

The Post

Dispatches from Cambodia: A Study Guide

The Post is an hour-long documentary made over two months, late in 1998. It deals with a range of issues and events affecting modern Cambodia, as seen through the eyes of the editor and staff of *The Phnom Penh Post*, the most significant English language newspaper in Cambodia.

The Post is a valuable teaching and learning vehicle for students of History, Politics, Media Studies, International Studies and Environmental Studies. Its appeal would be principally to students in the upper levels of secondary schooling and to tertiary students, but with appropriate preparation, middle school students could also gain considerable information and insight from this documentary.

Through the period covered by the documentary we are given an insight into the realities of producing a newspaper in this environment. There are considerable difficulties, but also a sense of energy and even romance. The documentary touches on many stories, but focuses on three in particular:

- the return of Prince Ranariddh and the formation of an apparently workable government – Cambodia's first in thirty years;
- the appearance of two of Pol Pot's closest advisers in Phnom Penh, at the invitation of Hun Sen – *The Post* covers a press conference at which Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan apologise for

the brutality and devastation caused by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot; and

- the discovery and exposure of the illegal dumping of Taiwanese toxic wastes at Sihanoukville.

Background

Because the documentary assumes a certain knowledge of events in Cambodia over the past thirty years, it would be helpful if teachers could take students through the following summary before they show the documentary. (The provision of a map, made into an overhead transparency, would be a useful addition to this guide.)

Cambodia is a country situated between Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and



Mathew Grainger, managing editor

The Gulf of Siam. Its capital, Phnom Penh, is on the Mekong River in southern Cambodia. Like Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia had been part of France's colonial empire since the late nineteenth century. (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were known as French Indo-China.) After occupation by the Japanese between 1942 and 1945, Cambo-



Remains of skulls and bones collected in the surrounding fields after the Pol Pot regime



dia again came under French control in 1945, but was given a high degree of autonomy, and was granted full independence following the Geneva Conference in 1954. Because of this, Cambodia's experiences over the next fifteen years were very different from those of Vietnam. The French divided Vietnam into two sections in 1954, installing a pro-Western, anti-Communist government in the South. This division fuelled a civil war between the North and the South, and eventually led to U.S. involvement

Between 1954 and 1970, Cambodia was ruled by Norodom Sihanouk, first as King, then, after 1955, as Prime Minister. At first Sihanouk pursued a policy of neutrality but as the sixties progressed, he moved closer to North Vietnam and this led the U.S. to fear that Cambodia was turning to Communism. In March 1970, the government of Sihanouk was overthrown by an anti-Communist military coup led by Lon Nol. It has been suggested that the coup was supported by the American C.I.A.

Lon Nol's government, the Khmer Republic, did not have the support of most of the Cambodians but it did have the support of the U.S. Over the next five years a bitter civil war was fought between the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian communists) and the Cambodian army which had the support of the U.S.A. and the ARVN (South Vietnamese Army). Cambodia was repeatedly bombed by the U.S. during this period.

U.S. bombing and the unpopularity of Lon Nol's regime led to the formation of an alliance, in 1973, between the exiled Norodom Sihanouk, and Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge (even though Sihanouk and Pol Pot had little in common). By 1975 the Khmer Rouge was in control of Cambodia, and the country was renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea.

Over the next three years, one of the most brutal regimes that the world has seen flourished under Pol Pot. Up to three million Cambodian people were killed and most of the country-

side was laid waste. The regime of Pol Pot came to an end when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1978, and Pol Pot fled with other Khmer Rouge leaders to the Thai border.

For the past twenty years there has been division, famine, instability and civil war in Cambodia. An election in July 1998 resulted in a political stalemate between Hun Sen (Cambodian People's Party), Prince Ranariddh (Sianouk's son and leader of Funcinpec) and Sam Rainsy, the leader of the third major party. The stalemate was broken in November 1998 with the return of Prince Ranariddh from Bangkok and the agreement between Hun Sen and Ranariddh, to form a coalition. This sequence of events is one of the stories covered in the documentary.

It would be wrong to suggest that all of Cambodia's problems have been solved, but in the last year Cambodia has probably enjoyed its longest period of relative peace and stability in over thirty years.

General Questions

1. What did you learn from this documentary about:

- a) the nature of everyday life in Phnom Penh
- b) life in the Cambodian countryside
- c) the importance of family in Cambodian society
- d) the suffering that many Cambodian people have endured in the past fifteen years.

Support each of your comments with reference to at least two specific conversations or events in the documentary.

2. What is the value of a documentary such as this for Australian viewers? Is it likely to contribute to Australians' understanding of the Asia-Pacific region?

3. As you watched the documentary, did you have an impression that journalists were acting for the camera, or was there a sense that we were unseen observers in the whole process of collecting and reporting news? Refer to specific parts of the documentary to support your answer.

4. Do you think that there is a special sort of person who becomes involved in a venture such as *The Post*, or are most of the journalists just there by accident?

Media & Journalism

The Post, its staff, premises and working conditions do not fit with the usual image of a modern media organisation. The Editor-in-Chief, an American, Michael Hayes, who had been working in Asia for seven years, began the paper in 1992. His explanation for the venture is quite simple: '... that, you know, an English language newspaper might have a chance of making it'. At the time that this documentary begins, it looks as though his dream may have been fading, but subsequent events late in 1998 bring about a change, not just in the situation in Cambodia but also in *The Post's* own fortunes.

