Report on BlogFest Asia 2012

Introduction

BlogFestAsia 2012, an annual gathering of bloggers, took place from November 1st to 5th, 2012. This is the third regional blogger gathering event that took place in Asia. Nearly 200 from many countries gathered together at Build Bright University in Siem Reap, a temple town of Cambodia.

The event was organized with several purposes. First of all, Cambodia is growing economically, and there is obviously a need for the flow of information and knowledge to this part of the region. Also, Asia has seen a boom in technology and development; therefore, BlogFest Asia serves as a platform for information exchange. It was important to get bloggers and social media enthusiasts as well as technology experts in the Southeast Asian region to come and share their experience and knowledge related to technology development in this region. Furthermore, it will help bridge understanding between people in the region and help participants benefit from skills and expertise brought along by international participants or experts.

Looking at a small side of the event, as the ASEAN region moves towards economic integration by 2015, it is essential that bloggers and social media enthusiasts from this part of the region come together and forge a strong sense of community amongst each other. The Internet is the trendiest platform which can be at the forefront of unification of ASEAN communities, and help us develop a strong and common bond of regional identity and ethos.

When the power of traditional media subsides, some governments put some restrictions on them. Therefore, social media and blogging have come to play an important role in informing and sharing. During the event, participants discussed Internet security, social media for social causes/profit (companies and NGOs), Internet freedom or freedom of expression online and challenges against going online. Siem Reap was also picked because it stands in testament to the greatness of Cambodia and its identity to the world.

The event became possible because of sponsorships and contributions from many agencies including the Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (Spider), the US Embassy, the UK Embassy, the Asia Foundation, the Dot.Asia, the Global Voince Online, the Wikimedia Foundation, and the private company named Sabay. Also there is also contribution in-kind as the funding channel intermediary or direct support to the participants such as the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, the Open Institute, Rising Voice Project of the Global Voice Online, Southeast Asia Press Alliance, and Mozilla Foundation.

More importantly, this event was become successful because of the engagement and contribution from 26 volunteers who mostly are young and passionate in civic engagement and blogosphere.

Background

Co-founded by Isaac Mao (Hong Kong), Ching Chiao (Hong Kong) and Jeremiah Foo (Malaysia) and supported by bloggers from around Asia, BlogFest.Asia is spreading fast within Asia, hoping to create a platform that unites Asian bloggers who will discuss, share and develop new ideas to promote a broader space for expression in a world growing smaller.

The previous two BlogFest Asia events were organized in Hong Kong and Malaysia in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Organized by prominent Cambodian bloggers like Tharum Bun (tharum.com/blog) and Sopheap Chak (sopheapfocus.com), Kounila Keo (blueladyblog.com) this year, BlogFestAsia 2012 saw a lot of participants from 15 countries including Australia, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Myanmar, Sigapore, Italy, Australia and Malaysia. The original steering committee also provided the Cambodian organizers advice on some content of BlogFest. Moreover, bloggers from countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines are expressing their interest to organize BlogFest in their country next year - as the venue of BlogFestAsia has to rotate every year.

As the event proceeded, it drew a lot of attention from the local and international media which also highlighted Internet Freedom and Internet Security for bloggers in the region (see annex below). Our event also took place shortly after a few Asian bloggers were prosecuted in their countries, however demanding justice and rights to expression. The event also came at the right time when the number of Asian bloggers is growing tremendously. This regional gathering of bloggers serves as a signal for unity for information sharing and network creating.

The Event

Both local and international participants arrived a day before the event actually kicked off. To make it easy for the volunteers as well as participants, BlogFestAsia organizers informed them to arrive a day before the event started. November 2nd kicked off with participants on 24 tuk tuks being driven around to explore the temples and Siem Reap. November 2nd included a heritage tour to temples, cultural villages and Siem Reap town for the purpose of preparing for the blogpost writing contest to be announced on November 5th. Approximately 200 international as well as local participants arrived on November 3rd, with the short opening speech by Dr. In Vireacheat, chairman of Build Bright University Council, later which was the keynote speech about Internet power delivered by David Isaksson from SPIDER, one of our sponsors from the event. It followed by the panel discussion on the practical aspect of internet empowerment where the panelists were discussing on the aspect of gender, language, and the civic engagement. The afternoon sessions included strong topics taught by experts flying from different countries and region. The topics ranged from Internet security, photography workshop, telling stories through visual, self-publishing via blogging, blogging, Wikipedia and other alternative form of media.

November 4th began with country report for which we invited a representative from each and every country represented at BlogFestAsia to come and give a brief about social media and blogging situations in their respective countries. Considered as the most interesting part of the sessions, the session allowed participants to listen to different challenges and advantages which each and every Asian country (involved) receives. It was later followed by a talk by Ed Legaspi from Southeast Asian Press Alliance about Freedom of Expression/Speech in Southeast Asia. Like November 3rd, November 4th also had breakout sessions on Internet Security, Internet Freedom/Responsibilities, Online Advocacy, Cyberlaw Crime in the Philippines, Journalistic values, etc.

The Minister of Information, Khieu Kanharith, graced the event with his presence on November 5th with him asking participants to express their impressions of the event and after which gave a speech about media and technology in Cambodia. The three winners of Blog Contest were later announced with the Minister giving the prizes to them. Before ending his speech, Khieu Kanharith said that conferences such as BlogFest Asia are invaluable in this modern era where the internet is becoming increasingly powerful.

"Bloggers become more vocal and active in their activities, internet and online security can be an important topic for them as well as for other internet users in the region," said one of the BlogFestAsia 2012 organizers.

