologies as a way of fostering progressive political change' (p. 4141-4142) noting that in Thailand new media had given 'voice to the voiceless' and also fuelled a climate of intolerance. The contradictions of social media in Cambodia are similarly documented in this study, not least in the themes of *sanction and reward*, *access and control*, *fear and opportunity*. However, informed by the work of Anduiza et. al. (2012), Jorba and Bimber (2012), and Boulianne (2016), this study posits that a growing civic awareness in Cambodia has resulted due to access to news and information afforded by social media platforms. This becoming, what Foucault (1984) describes in terms of a 'critical ontology' of the self in the social world, of being civically knowledgeable of conditions and forces at play in society and beyond, is a qualitatively different experience for populations living under authoritarian regimes than democratic governments—as vividly recounted in the experience of gaining 'voice' described by Cambodian women in Chapter 5. A generation in Cambodia has access to news and information with which they quietly compare, contrast and critique to a degree not possible for previous generations. However, as White (1962) notes, 'a new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter' (p. 28). What a more civically aware population chooses to do with such awareness is, I propose, less a question of if, than one of when. The previous 'when' being 2013 and explained in this study in terms of a hysteresis effect: 'Periods in which expectations…fall out of line' which can lead to 'a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibles' (Bourdieu 2000, p. 234). To reflect on an earlier period of authoritarian rule and dissimulation among publics, Lohmann (1994) and Kuran (1991) notes the pace with which deeply entrenched regimes collapsed in Eastern Europe in 1989, and at speeds which caught most seasoned political observers by surprise. Prior to the collapse, many in East Europe had tolerated repression and tyranny, Kuran notes, and displays of outward support or submission were understandable given the punishment associated with dissent in such regimes. With echoes of this study's findings regarding social media usage in contemporary Cambodia, Kuran tells how sanction for dissenters in Eastern Europe included harassment, job loss, and imprisonment: 'In short they could expect to be denied the opportunity to lead a decent life' (1991, p. 26). Describing the masking of true sentiment in repressive environments as 'preference falsification', Kuran argues that regimes may appear outwardly strong while internally riven by weaknesses and contradictions that are hidden by public demonstrations of loyalty—which draws another

parallel with contemporary Cambodia. Though acknowledging that such changes as witnessed in 1989 were the result of 'a symphony of interacting variables', Kuran does refer to the importance of people becoming 'sufficiently knowledgeable' and the efforts by regimes to censors and suppress information deemed harmful to their survival. Kuran also notes the influence of public discourse on the private preferences of individuals as one of the myriad catalysts, including the dissenting narrative of Glasnost, and the dissenting thoughts that it generated.

Instead of a naïve refutation or affirmation of the potential influence of social media, this study argues for greater cognisance of specific cultural contexts and of societal differences regarding social media practice and role in political processes. The outcome of the 2018 national election in Cambodia owed less to the influence of social media than to what Bourdieu describes as agents' experiential dispositions and a practical sense of the possible informed by past experiences. Hun Sen's winning of all seats in the 2018 election also speaks less to his popular appeal than the depth of dissimulation in Cambodian society, which has also rendered public activity on social media an *empty indicator* of truer sentiments. Social media has played a role in Cambodia's political process in important, contradictory, less immediate, and still impending ways that are not yet evident; in what could be described as the *potentiality-in-waiting* of people that are increasingly civically and critically aware.

9.6 Limitations of this research

A note of caution is required as the findings of this study are specific to the research period and pertain exclusively to the use of Facebook, the platform that remains the most popular in Cambodia. Based on continuing observation of Cambodia's information and communication field since 2018, social media platforms such as Twitter and TikTok have seen increased usage, and for those Cambodians tweeting in English and producing TikTok videos, there appeared to be latitude for parody and commentary critical of authority. This relative openness speaks to findings in this research where sanctioning of social media was not uniform and blunt, but targeted and occasional to certain times and subjects of political sensitivity. Distance from the fieldwork location and the time that has elapsed since fieldwork means that findings contained within this study are temporally specific to a society and a population. Individuals and society continually co-evolve, therefore findings in this study are by definition limited by the process

that was required to reach them. The limitations of this research also involve the nature of its conceptualising in that a qualitative methodology requires time and immersion in the subject being studied, though it cannot compare with full-time immersion in the field being studied. Additionally, although this study applies a Bourdieusian lens as a means to investigate and interpret the empirical data gathered, organisation of the data reporting chapters 5, 6 and 7 could have adhered to a stricter organisation in terms of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts, such as the positioning and reciprocity of fields, the habitus of agents involved, and the forms of capitals accrued and exchanged, rather than themes, as the focus of analysis. However, themes were chosen as they spoke more directly to the research questions, while also being theoretically compatible with a Bourdieusian perspective.

