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SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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Steelworkers Reading the Newspaper

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, 1938. Source: www.loc.gov (CC)

Scam Stories Hinge on On-the-Ground Journalism

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Before the cyber-fraud industry and 'pig butchering' scams became the subject of diplomatic briefings and think tank reports, journalists were among the first to capture the early threads and weave them together into a picture that entailed corruption, money laundering, and labour rights abuses on an extreme scale. This essay explores how local journalists—defined as those who regularly conduct interviews and investigations in their region of residence—played a crucial role in understanding the emergence of the industry, despite immense pressure on their security and resources.

The biggest story currently gripping Southeast Asia emerged with mysterious calls for help in the late 2010s. Young men and women posted strange, personal accounts of being detained in their so-called workplaces in Cambodia and other locations in the region, gaining increasing attention from Chinese overseas communities online. Meanwhile, in an apparently unrelated development, people all over the world started sharing stories of losing the contents of their savings accounts, retirement funds, or mortgages to investment schemes pitched by an internet friend or romantic partner. Connecting these cases required journalists to take on a wild new range of reporting methods, from staking out casinos and tracing cryptocurrency transactions to collaborating with rescue groups to share victims' information.

By trying to unravel for readers this weird tale of slavery and deception, journalists were among the first to bring Southeast Asia's cyber-scam industry to international attention. This was made even more challenging by the fact that the space where the scam industry operates was generally outside the scope of the usual stories that for years had come from the region. Before, reporters were familiar with stories of Cambodians being trafficked abroad while looking for a better wage or life, but now foreigners were being trafficked *into* Cambodia. Meanwhile, the scam syndicates were conducting their crimes mainly online and the traditional criminal activities that emerged—from illegal border crossings and robberies to violence and deaths—were seen merely as symptoms of a greater web of organised crime. It took a while before the whole picture of the scam industry complex came into focus.

Researching the online scam industry revealed the huge gaps in transparency throughout Southeast Asia. Even acquiring basic information—such as the number of foreigners working legally in a country or the beneficial ownership of companies—

proved challenging, but the efforts to do so brought to light the existence of a whole underworld of unregistered and untracked entities. For journalists and researchers, this environment is a gold mine as it provides countless story angles to pursue. While this has inspired a great number of foreign fly-in correspondents, a handful of academics, and a fleet of armchair analysts, it was local, on-the-ground beat journalists—including some from China—who played the central role in investigating and documenting the growth of this industry and the social and economic devastation that it has been leaving in its wake. They are also the ones who faced the greatest threats for doing their job, be it from the scam industry, governments, or simply via exploitation of their underpaid and often thankless work.

Though this essay will touch on coverage in other countries and languages, it mostly focuses on English-language reporting of the scam industry in Cambodia. This is because this is where the cyber-scam phenomenon first came to wider public attention and where I have been operating as a journalist for several years. If it has not already been conducted, there should be a deeper analysis of the shifts and trends in Chinese-language journalism, as Chinese journalists and bloggers have been following the scam industry's growth since its early days, long before it came into the spotlight in the international press.