Other journalists introduced include: Kathleen Hayes, Managing Director, Matthew Grainger, Editor, and Peter Sainsbury, the New Zealand-born journalist who broke the story of the death of Pol Pot. Chea Sotheacheath, who takes us to the village where he was born and gives an insight into the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime, and Bou Sarouen, whose family also fell victim to the Khmer Rouge, are among the local journalists without whom *The Post* could not operate.

Beth Moorthy, a young American journalist, regards herself as being privileged to be working at *The Post*: 'I was one of the few warm bodies left in town without a job ... And to be thrown into covering these stories ... At home I'd be covering what the dog catcher did'.

1. The staff of *The Phnom Phen Post* obviously work under difficult circumstances. Identify some of the difficulties that they face in:

- a) the gathering of news for the paper
- b) the verification of facts
- c) the actual production of the paper.

2. In spite of the difficulties that they are shown to face, do you



Kathleen Hayes, managing director *Phnom Penh Post*

think that this documentary romanticises the life of a foreign correspondent? Give examples of incidents or aspects of the documentary which may help to convey this impression.

3. What does this documentary indicate about the commitment and dedication of the journalists working on *The Post*? How does it indicate this? Does the material that you have seen in this documentary support or challenge your previous views about journalists?

4. Why does *The Post's* editor match local journalists with expatriate journalists? Could the paper be successful without local journalists on the staff? Refer to two specific incidents or stories that would not have been possible without co-operation between local and expatriate journalists.

5. Consider the manner in which the documentary has been edited. How does the editing help to create a sense of a story unfolding? Does the editing and post-production convey a sense of immediacy and urgency in the events that are portrayed, or is there an air of 'organised chaos' about the way that the paper and its stories emerge?

6. Who would buy *The Phnom Penh Post*? Try to identify and profile at least three different buyers and readers.

7. Can you suggest any reasons why an international foreign language newspaper may be unpopular in a country such as Cambodia?

8. You can access a summary of the latest edition of *The Phnom Penh Post* via the Internet. Type Cambodia into the search then select 'All the World's Newspapers'. You can also access a summary of 'The Voice of Cambodia Radio International' from the same site. Compare the two newspapers for content, style, presentation, etc.

History & Politics

1. Can you explain why Norodom Sihanouk and Pol Pot would have formed an alliance in 1973, when they had such different philosophies?

2. What were the long-term consequences of this alliance for the people of Cambodia?

3. Over the two-month period that this documentary was being filmed, the history of Cambodia was changing. In political terms, what actually happened and why was it so significant?

4. You are introduced to three main players in the current political process in Cambodia, Prince Ranariddh, Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy. Do some further research into the background, political philosophies and activities of one of these three.

5. Michael's seventy-six word introduction may not have been in keeping with the rules of journalism, but it did sum up the situation, as he saw it, in November 1998:

For the first time in almost three and a half decades, Cambodia is on the verge of finding itself with a government that is recognised internationally, a political environment without any significant competing ideologies, an absence of any major armed conflict internally among warring factions vying for power, the near complete dissolution of the Khmer Rouge as a threat to national security and no regional or international powers attempting to interfere in the nation's domestic affairs.

To what extent is this introduction a realistic view of the situation in Cambodia at that time? To answer this properly, students



Pok Sokundara, translator/journalist

should consult the overseas news sections of the major daily papers. Up-to-date information could also be gained from the Internet — simply search under 'Cambodia'.

English

1. Imagine you are a reporter on *The Phnom Penh Post*. Using one of the stories followed in the film, construct an account of a day spent researching, interviewing and putting together the material for an article.
2. Why do you think that the editors of this paper see its publication as so important? Do you believe that the expatriates and locals working on this newspaper can really make a difference in Cambodia?
3. We are told that Michael Hayes gambled \$50,000 to start the paper in 1992. What does this tell you about the sort of person he is — his ideals, his passions, his weaknesses, etc? What else do you learn about Michael Hayes from the film?
4. Do you think it is possible for a free press to exist in Cambodia? Use evidence from the film to support your view.
5. Using some of the exchanges and conversations between Western and Cambodian journalists as starting points, construct a dialogue between a Western and a local journalist about their different attitudes to work, to the paper, to leisure, to the political situation and to bribery.

6. Look in the foreign news section of your daily newspaper or consult the Internet, to find out about an issue that is making news in Cambodia today. Write about the issue in the form of an article for *The Post*.

Environmental Studies

1. Explain the toxic waste issue that is revealed by *The Post's* journalists.
2. The issue of the dumping of toxic waste is one that troubles all countries. Is it less of a political issue in undeveloped countries or countries where there is political turmoil? Why?
3. What impact do you think the exposure of the toxic waste scandal in *The Post* will have on the issue? Explain your answer.
4. What actions could people in other countries take, to ensure that this sort of pollution of Cambodia is not able to continue?

International Studies

The sequence of events depicted in the film, and the circumstances surrounding them, provide a rich resource for students of International Studies. Any teachers choosing Cambodia as a context for the study of international relations in the South East Asian region

would find a wealth of material in the documentary itself.

1. How do the events that you see in this documentary illustrate the fragility of stable government in Cambodia?
2. What impact would a more stable Cambodia have on the surrounding region?
3. Michael Hayes believed that the new government in Cambodia, formed in October 1998, would be recognised internationally. Has this been the case? (Consult the foreign news section of your daily paper, or the Internet.)

Access to *The Phnom Penh Post* via the Internet — www.phnompenhpost.com/ PhnomPenhPost — would provide teachers with an up-to-date source of data and a further perspective on changes in the region. ■

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