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Media Ruins

Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

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CONCLUSION

I have insisted in this book on thinking about technology with a forward and backward vision: cultural memories—including histories of conflict and artistic heritage—inform future visioning, including technology design and appropriation. In Cambodia, historical media modes and contemporary ones coexist. Media ruins populate the streets of Phnom Penh. This coexistence of new and old media infrastructures makes material the crossing of memories, skills, and people across historical and contemporary moments. Every place lives with the shadow of its history; however, in Cambodia, the events of recent history are present in contemporary life in a striking way. Recognizing this force of history is essential for any technology implementation effort. The concept of infrastructural restitution—the creative reconstruction of historical media artifacts and infrastructures—illustrates ways that history matters to vernacular innovation, including in the realm of emerging technology.

Each of the chapters illuminated a different aspect of infrastructural restitution. The first chapter introduced the value of an infrastructural lens to understanding an intertwined history of media and politics. Chapter 2 first presented empirically the concept of infrastructural restitution, pointing to the repair work of state media workers reconstructing infrastructure after disaster. Chapter 3 noted dangers in ahistorical foreign media intervention. The second half of the book illuminated the ways that media preservation projects offer a forward-looking glimpse toward post-conflict healing and political action. Chapter 4 elucidated the hidden script of infrastructural restitution, and the ways that it can encourage issue-level political change. Chapter 5 explored the ways that excavating positive affect from historical media artifacts can be a mode of healing. It showed how processing history materially and watching, rewatching, and interpreting media artifacts can shift emotional experience. Chapter 6 illustrated the transnational tensions of presenting past artifacts in the contemporary context, and the power of new media archives in telling contested histories. It also explored what kinds of restitutive work online contexts render invisible.

The three historical chapters were not just background to the main story of contemporary digitization. Rather, the first half of the book painted a concrete picture about the historically tight links between media and politics. Urban dwellers in Phnom Penh live and make meaning among media ruins from each of these earlier periods. The infrastructures and artifacts built in the first chapter are what reconstructors now primarily seek to restore. The links between the past and present are not just material and architectural, though; some of the actors working during the PRK period are still active in the media sector. In addition, many of the current leaders of Cambodia are veterans of its conflicts. Their personal histories and the ways they acted in specific ways in their communities matter today to the ways that they govern and intimidate citizens. As such, each participant's interpretation of history reflects their current positioning and desires for the future. These chapters also heed a warning about the necessity of paying attention to history in any technology intervention. As I showed particularly in chapter 3, ahistorical approaches to media can cause damage and instigate violence.

An infrastructural approach offers new insight into the practices of restitution, as well as its reach and meaning, with its interlocking interest in form, work, and relationality. In Cambodia, form and content are inseparable dimensions of media reconstruction. Much of the contemporary media infrastructure was installed by prior regimes and forces encounters with the past. Paying attention to the spaces, films, and platforms in and through which such reconstruction happens shows how memory manifests in cracks, breaks, and crumbling buildings of media, not just through stories on screen, old photographs, or recovered radio reels. The repair work of young media creators happens in different formats: the physical space of media (cinemas), the materiality of media (film), and the storage of media (internet "archives"). In various ways, all of these projects move across online and offline realms, digital and analog formats, and in architectural space. I considered form in both its material (radio transmitters and receivers, the number and location of film projectors, fiber-optic cables) and immaterial instantiations (networks, memories, ghosts, and hauntings).

The infrastructural *work* of restitution requires skill, cooperation, and attention, and can be highly affective. The work also often involves care and collaboration; for example, the Roung Kon team worked together to measure the distance between door frames in old cinemas, with older and more experienced volunteers teaching the younger ones to enter the data into AutoCAD. This cooperative and helpful work of infrastructural restitution helps contribute to its effects for peace-building and reconciliation. It can also involve difficult emotions, like fear and sadness; for instance, Ka Toy traveled through the northwestern provinces as a projectionist in the 1980s, facing attacks from warring factions, in order to screen films for rural populations. As a form of infrastructural work, building from scholars like Star and Strauss, this historical and healing work is often invisible.[1] In particular, I showed in chapter 6 how some of the offline, community-embedded work, like visiting provinces for tourism, collecting new stories, and teaching students, is rendered invisible to globalized audiences of internet tools.