Cyber Slavery: Inside Cambodia's Online Scam Gangs

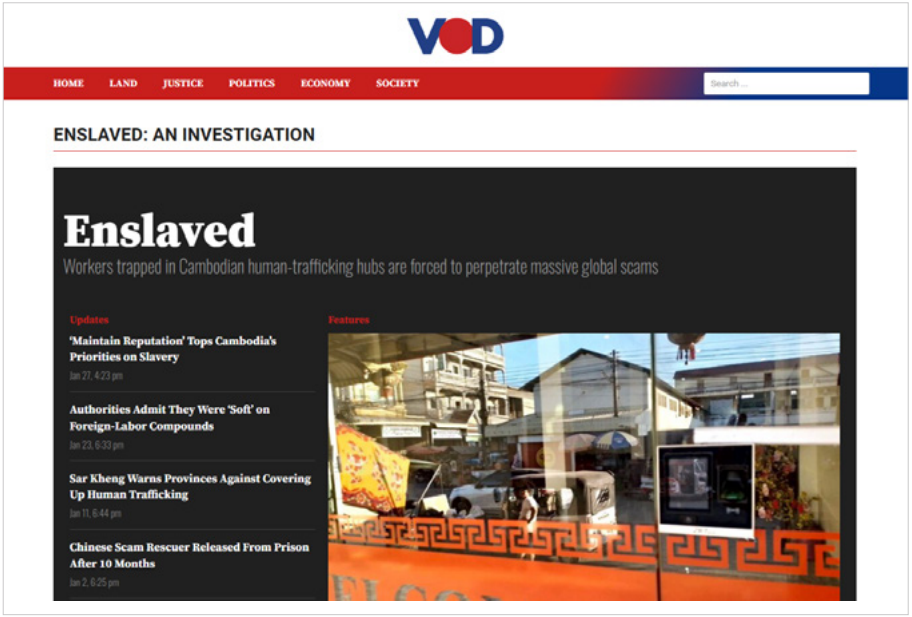
Article published by Shaun Turton in *Nikkei Asia* in September 2022. Source: *Nikkei Asia*.

International Attention

Reporting on the scam industry may seem like a clear hit for global media: victims in the United States and Europe, diplomatic controversies, and, of course, the gore and drama of torture, trafficking, and even murder. However, these elements have also often led to a reductive and simplistic understanding of the issues at stake among both the audience of these stories and the news outlets that produce and sell them, whether it is by reducing what is a very broad scam and online gambling ecosystem to just 'pig butchering' romance investment frauds or by associating the boom of the scam industry with—if not outright attributing it to—the Chinese Government, especially its landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Local news outlets and reporters have been crucial to inform international journalists, deepen global understanding of the issue, and research leads that often were uncovered but later abandoned by mainstream international media. Indeed, one of the first pieces to string together the scam industry came from a regional publication, *Nikkei Asia*. In 2021, their Cambodia-based reporter Shaun Turton published a comprehensive feature connecting a rise in complaints from workers trafficked and detained in scam compounds in Cambodia to intricate scam schemes that were targeting people in China and beyond (Turton 2021). For years before that, there had been many reports of raids on 'VoIP' (Voice over Internet Protocol) scam syndicates in Cambodia (CNE 2018). Generally, these raids were only reported locally as police activity to stop unregistered businesses, but they often involved the arrest of dozens of people at a time—a fact that suggested the nascent industry was established long before it gained global recognition. However, no-one had identified the growth of the online scam industry in the region as a major trend, and human trafficking and forced labour were not yet associated with the sector. After the *Nikkei* story first connected the dots, local Cambodian news outlet *Voice of Democracy* (*VoD*, of which I was a part) took the lead in covering the issue, enlisting both staff and freelancers to report, and dedicating an entire page to covering it under the headline 'Enslaved'.

Even though no local news outlet in Cambodia embraced the topic as an editorial focus in the same way as did *VoD*, other English-language news outlets in Cambodia covered the topic through their respective lenses, including the free-press advocacy organisation and news outlet *CamboJA News* and the pro-government *Khmer Times*. Regional news outlets and journalists reporting in English—from Thailand and Vietnam to Indonesia and Malaysia—had also reported a rise in both online scams and the number of workers detained, which led to natural collaborations between regional reporters, both officially in published stories and informally via chats and information-sharing. As mentioned, Chinese journalists and bloggers, some of whom were based in Cambodia, had noticed the issue significantly ahead of *Nikkei*'s feature. While the Chinese-language media sphere remains largely a world unto itself, there have been noteworthy instances of formal and informal collaborations with other journalists in the region.



Enslaved

Screenshot of the 'Enslaved' section of *Voice of Democracy* website. Source: *Voice of Democracy*.