9.7 Further discussion and pathways for research

The central proposition that social media facilitated the nurturing of civic awareness through access to independent sources of news and information presents an opportunity to assess the character of those sources. That among the most popular sources of independent news and information were media entities supported by foreign governments, such as the United States and France, raises questions regarding representations of Cambodia, and what is being represented back to Cambodians in the news and information they consume. Further study might consider how Cambodian online news agendas are being framed and for whom. Do foreign-funded news organisations support and extend Western geo-political interests in Cambodia? The question being, crucially, who speaks for Cambodia. As McCargo (2017) notes, Cambodia's faltering democratic transition occurred amid a growing media sector, which demonstrated 'the shortcomings and limitations of mass media as a progressive political actor' (p. 4139). Correspondingly, while direct reference to Asian values has fallen out of favour, there remains a persistent, more tacit, discourse by power elites regarding the regional unsuitability for liberal democracy, including in Cambodia (Lim 2018). China's economic rise and its substantial investment in Southeast Asia has also lent support to the superiority of Beijing's model of state capitalism with authoritarian characteristics over more representative forms of government and media freedoms (Kurlantzick 2013). Thus, Chinese state investment in Cambodia's news media sector and training programmes for Cambodian journalists (Agence France-Presse 2018) requires scrutiny in terms of the consequences for and the discourse on liberal democracy, and the possible introduction of Beijing-style cyber firewalls domestically

and regionally. The *practice of active silence,* I have argued, is akin to a small act of everyday resistance where agents have surreptitiously accrued and increased their critical and civic awareness, which is a *potentiality-in-waiting* in an authoritarian context. An essential element of this growing civic awareness afforded by access to news and information, and not addressed in this research, are mediated representations of democracy and democratic practices, and the resultant normative *imaging of democracy* in terms of how society, government, and the practice of politics should function. Thus, a valuable focus of further study could involve analysis of the role of digital media in a transnational *imagining of democracy*, particularly when efforts are being made to limit a *democratic imagination* in authoritarian contexts such as Cambodia. This might involve mapping the tension that is inherent between domestic political actors who seek to internationalize Cambodian politics and those seeking to circumscribe or realign politics in line with China's growing hegemony domestically and regionally, and the role of both Chinese and Western technology firms and governments in the ongoing encounter of competing geopolitical realities, global media markets, and the imagining of potential imagined futures. Similarly, while this research is focused on Cambodia, the *practise of active silence* and accompanying meta themes developed in this study are arguably not unique to authoritarian contexts. Thus, application of Bourdieu's field theory to research on social media use and practise in Western and Asian liberal democracies, Japan and South Korea, for example, could present interesting points of comparison and contradiction for this research in Cambodia.

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Appendices

Appendix. A: Guiding interview question 2017.

Semi-structured interview questions:

- What is your preferred social media platform and why?
- What do you use social media for most, and what is the audience you hope to reach with your social media posts?
- In your opinion, how significant is social media as a channel of communication in Cambodia? Why?
- What was the most popular discussion/debate on social media in the past year?
- In your opinion, how influential is social media in terms of disseminating news and influencing public opinion?
- Describe the different ways – political parties, civil society, young people – use social media?
- Do you think social media was a factor in the 2013 national election outcome?
- Do you think social media will be a factor in future elections? How and why?
- Is social media good or bad for Cambodian society? Please elaborate on your answer.
- Who do you consider the most influential social media users in Cambodia and why?

Appendix. B: Guiding interview questions 2018.

Questions:

- What good things happened in Cambodia in the past year?
- What negative things happened?
- Where do you get your news from?
- Which media is the most valuable for you? Why?
- How important is social media for staying informed of important issues?
- Does information on social media influence your view of society?
- Have you ever encountered 'fake news'?
- Did social media influence your decision in the recent election?
- What was the most important reason for voting, or not voting, the way you did?
- Has social media changed Cambodian society?