Paying attention to this invisible work brings me to the underlying feminist motivation of this book—in a world in which much is broken and in a particular context too often stereotyped for its national tragedy, I focused in this book on healing, collaborative, and inspiring action. The work of infrastructural restitution is rooted in the past, but it exists in the present and pushes toward the future. I described the development of Preah Sorya's large volunteer networks, Meta Moeung giving up personal time and space for the generation of a new invisible infrastructure of support for young artists, and Sokmean Srin spending his nights and weekends learning about the best parts of Cambodia's past so he could teach others about it. All of these are purposeful and generous activities that, regardless of their outcomes, are leading to powerful collectives and meaningful work that improve people's lives.

The *relational* aspect of media infrastructures and their inherent power dynamics are clear in the links between national politics, foreign interference, and technology in Cambodia. Media infrastructures drive and/or enable domestic politics and their relation to global empires. Understanding the values of infrastructural restitution cannot be understood without political context, rendered in historical perspective. In the first part of the book, I demonstrated the ways that domestic and foreign politics hinged on the use of media technologies during three significant moments in the Cold War. In the first chapter, I argued that the United States Information Service supplied tools and training for a media infrastructure that Sihanouk then used to undergird his authoritarian state. This became clear, for example, when Sihanouk cut off ties with the United States after discovering that they provided radios to Dap Chhuon's right-wing rebels. The second chapter described the ways that Vietnam and the Soviet Union sponsored media training and sent devices to Cambodia to support state power and post–Khmer Rouge recovery during the People's Republic of Kampuchea period (1979–1991). In the third chapter, I told of the development of Radio UNTAC, which was a key part of the first national election in 1993 and the opening of Cambodia to Western markets. I then showed that, after the opening of markets during the UNTAC period, multinational telecom companies dictated the building of infrastructure and the labor conditions of such infrastructures (for instance, those who dug the ditches for the first fiber-optic cable to run through Cambodia).

In the second half of the book, I described projects of infrastructural restitution in a moment of renewed media authoritarianism. In each case, I showed how young media creators, who did not themselves live through the Khmer Rouge regime, have called for political and social change through historical reckoning. The cases highlighted different dimensions of future-building, from Roung Kon's appeals for urban public spaces and space for expression in a rapidly urbanizing, gentrifying Phnom Penh to Preah Sorya's moves toward emotional healing to Sokmean Srin's romantic calls for the cultural flourishing of the past. The Bophana Center, through its Khmer Rouge History application, gave a case for a future in which all young people have a clear sense of the past. In their different ways, all of these projects used media as prompts to remember, to forget, and to use memory to move through a collective history of violence.

Whether working in decaying cinemas or at ancient royal temples, in an arts center or a school, all of these participants used historical artifacts—mediated through material platforms—to build new futures and call for change. As political actions, practices of infrastructural restitution tend to be subtler and more targeted to specific issues than more publicly obvious forms of protest, including the networked protest we have seen from the Arab Spring to Hong Kong.[2] In a moment of increased authoritarianism, however, the subtler forms of infrastructural restitution may be more palatable and effective as a form of political action in Cambodia.

That is not to say that this political action is uncontested; on the contrary, in each case, actors with different agendas could articulate counterarguments or alternative interpretations of the historical artifacts that are recovered and celebrated by these groups. Restitution brings us back to a previous state, but we can imagine ambivalences about that return. For instance, romanticizing the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period can be contested on the grounds that it represented a time of deep inequality, as illustrated in the first chapter of this book. When Roung Kon visited the Hemakcheat cinema, people were living there in slum-like conditions. The group praised the cinema for its past cultural glory without directly attending to contemporary urban inequality, which mirrors the inequality of the time that they are honoring. These impulses can work alongside nationalist or lineage-based impulses that praise the past uncritically. They can also lead to xenophobic harms. As discussed in chapter 2, encouraging change in ahistorical ways, the way that UNTAC did, however, is not an anecdote to the romanticization of the past as it can also encourage more violence.