As what was going on inside Cambodia started to catch international attention, *VoD* reporters (including myself) frequently worked as fixers and translators for the onslaught of foreign correspondents who travelled to the country in 2022 and 2023. Some foreign correspondents' pieces introduced new elements to the narrative. For instance, *Al Jazeera*'s *101 East* named several Cambodian tycoons and newly minted Cambodian nationals who owned properties propping up the scam industry (101 East 2022), while *ProPublica* found intriguing crypto-networks and technology that allowed scammers to reach targets and move money with ease (Podkul and Liu 2022). *Bloomberg* journalist Zeke Faux (2023) even managed to slip a couple of chapters about the online scam industry in Southeast Asia into his wacky journey through the world of crypto-fraud in his 2023 nonfiction book, *Number Go Up*. Though international reports undoubtedly helped elevate global attention to scam industries, local reporters who worked as fixers often expressed frustration to me with the way some foreign correspondents treated them and even how they handled the privacy concerns of their sources, which are persistent issues when journalists fly in to cover a story (see, for instance, Klein and Plaut 2017).

By the end of 2023, 'pig butchering' was heavily integrated into news vocabulary. Following the early international reports that invested in investigations, several major (and sometimes unexpected) media outlets, including the *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *The Dr Phil Show*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, all took up the story with varying degrees of nuance. As pig butchering became well known, it was often narrowed to its most accessible definition: the romance-cum-investment scam that utilises workers—often forced to labour under duress—to drain people, including Westerners, of significant amounts of money. Simultaneously, as the world was becoming familiar with this type of scam, the industry evolved due to waves of crackdowns and increasingly aware target populations.

Regional media keep following events as they occur, but US and European media are cooling on the scam industry, perhaps in part because the narrative is changing. One could even argue the scam industry never received the attention it deserves due to the complexity of explaining the topic and the general lack of focus on Southeast Asia as a region. The scammers continue to shift their methodology and style of operations to trick both their marks and law enforcement, so it becomes harder to teach readers—and editors outside Cambodia—about these new nuances. Moreover, global interest has shifted as other conflicts have taken the spotlight—most notably, Russia's sustained assaults on Ukraine and Hamas's attacks on Israel in October 2023, followed by the Israeli Government's genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip and other Palestinian territories.

Regional and local news outlets continue to have a stronger inclination to publish scam-related stories, but even they are vexed by several problems, including the challenges of reporting on such an opaque topic and the dangers inherent in so doing. Some nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and the tenacious website-turned-newsletter *Cyber Scam Monitor* share information about the industry publicly and privately, but they cannot replace local news outlets, which have the benefit of developing sources and gaining access. This is something that is mostly missing now in Cambodia, as the government has cracked down on critical voices willing to report on this issue—including *VoD*, as I will discuss in more detail below.

A Dangerous Game

Reporters based in-country may be the best suited to produce nuanced and timely coverage of emerging trends in the cyber-scam industry, staying on top of changes and key events around a constantly moving target. Yet, they face the greatest challenges and risks as the criminal elements behind these operations, their elite backers, and complicit state actors are bent on preventing exactly this type of grounded coverage of the industry.

Several incidents throughout 2022 and 2023 demonstrate the danger of reporting on scams, but none so much as the 'blood slave' case of early 2022. The case originated with an escaped scam worker's testimony, recorded from his hospital bed, which included a

claim that the man's boss had repeatedly extracted and sold his blood when he failed to earn money for the company (Ye 2022). The story went viral in China and then caught global attention when it was reported in English. It was at this point that the Cambodian Government came down on the former worker and the leader of an informal Chinese rescue group that was helping to spread word of the case. A Chinese reporter who covered the case also allegedly received threats via phone calls and social media messages, in a dynamic that is well known among Chinese-language journalists working in Cambodia (Mech and Keeton-Olsen 2022).

