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Televising history at the trials

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An award-winning British TV producer is helping Cambodians stay abreast of developments at the Khmer Rouge tribunal by airing a weekly programme featuring highlights and analysis

Horrendous images of the babies being smashed against the trees: "I didn't recognise it at first," says Pol Pot's former chief torturer from the witness dock.

The television camera cuts to a shot of the dual row of Cambodian and foreign judges. Some frown; others remain impassive.

The footage then flips back to the accused, capturing the reptilian pride emanating from 66-year-old Kaing Guek Eav, better known as "Duch", as he continues in a measured tone: "It was done by my subordinates. I do not blame them because this was under my responsibility."

We cut back to a well-lit TV studio, where a pair of handsome, businesslike co-presenters promptly begins quizzing a Cambodian legal expert on intricacies of the case.

Male presenter: "Some of Duch's evidence seems carefully calculated rather than spontaneous. Is that a fair statement?"

"The way he answers each question cautiously may make the judges and observers sceptical about what he says..." begins the guest in response.

Hoping for closure

The aforementioned represents a sample minute of the 24 minutes allotted weekly (excepting repeats) to covering the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia - the long-awaited Khmer Rouge genocide trials - by Cambodian Television Network (CTN).

It is hoped that the trials will bring closure to survivors' grief, and that the process will also educate young Cambodians about an era they know little about.

The show, *Duch On Trial*, summarises the weekly developments with a deft blend of courtroom 'action', explanation and analysis. It's slicker than typical local media output - though a company called Khmer Mekong Films (KMF) is credited with the production.

It turns out that a 64-year-old Cambridge-educated BAFTA-winning former BBC producer, who helped shape primetime pop culture for millions of British telly addicts for three decades, is the man behind KMF.

Award-winning

Having won awards for his contribution to iconic British television shows such as *Eastenders* (he cast characters like 'Dirty Den' and Nick Cotton) and *Crossroads*, and founded the kids' soap opera *Byker Grove* in the process, Matthew Robinson came to Cambodia six years ago on a contract from BBC World Service Trust to make a health-promoting drama.

"A hundred episodes; that's finished," he says, briskly.

Robinson founded the film and television production company in 2006 - and has run it from Phnom Penh ever since.

The company's involvement in the landmark tribunals started when it won a bid to produce some pre-trial short films, funded by the British government.

"It was part of their funding for developing countries," says Robinson, who came up with a semi-dramatized treatment to explain a complex, convoluted trial system - that has had international legal experts scratching their heads - "in simple terms to ordinary, uneducated Cambodians".

The resulting series of six films, titled *Time For Justice*, was screened to thousands of villagers as part of a nationwide outreach programme. This jolted horrific memories in its older viewers, evident from the filmed post-screening debates.

"This film reminded me of what Pol Pot did," exclaims an old, bespectacled man. "It was the same as in the story. My brothers and sisters all died."

Painful generation gap

He begins to cry. "I cannot speak because I am overcome," he eventually sobs.

His testimony stands in sharp contrast to that of the jeans-clad teenage girl who subsequently says: "Now I believe that this regime really did exist. It's shocking to hear older people talk about what happened to their families.

"When I was first told that so many people were killed, I didn't believe it."

Such footage exposes the painful generation gap between those who survived the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and their children and grandchildren, who are often left in the dark when it comes to their country's recent history.

Despite the education campaign, a pre-trial survey found 85 percent of respondents "had little or no knowledge" of the tribunal, although court officials disputed its findings.

A subsequent study conducted by the Human Rights Centre at the University of California in the fall of 2008 found that as much as 70 percent of Cambodia's population is under the age of 30 - and four out of five members of this generation know little of the Khmer Rouge years.

"It is a problem," acknowledges Robinson. "That was why we commissioned an initial focus group to find out whether those beliefs are really true. And partly they were, though I don't think the intelligent [younger] generation thinks it's all fictional.

"In terms of 'bang for buck', outreach really doesn't compare with television," he continues.

"You have to have an awful lot of motorbikes and projection equipment, and a lot of people going into a lot of villages to get anywhere near even 10 percent of one showing on television."

When the British Embassy won additional government funding to produce a television show to cover the Khmer Rouge tribunals, KMF was invited to advise.

"I suggested a weekly sum-up of the weekly highlights presented in bite-sized chunks - again aiming at rural Cambodians," says Robinson.

"It was never intended for the legal community or more highly educated Cambodians; you'd start off with a different approach for that target audience."

Impressive results

The results have still impressed. After initially expressing doubts about the programme, CTN now schedules regular repeats of key episodes in addition to the regular Monday lunchtime slot.

And, whereas the funding initially only covered the first eight weeks of the courtroom developments, the show's success has prompted further funds that should extend to covering the closing of Duch's trial - and hopes that additional donations could see it become a permanent fixture on the TV schedule while the tribunals are running.

Meanwhile, the wisdom and experience Robinson brings to the editing suite are setting new standards for local production values.

"Cambodian people have never seen a show like this. We include so much information, so many details, in the 24 minutes; we cannot afford to waste any time," says male co-presenter, 29-year-old Neth Pheaktra, who is also deputy chief of staff at the Post.

"My friends tell me that as presenters, Ung Chan Sophea and I seem very professional," says Neth Pheaktra, who says he sometimes gets recognised by viewers. They ask him why he never smiles on TV.

"Cambodian people have never seen this presenting style before. Lots of TV presenters - they talk a lot, and they're always joking, but they never say anything.

"I cannot joke about such a serious subject."

His co-presenter, 26-year-old Ung Chan Sophea, a reporter for French newspaper *Cambodge Soir Hebdo* and Radio France International, says before the show aired "some of my friends and other people around me told me 'It's useless doing a trial programme' - but after they'd watched it, they changed.

"Suddenly it was 'Oh! It's a worthwhile, interesting programme'."

National calling

Both presenters feel duty-bound to contribute to this moment in Cambodian history, a bittersweet note of progress in an impoverished nation still struggling to rehabilitate its crippled economic and human resources.

Moreover, "if we don't have this programme, some victims will not know the outcome of the trials", believes the show's resident legal expert, Sok Sam Oeun.

"We want all victims to be released from their suffering. And the best way of doing that is by giving them the right to follow this trial."

Greater outreach

And the best medium for doing so happens to be television.

As Matthew Robinson notes: "Although the outreach people did a very good job and probably got [Voices For Justice] shown to 50,000-100,000 people, one showing on CTN is going to get at least 800,000, if not a million people."