Bringing historical media artifacts back to life can also unearth some uncomfortable realities about the past for younger generations. For instance, the participants of “Listening from the Archives” described disorientation in hearing digitized communist propaganda from a 1984 radio program. Just as the law of restitution makes things return to a state as if the conflict never happened, infrastructural restitution cannot fix what happened in the past. Rather, these practices honor the artists who died and the cultural artifacts that were lost or forgotten in the later wars, and encourage the consideration of how the best of history can be integrated into the future.

Media infrastructure and its repair cannot be understood solely on the political register; they must also be understood on a personal and affective register.[3] A collective history of violence has impacted the political, cultural, and technological course of Cambodia since the late 1960s. Artists are attuned to the emotional and embodied legacy of that violence. From the earliest parts of this story, the USIS imported film and radio technology for the purposes of ideological control. These tools were taken up by Sihanouk’s authoritarian state. We see the affective and political tangled up in media in immaterial instantiations like Sihanouk’s fight to control radio waves, or in material things like Cold War–legacy radio transmitters. Independent artists used these same tools to make funny, touching, silly, or otherwise affectively evocative media content.

The concept of disintegration noise brings together the material and psychological aspects of a history of violence through material form. The wear of time is visible in the marks and scratches of old film reels, the haphazard copying of these reels into VHS formats, and marks of the program used for their digitization. Watching the limited number of films available from the prewar period again and again mirrors the repetition common to ruminating over a painful history. The effect for Preah Sorya is to feel all the feelings of the past, a complex mix of loss and the happiness of the images on screen, and thus to shift the "problems of the way of the heart." Recovering media gives space for positive affective experience of the past.

Media artists' relation to violence and memory changes the meanings they give to repair, and these modes of restitution provide new insights into its theorization.[4] In a post-conflict setting with a broad aesthetic of destruction, noise and brokenness can act as complex structures of feeling and indicators of value rather than problems to be fixed. The horizontal lines of a bad VHS copy of a film, now reproduced in a digital copy, convey authenticity for Preah Sorya. A vocal performance can create something new from that which has been lost. When Roung Kon praises the media ruin and mourns its demolition and replacement with new buildings, we can see how the choice not to repair can itself be a value-laden act. These cases pointed to the ways that both decay and ruin, as well as repair and reconstruction, import culturally specific meaning and can differ based on any individual's relation to history.

By drawing lines between the historical media landscape and contemporary Cambodia, I illustrated the Cold War roots of the ways that digital media technologies today have broadly become tools for global geopolitical interference, nationalism, and authoritarianism. This book therefore provides a historical foundation for understanding the contemporary geopolitics of technology in Cambodia: the ways that digital media policy and practice are again becoming increasingly central to internal politics and foreign relations. Across the Southeast Asian region, authoritarian regimes govern through the internet, making social media a part of civil service and a site of resistance.[5] One particularly relevant issue across the region in 2022 is the expansion of Chinese influence in matters of digital media policy. Within Cambodian online spaces, there is rising tension between Western corporate technology policies and Chinese state technology practices. Government actors and citizens sometimes take different sides on these geopolitical media tensions.

For example, the Cambodian government's digital media advisors and allies are more frequently now coming from China. In February 2022, the government proposed running all internet traffic through a National Internet Gateway, allowing authorities to monitor all activity and collect users' data, a policy similar to Chinese government internet surveillance.[6] At the same time, Facebook remains by far the most popular way for most Cambodians to use the internet. This semi-monopolistic entity uses corporate surveillance and extract advertising revenue from one poorer part of the world to a richer one.[7] Through the case of Amazing Cambodia, I addressed the postcolonial politics of platforms and raised a concern about the power of a corporate American transnational technology platform (Facebook), which now holds license to valuable historical cultural heritage material about Cambodia. The US government is now using such Chinese global competition as a way to encourage more funding to US tech firms so they can have a broader international reach, thereby winning the capitalist rivalry with China.