This one case highlights several problems with which local reporters must contend: how to ensure safety for themselves and their sources, and how to properly verify facts. The only place reporters can exercise full control is their research and, even then, this requires weighing the value of the story against what can be verified. The story of the alleged 'blood slave' seemed a perfect representation of the torture and greed that reporters already knew were happening based on repeated testimonies from other victims, but it also went beyond those stories in its villainous drama. Ultimately, it emerged that the man had embellished his testimony. It was true that he had escaped from a scam compound in extremely bad health, but under closer scrutiny, his account of having his blood extracted proved to be false.

The question then becomes, how much can be verified? Reporters asked medical staff who vouched for the story, as well as the rescue group leader, who was later arrested, while citing a statement from the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh that acknowledged the case, including its sanguinary aspects (Mech and Liu 2022). But how much further can they go to verify? Finding the man's peers inside the scam business would be challenging, if not impossible. Even if it were possible to track them down, his colleagues would have an incentive to not talk or to lie, either out of fear or because they are satisfied with their work and do not want to lose it. And identifying and confronting a scam boss are near impossible, if not outright dangerous to reporters. To some extent, the case echoes the ethical dilemmas presented by *Rolling Stone*'s profile of the survivor of a gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity, which fell apart under scrutiny and thus created greater risk for both reporters trying to cover sexual assault and survivors willing to tell similar stories (Coronel et al. 2015).

No story is published in a vacuum, certainly not that of the 'blood slave'. With people already publishing details of the story online, journalists on the ground may have felt compelled to rush to aggregate the story and potentially skirt around fact-checking. This situation should, rather, have urged them to conduct due diligence or even pursue new and unique angles unlikely to be covered by fly-ins or aggregators. As stories go viral and dozens of news outlets republish the same information, sometimes word for word, on-the-ground journalists are uniquely placed to verify rumours, address what remains unknown or challenging to confirm, and sometimes even extend the coverage

and add depth to the narrative. The type of journalism that can set the record straight can come—almost exclusively—from journalists on the ground. Even so, their proximity to the action may put them at greater risk.

The blood slave case also hints at the greater challenges facing journalists in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, irrespective of the cyber-scam industry. Governments across Southeast Asia are pressuring journalists at an increased rate. Reporters in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries across the board have limited freedoms to report and access information, sometimes in the name of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, even after daily routines and economic activity largely resumed (Walker 2024). Individually, authorities in these countries have also shown increased ire towards journalists, with Vietnam jailing multiple reporters on spurious charges (RSF 2023) and Thailand using *lèse-majesté* as an excuse to go after journalists (Wongcha-um and Thepgumpanat 2024). Nearby China has effectively stifled its local and foreign press corps (FCCC 2021), while Hong Kong—once a bastion of press freedom—has dramatically declined in press freedom rankings (Liu 2023).

The trend of suppressing the independent press certainly extends to Cambodia. The Cambodian Government often categorises independent journalists as opposition party members and thus swings its axe to limit their activities, while making information increasingly difficult to access. On the eve of the 2023 national election, then prime minister Hun Sen revoked the media licence for all *VoD*'s Khmer and English-language reporting over one issue with a Khmer-language article, which led to widespread speculation about the real reason for the forced closure, with some observers believing it was due to the outlet's emphasis on the scam industry (Ng 2023). While the real reason for Hun Sen's action is impossible to know, the result is plain for all to see, with reporting on the cyber-scam industry and other persistent social and political issues—from labour abuses and land disputes to extensive corruption allegations—becoming increasingly rare. Journalists in Cambodia say they have since struggled to cover the scam industry, and news outlets more widely have faced threats, from both an incoming code of regulations placed on all journalists (Seoung 2024) and coordinated social media attacks (Va 2024). Then in September 2024, Mech Dara, a Cambodian journalist who doggedly reported on the online scam industry, was arrested, jailed and charged with incitement over his social media posts. The social media post at the center of his arrest, which was shared around social media before he posted, was not related to the scam industry and proved to be inaccurate. However, many international observers speculated his arrest was related to his reporting on the cyberscam business, and the punishment is likely to add to the existing climate of self-censorship among practicing journalists (Chan 2023). Local journalists are canaries in the coalmine and now the miners have few birds left to warn them of impending danger as they toil in the darkness.