Appendix. C: DCU Ethics Review Panel Clearance

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Mr Kevin Doyle
Dr John O'Sullivan
School of Communications

03 April 2017

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2017/059**

Proposal Title: **Social media use and meaning in Cambodia's social, political and cultural context**

Applicant(s): **Mr Kevin Doyle, Dr John O'Sullivan**

Dear Kevin,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Donal O' Gorman

Dr Dónal O'Gorman
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
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Research & Innovation Support
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Appendix. D: Research statement for participants

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Plain Language Statement

I. Introduction to the Research Study

The research working title is: ***Social media use and meaning in Cambodia's social, political and cultural context.***

Kevin Doyle, a PhD student at the School of Communications, Dublin City University, Ireland, will conduct the research.

The researcher can be contacted at kevin.doyle38@mail.dcu.ie

II. Details of involvement in the research study

Participants will be required to be available for at least one face-to-face interview with the principal research - Kevin Doyle - at a convenient location in Cambodia.

The researcher may seek a follow-up interview.

Interviews should last no longer than 1 hour, but will not be limited to that period if the participant agrees.

The researcher requests that the interviews be recorded (audio only) in order to facilitate data gathering and subsequent data analysis. Participants retain the right to decline the researcher's request to record the interview.

Interviews will take place between June 1 and July 1, 2017.

III. Potential risks to participants from involvement in the research study

It is not envisaged that there will be any risks to participants arising from involvement in the study.

IV. Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the research

It is expected that this study will help provide a better understanding of the dynamics of social media use in Cambodia and the characteristics of social media as a communications channel in the country's distinctive social, political and cultural context.

V. Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity.

Data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher, Kevin Doyle, alone.

Participants' names will be protected from disclosure, though the confidentiality of information provided remains subject to legal limitations.

Interview notes, audio files and transcriptions will be held by the principal researcher alone and will be stored in a secure location.

VI. Data Destruction

It is planned that the data collected from interviews will be safely and securely disposed of within four years from the initial date of collection.

VII. Voluntary Participation

Participants may withdraw from the research study at any point. There will be no repercussions for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed.

VIII. Additional Information

It is envisaged that approximately 15 participants will be interviewed as part of this portion of the research study. A link to the final research project will be sent to all participants once complete.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary,
Dublin City University
Research Ethics Committee,
c/o Research and Innovation Support,
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9.
Ireland

Tel: +353 1-7008000,
E-mail: rec@dcu.ie

Appendix. E: Informed Consent Form

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent Form

I. Research Study Title

The study in which you are being asked to participate has the working title: ***Social media use and meaning in Cambodia's social, political and cultural context***. It is being conducted by Kevin Doyle, a PhD student at the School of Communications, Dublin City University, Ireland.

II. Purpose of the research

As social media grows in popularity in Cambodia, this research seeks to understand the importance (or not) of social networking as a new channel of communication to discuss and debate social, political and cultural issues. Limited research currently exists regarding the role and possible impact of social media in the contemporary Cambodia context. This research aims to provide insights into this important area of study.

III. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

As referenced in the Plain Language Statement, participants in this research will be required to participate in at least one face-to-face interview, which the researcher will request permission to record (audio only).

Participant – please complete the following (circle Yes or No for each question)

Have you read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to you)?	Yes/No
Do you understand the information provided?	Yes/No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes/No
Have you received satisfactory answers to all questions?	Yes/No
Do you agree to have your interview recorded (audio only)?	Yes/No

IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

This is a voluntary research study. As a participant, you may withdraw from the research study at any point. There will be no repercussions for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed

V. Arrangements to protect confidentiality of data

Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity of participants in the research study. Data collected during the interview will be analysed by the principal researcher, Kevin Doyle, alone. Participants' names will be protected from disclosure. If reference is required, a suitable and safe indirect form of reference, agreed by the participant, will be used. While every effort will be made to protect the identity of participants, the confidentiality of information provided remains subject to legal limitations. Interview notes, audio files and transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and will be stored in a secure location.