As mentioned in the introduction, my intention here is not to mark Chinese or American approaches to digital diplomacy as wholly different; rather, they have different modes of control and exploitation building on long-standing modes of foreign intervention via media. Both demonstrate strong connections between the state and technology companies. For instance, the links between Facebook and the US state are multiple. Facebook spent nearly $20 million lobbying in the US in 2020, financially connecting the company to the state. The company has also made important decisions related to advertising and speech that directly impacted political power and swayed democratic elections. Likewise, the major tech platforms in China support state surveillance and do not allow for oppositional speech. The socialist state and the corporate sector overlap strongly such that China's economic model has been called "capitalism with Chinese characteristics."[8]

Instead of encouraging the continuation of polarized language, my goal is to show that both digital governance models have troubling concerns for postcolonial politics when enacted in sites like Cambodia. Digital media diplomacy is affecting amazingly dynamic media infrastructures, including geographies of technology installations (such as 5G towers and the location of new data centers) and information control tactics (such as chilling effects and platform censorship policy). Analyzing these geopolitical tensions in conjunction with the histories of media and politics presented in the first half of this book illuminates that these new geopolitical trends are far from exceptional and part of an ongoing legacy of domestic and foreign impulses for control.

Many scholars have responded to the problems inherent to transnational digital tools and policies by calling for changes to the tools themselves through corporate self-regulation. In the field of human-computer interaction, the "implications for design" section is a common area in which to call for platform change. Though these are often apolitical changes at the level of hardware or software, some more meaningful improvements that scholars have suggested—and, at times, companies have enacted—include enhanced content moderation, more contextually attuned speech policies, and proper translation of user interfaces.[9] Though we can encourage responsible self-regulation, there are limits to this self-monitored approach. Given the history raised here and the essentially extractive business model of corporate technology platforms, self-regulation is not a radical solution, and likely not a wholly effective one.

As an American and former tech worker, I feel some responsibility for reining in the harms of American companies in international settings through regulatory channels, particularly given what I have described about the violence that America has historically enacted through media channels (via the USIS, for example). US-based users of Facebook could call for US legislation that would give rules for the company's moderation of international speech, minimum bars for user interface translation and the development of digital literacy, and consent tools that are actually understandable. Other possible avenues for change are through international regulation. For instance, the UN could regulate transnational technology platforms based on international human rights law. Given the transnational nature of the internet and many internet tools, having internationalized laws for antitrust, privacy, and speech would give possibility to more just global connection via the internet. Using international or US legislation to regulate the use of platforms in other nations, however, is complicated by conflicting desires for national sovereignty and self-determination and the challenges of international enforcement.

The practices of infrastructural restitution I have described shed light on broader questions of transnational technology use. Much of the work described in this book uses hardware and software in platforms developed and designed outside Cambodia, but media creators made them their own and embedded them within their own political practices and historical context. These, like other globalized objects, are rendered local and situated as a form of global assemblage.[10] The actors in this book have appropriated these tools for their own uses, reconfiguring lines of power and agency in the global technology landscape. The creative tension is generative for remembering something old while building something new, and gives users an important place in the iterative and cumulative process of technology evolution. This interpretation builds on critiques of unidimensional design for others without their input, through either an analysis along the lines of power and economy, such as postcolonial computing, or the praise of flexible and fluid technologies.[11] It also reiterates the values of seeing repair as a mode of artfulness, environmentalism, and healing.[12]

I cannot resolve from this narrative the essential tensions between the controlling nature of these platforms and the tailored and grassroots uses of the tools I have described. This tension has long been a feature of Cambodian media use. For instance, Som Sam Al's training through the USIS and with Sihanouk prepared him for making independent films with artistry. We see the same phenomenon happening today with artists or media creators like Sokmean Srin co-opting tools of control like Facebook for their own political and cathartic ends. This book gives more evidence of ways that the technology industry—from tech platforms like Facebook to data centers and smartphones—represents a large, important, and relatively new transnational influence in many people's lives around the world. The troubling political economy of the platforms does not preclude their use for artistic or activist purposes, but presents a barrier that their users must overcome or overlook.

My hope for the future is that artists can use locally generated platforms for grassroots causes, written in local languages and customized for local infrastructures, through nonexploitative business models. I hope that there become more opportunities to host healing, creative, and socially engaged content on tools that fully align with such content. The realization of this vision, however, likely requires seeking out alternatives to the dominant political economy of platforms we know today and a rethinking of the contemporary global internet environment in ways that are safe, affect-sensitive, and in tune with global power dynamics.

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