Cambodia's Cyber Slaves

Recent report by the author and Mech Dara in *CamboJA News*. Source: *CamboJA News*.

Riding the Wind

Human trafficking in Southeast Asia has always been a hot topic, in both news and day-to-day conversations. The phrase 'human trafficking' instantly conjures ideas of vulnerable, sometimes tortured people—often poor, often women—dragged through jungles and stowed in the backs of vans, sold to the highest bidder. Those stories are as easy to tell as a fairytale: there is a clear victim, a dastardly villain, and likely somewhat of an action sequence in between. Those stories have been told—well, poorly, and every level in between—thousands of times.

This narrative arc might be ingrained in our minds, but it is rarely the true or complete story. From the emergence of the Southeast Asian scam narrative, the advocates and experts who are monitoring the trend from a distance have at times made grave errors of fact and interpretation, but local reporters and others who have been conducting solid research on the ground are potentially better placed to help shape the narrative in real time.

A solid example of interpretative errors and the slow uptake in understanding of trends can be seen clearly in the US State Department's annual global trafficking in persons (TIP) reports. While observers were starting to piece together reports of Chinese

nationals detained in scam compounds in Cambodia in 2021 and 'VoIP fraud rings' into a more cohesive picture, the State Department completely missed the trend, making only one oblique reference acknowledging that some Chinese nationals were being trafficked to unspecified countries to conduct phone scams (US State Department 2021). The 2022 TIP report finally acknowledged the scope of Cambodia's scam industry and thus downgraded the country to tier 3, the lowest possible ranking (US State Department 2022). But that report still failed to capture the significance and size of Cambodia's scam industry and made some dubious errors, including tying the scam business to China's BRI. It was not until 2023 that the State Department seemed to have a firmer grasp on the nuances of the scam industry, but at this point the nebulous business had begun changing shape yet again (US State Department 2023).

As more observers started to learn about the scam industry, many painted it with a palette of presumptions and generalisations—often to serve their own agendas. In the beginning, some confused and conflated the human trafficking of foreigners into Cambodia with the trafficking networks that send Cambodians to other dangerous businesses, including the fishing industry and China's bridal market. Only later did it dawn on them that this trafficking was moving *towards* and *inside* Cambodia. Even when the phenomenon began to receive the attention it deserved, it was often through a prism of geopolitical lenses. US officials, think tanks, and NGOs drew flawed links to Chinese state-backed activities, made sure to refer to scam operations as 'PRC-invested' (US State Department 2023), and discussed imaginary ties between legitimate Chinese investment, such as the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, and human trafficking (Loughlin 2022). This language and framing were in turn picked up by numerous journalists and analysts outside the country.

The scam industry is now part of mainstream international discussions, but the dynamics on the ground are shifting faster than anyone can capture in print. For example, journalists, NGOs, and other responders often appear eager to write stories about prototypical victims as well as some stylised comic-book mafioso brutally beating and torturing workers until they successfully scam someone. This is not wrong in many cases, but this black-and-white victim/villain narrative is no longer the standard in Southeast Asia's scam industry. Many businesses are adapting, using more sophisticated carrot-and-stick methods to keep workers in line, and they appear to be deploying increasingly advanced technology to stay one step ahead of law enforcement and target new markets. Anecdotally, the scam industry in Cambodia has also been employing Cambodian workers, who are reportedly free to come and go between shifts (Mech and Keeton-Olsen 2024). The dynamic of slave/boss also misses the fact that, as much as we may not want to confront it, many people enter the industry willingly. In many cases, they do so due to desperation and limited economic opportunities and, by not telling their stories, we fail to capture something crucial: the structural issues that lead—maybe even push—people into this dark corner.