VI. **Signature:**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix. F: Semi-structured Media Diary questionnaire

កំណត់ហេតុប្រព័ន្ធផ្សព្វផ្សាយរយៈពេលមួយសប្តាហ៍
One Week Media Diary

- ចាប់ពីថ្ងៃទី (From date):
- អាយុ (Age):
- ភេទ (Gender):
- ទីតាំង (Location):

តើអ្វីដែលគួរអោយចាប់អារម្មណ៍បំផុតដែលអ្នកបានឃើញនៅលើហ្វេសប៊ុក(Facebook)ថ្ងៃនេះ?
What was the most interesting item you saw on Facebook today? Why?

ថ្ងៃ Day	ព្រឹត្តិការណ៍ Item	សូមពន្យល់ហេតុអ្វីបានជាអ្នកចាប់អារម្មណ៍បំផុត៖ Please explain
ថ្ងៃទី១ Day 1		
ថ្ងៃទី២ Day 2		
ថ្ងៃទី៥ Day 5		
ថ្ងៃទី៦ Day 6		
ថ្ងៃទី៧ Day 7		

សូមសរសេរពីបីប្រយោគពីសកម្មភាពរបស់អ្នកនៅលើហ្វេសប៊ុកនៅថ្ងៃនេះ៖
Please write a few sentences on your activities on Facebook today:

ថ្ងៃទី១
Day 1
ថ្ងៃទី២
Day 2
ថ្ងៃទី៣
Day 3
ថ្ងៃទី៤
Day 4
ថ្ងៃទី៥
Day 5
ថ្ងៃទី៦
Day 6
ថ្ងៃទី៧
Day 7

អ្វីដែលខ្ញុំបានចែករំលែក(share)នៅលើហ្វេសប៊ុកនៅថ្ងៃនេះ៖
What I shared on Facebook today:

ថ្ងៃទី១
Day 1
ថ្ងៃទី២
Day 2
ថ្ងៃទី៣
Day 3

ថ្ងៃទី៤
Day 4
ថ្ងៃទី៥
Day 5
ថ្ងៃទី៦
Day 6
ថ្ងៃទី៧
Day 7

អ្វីដែលខ្ញុំចូលចិត្ត(like)/ មិនចូលចិត្ត(did not like)នៅលើហ្វេសប៊ុកថ្ងៃនេះ
What I liked/didn't like on Facebook today:

ថ្ងៃទី១
Day 1
ថ្ងៃទី២
Day 2
ថ្ងៃទី៣
Day 3
ថ្ងៃទី៤
Day 4
ថ្ងៃទី៥
Day 5
ថ្ងៃទី៦
Day 6
ថ្ងៃទី៧
Day 7

តើអ្វីដែលខ្ញុំបានធ្វើអត្ថាធិប្បាយ(comment)លើហ្វេសប៊ុកនៅថ្ងៃនេះ៖
What I commented on Facebook today:

ថ្ងៃទី១
Day 1
ថ្ងៃទី២
Day 2
ថ្ងៃទី៣
Day 3
ថ្ងៃទី៤
Day 4
ថ្ងៃទី៥
Day 5
ថ្ងៃទី៦
Day 6
ថ្ងៃទី៧
Day 7

តើថ្ងៃនេះអ្នកទទួលបានព័ត៌មានសំខាន់ឬចាប់អារម្មណ៍បំផុតមកពីប្រភពណា? ពីមិត្តភក្តិ? ហ្វេសប៊ុក? វិទ្យុ? ទូរទស្សន៍? កាសែត? Where did you get the most important news today? From friends? Facebook? Radio? TV? Newspaper?

ថ្ងៃ Day	ប្រភពព័ត៌មាន Source of news	សូមពន្យល់ហេតុអ្វីបានជាអ្នកចាប់អារម្មណ៍បំផុត៖ Please explain
ថ្ងៃទី១ Day 1		
ថ្ងៃទី២		

Day 2
ថ្ងៃទី៣
Day 3
ថ្ងៃទី៤
Day 4
ថ្ងៃទី៥
Day 5

ថ្ងៃទី៦
Day 6
ថ្ងៃទី៧
Day 7

តើការបង្ហោះលើហ្វេសប៊ុក(Post)ដោយប្រើលុយជំនួយ(sponsor)
អ្វីខ្លះនៅលើហ្វេសប៊ុកដែលអ្នកចាំបានចាប់ពីថ្ងៃនេះ (ក្នុងកំលុងពេល៧ថ្ងៃ)? Which sponsored posts on Facebook do you remember most from today?