

## New Professional Journalism Charter Speedily Implemented Only Days After Input Deadline



*Information Minister Neth Pheaktra speaks at a press conference to launch the Charter for Professional Journalism on August 6, 2024, a photo post on the Ministry of Information's Facebook.*

The Ministry of Information seemingly rushed the promulgation of the Charter for Professional Journalism on Tuesday, only days after the deadline for input by media associations with just a few suggestions included.

On July 24, the ministry held a [consultation](#) with journalists, media associations and relevant institutions on the draft charter, followed by a 10-day period for stakeholders to review and provide feedback by August 2.

But four days after the deadline, on August 6, the ministry promulgated the charter without further discussion on the input by relevant parties. The charter comes into effect immediately. Information Minister Neth Pheaktra said the expeditious issuance of the charter was to “establish order” in the media and strengthen journalism ethics. He remarked that “under the pretext of press freedom”, Cambodians had “fallen in a trap” of receiving true and false information.

“At this point, it was necessary for the ministry to accelerate the work [implementation of the charter] to establish order in the information sector and organize it by providing secure information to citizens and strengthening journalism ethics.”

Pheaktra told a news conference on Tuesday that although the deadline for feedback was August 2, they continued to receive input on August 3.

Some points in the comments by the media associations or relevant organizations were accepted, but others were rejected as they were “perceptions of foreigners”, he mentioned.

“Some of their comments were already in the charter. They were perceptions and interpretations, and some were accepted for improvement as they were also good,” he said.

“But some comments were technical; they were just the views of foreigners, so we reserve the right [to exclude them] in view of our sovereignty and laws.”

While the ministry received the comments, he said it did not influence the revision of the charter as they were a compilation of inputs by the journalists.

The charter was “made by journalists themselves” through the input collection and consultations with the ministry’s legal team for a common interest, Pheaktra added.

He stressed that the charter “did not oppress the press or block freedoms”.

Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) executive director Nop Vy said the promulgation of the charter seemed “very rushed”. It left CamboJA and its partners, Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), Women’s Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC) and Cambodian Female Journalists (CFJ) with very little time to review and provide comprehensive views on the content of the charter.

In comparison to the draft charter, the official charter has some changes, Vy said, however, the ministry did not apply much of the proposals submitted by the media associations.

### **Removal of an entire article**

Last Friday, CamboJA rushed to submit the input gathered from media partners and its members to the ministry. CamboJA [requested](#) the deletion of a few phrases, and addition of some “important” phrases in the draft including Article 4, 5, 21 and 28.

He said some were amended but others remained the same. Article 5 saw “little” change.

CamboJA requested the deletion of the entire second phrase of the article because it was built around legal principles and other rules.

The article stated that “freedom of expression and freedom of the press do not grant immunity to those exercising these freedoms from punishment for acts that depart from the content of these freedoms”. However, the ministry only replaced the word “punishment” with “liability”.

According to Article 21, “practitioners in the field of media and audio-visual must maintain an independent position, be unbiased and honest, prioritize people and society’s interest, and not be in a relationship, have an interest or be under the influence of sources, donors or project managers relating to the topic and performance”.

In this article, CamboJA suggested the removal of the words “donors or project managers”, however, the ministry did not make any changes.

An important article in the draft was Article 28 where CamboJA proposed that the ministry create an independent group or press council to ensure the effectiveness of journalism and for the ministry to avoid interfering in the inspection, monitoring and performance of journalists. But the entire article and Article 29, which make up the final two chapters of the charter, were deleted.

CamboJA had suggested that Article 28 strongly advocate the establishment of a committee to evaluate and analyze the implementation of the charter for professional journalism. There needs to be independence or just a minimum number of ministry officials involved in it, otherwise, the committee would “misinterpret and suppress” the work of journalists, especially independent journalists.

Following the removal of the article, the official charter mentions that a committee will be established under a separate legal instrument.

“If there is a separate establishment, we would like to see this as an independent committee to monitor the implementation of the charter for professional journalism and code of ethics for journalists,” Vy said.

### **Ambiguous terminologies**

Meanwhile, UNESCO submitted their input one day before promulgation day.

Responding to CamboJA News via email, they said they came to know from media and civil society organizations, who have reservations on the level of consultations that it should be inclusive and participatory with enough time for review and feedback.

“UNESCO submitted its technical inputs and feedback on the draft charter to the ministry yesterday [August 5] to ensure that it aligns with international standards for effective implementation,” it wrote. “Our technical inputs and analyses are based on international standards.”

It learned from a public notice on the night of August 5 that there will be a press conference at 3pm by the ministry on August 6 to launch the charter.

“We will wait for the official version and continue to advocate for the charter to integrate key guiding principles in line with international standards,” it added.

Va Sopheanut, a freelance journalist, told CamboJA News that he was worried that the charter would restrict his freedom. He also found it “hard to understand” certain words in the charter as it had no specific meaning, such as the word “incitement”.

“The right to freedom of expression as a journalist was further narrowed in the charter,” Sopheanut said.

The ministry had said that if journalists do not abide by professional conduct, they would be subjected to the press law, but in reality, they use civil and criminal codes, Sopheanut commented.

“I hope that the press law is used on unscrupulous journalists instead of other laws which penalize journalists,” he said.

Lay Sopheavatey, a journalist at Thmey Thmey Media, told CamboJA News that the implementation of the charter was a “good thing” as it would strengthen professional ethics, particularly to guide journalists against misconduct and bias.

“I like the charter for professional journalism as it ensures journalists are not influenced by any source or biased towards any individual or party, or [write] based on personal feelings,” she said.

However, she noticed that there were some terminologies in the charter that needed explanation, such as “affecting public order”, “incite” and “national security”.

Sopheavatey added that readers would understand the phrases and words better with proper explanation.

“I am not very worried because the charter does not stipulate penalties, while many of the sections talk about respecting privacy, verifying information and opposing false information,” she added.