Journalists, and the media at large, are partially responsible for failing to update the narrative. For a journalist, it is always easier to find cases that match the archetype that we have in mind based on experience than to explore and redefine blurry concepts like scamming and trafficking. Even when we find something different, editors may stop it from getting out: in my own experience, editors, particularly internationally, have shut down story ideas that do not fit the idea of 'pig butchering' that they acquired from previous mainstream coverage, and they have also found changes in scam industry trends not relevant enough to their international audiences to publish. Of course, editors are not entirely to blame, as this comes from the desire of news outlet owners to fill their publications with content that caters to what they perceive are their readers' interests, to sell more ads. There has also been a blindness to purported victims and heroes who are not white Westerners; this is a trend we can see throughout media coverage broadly (Robertson 2021).

Journalists hold the unique privilege of setting the narrative and exposing the public to the issues about which they should know and care. Whether a reporter's beat is related to climate change, racial justice, the scam industry, or anything that is not celebrity gossip or cute animal videos, they tend to find that few readers will naturally gravitate to their subject. Therefore, it is their job to convince readers, editors, and everyone in between to listen to their story idea; and, after publishing one story, they bear a responsibility to continue to monitor the topic and find ways to provide relevant updates, because now that topic is on people's minds. Editors and news outlets, too, must shake off their perception of the news as a clickable, money-making machine. As participatory media advocate Darryl Holliday (2021) has written: 'Without a driving mission, journalism is guided by profit and, often, power.'

For the range of reasons presented in this essay, on-the-ground journalists have much more adaptability and fewer boundaries to accomplish this goal—especially now that most of us are no longer bound to a single print newspaper masthead. The journalists who are willing to learn about the scam industry—and keep learning, without perpetuating stereotypes and calling themselves experts—are key to driving the narrative about scams and building the pressure needed to eradicate the industry.

Conclusion

Coverage of the scam industry has neatly laid out many of the challenges that the journalism industry as a whole is facing today. These issues are making it more difficult for local journalists to work on the ground. We are trifled by the financial concerns of news outlets, whose CEOs are still complaining about the money lost to social media corporations and the internet in general—even though these have been known problems for decades now. As most of us do not have stable jobs in the industry, we cannot

invest time and resources in investigations, including staking out scam compounds in person. Those who work for smaller, local news outlets must contend with the 'fly-in' correspondents who try to scoop the locals for their own gain and publish a story that often replicates what local reporters have already written and, in some cases, even gets basic facts wrong. That is especially true in Southeast Asia, where foreign visitors can easily get by on a surface level but tend to gravely misunderstand the deeper dynamics at play. And all of that is on top of the monitoring, suspicion, suppression, and often punishment that local journalists experience at the hands of increasingly paranoid governments.

And, despite the factors working against them, local journalists are still among the first to raise the alarm about new, emerging, and often dangerous trends in the scam industry and beyond. Though some of them work faster and with a lower bar for verification than researchers, international NGOs, and governments, that speed better prepares them to respond to dynamic and tech-dominated businesses such as the scam industry's digitally driven and crypto-backed operations. Importantly, journalists either attempt to maintain no allegiances or transparently disclose for whom they are working—at least when they are operating ethically. They still make mistakes in reporting, but they are held personally and publicly accountable for their actions, which is often more than can be said about officials from governments and international NGOs. Local journalists in particular face grave risks—from possible detention to threats against personal safety—simply to shed light on malfeasance and wrongdoing.

The trend of diminishing cyber-scam coverage from Cambodia does not reflect a lack of interest in the subject, but rather the greater threats to media both locally and globally. There are more scam victims to interview, and the scam industry is evolving. But if local journalists cannot continue to investigate scams and other social problems as they have in the past three years, the corruption and abuses will continue unabated. ●