Challenges & Obstacles

Even though the event was considered a success and achieved its major goals such as getting people together and sharing information as well as creating bond, the event however faced a few challenges:

- Financial cash flow - a bit delayed/late because of many holidays and late transactions by the banks. However, the organizing team could overcame the challenge through using our own cash in advance - and reimbursed later with that cash flow.
- Sudden changes of attendance - some participants dropped at the last minute which then affects to our agenda arrangement as well as the participation.
- Team division and decision making - there shall be specific task division with decision making power among the organizing team members to engage with specific activities including fundraising, volunteer, and other arrangement. Regardless this fact, the organizing team could somehow manage to help each other during the pre and during the conference proceeding and with the engagement from all volunteers whose roles were defined clearly among each other including the registration, minute taking, social media, and logistics.
- Formality of the event - since the event involved high ranking officials - stage backdrops required formality as well as the national anthem which our organizing team didn't expect.
- Hot weather in Siem Reap could be an external factor affecting our organization as well since some participants could not resist with the weather and become sick and ultimately this affected to participation to some extent.
- No snacks provided during the break which the organizing team should have provided.

Conclusion & Lessons Learnt

At the end, our organizing team would like to thank all kinds of support from our sponsors and also contributors to make possible BlogFest Asia 2012, a meeting of Asian bloggers and technologists held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, from 1st to 5th November 2012. Also special thanks to our volunteers. This event also would not be possible and meaningful without the participation from all bloggers and others who attended and shared with each other information passionately during the event. Reading from all feedback from our participants, we appreciated all complimentary as well as the constructive criticism that helped improve our organization and this will become our lesson learnt that we would like to share with everyone for better organization of next events:

- Secure funding first (arrived at hands first) to allow the space for organizing team to manage and arrange the event more peacefully without risking the incurred expenditure or late reimbursement for the planned package provided to participants.
- Our best practice is to have first communication at the field with relevant stakeholders including the hosted venue and accommodation/neighboring spots to offer concrete information for participants in advance. Also the organizing team with few other volunteers managed to arrive at the spot early, few days in advance, for event preparation including banner hanging, stage arrangement with the hosted venue, and other logistic arrangement.
- Registration should be done twice per day to ensure the participation from all participants.

Annex
(Media Coverage and blog posts by bloggers from around Asia)

What are bloggers talking about BlogFest.Asia '12?
http://www.blueladyblog.com/events-phnompenh/countdown-for-blogfestasia-2012.html
http://asiancorrespondent.com/91462/cambodians-host-blogfest-asia-2012/
http://fainegreenwood.com/2012/11/07/blogfest-asia-2012-noisy-fractious-asean-bloggers-ignore-at-own-peril/
http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/11/01/blogfest-asia-2012-opens-in-cambodia/
http://iamtravelinglight.com/2012/11/04/siem-reap-no-problems-here/
http://duckorino.blogspot.com/2012/11/my-days-in-city-of-temples-angkor.html
http://khmerbird.com/blogging/cambodia-to-organize-blogfest-asia-2012.html
http://tonyocruz.com/?p=3332
http://blogpress.ph/2012/11/blogfest-asia-2012/
http://bunthoeurn-ke.blogspot.com/2012/11/social-networks-in-cambodia.html
http://sithenfreedom.blogspot.com/2012/11/siem-reap-rewarding-and-rewarded-capital.html
http://nonadita.com/2012/11/02/im-coming-to-blogfest-asia-2012-in-cambodia/
http://rainnamail.wordpress.com/2012/11/03/siem-reap-do-what-youve-never-done/
http://maochamna.wordpress.com/2012/11/04/my-impression-on-siem-reap/
http://reasey.info/blog/blogfestasia-2012-comes-end
http://www.lepetitjournal.com/cambodge/126812-medias-sociaux-sommet-geek-cambodge-rencontre-organisateurs-blogfest-asia-2012.html
http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2012110259525/Siem-Reap-Insider/bloggers-descend-on-town.html
http://asiancorrespondent.com/91462/cambodians-host-blogfest-asia-2012/?fb_source=hovercard
http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/11/01/blogfest-asia-2012-opens-in-cambodia/
http://www.vodhotnews.com/km/news/flash-news/78-news-flash/10096-vod-bosavy-report-writer-blog-meet-at-siem-reap
http://khmer.voanews.com/content/blogfest-to-encourage-free-online-expression-in-cambodia-and-the-region/1536072.html
http://www.rfa.org/khmer/indepth/blogger-10292012040919.html
http://www.rfa.org/khmer/indepth/rights-11052012084310.html
http://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/blogfest-asia-ka-10262012152651.html (Vietnamese language)
http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/in-countrys-nascent-blogs-critical-speakers-are-scarce-5256/
http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/cambodia/121104/asian-bloggers-discuss-internet-freedom-at-cambod

http://sarvinakang.wordpress.com/
http://keoleny.wordpress.com/2012/10/07/blogfestasia-2012-in-cambodia/
http://chuacuuthenews.wordpress.com/2012/10/10/blogfest-asia-hoi-bloggers-chau-a/
Kyaw from Mynamar: http://kyawzayya.com/?p=892
Tharum Bun: http://tharum.com/blog/2012/11/02/clogging-cambodia.html
Andy Brouwer: http://blog.andybrouwer.co.uk/2012/10/bloggers-unite.html
ABC Australia: http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/khmer/radio/onairhighlights/1039866

Samsokrith: http://aseanclan.blogspot.com/2012/10/blogfests-asia-2012-angkor-siem-reap.html
Radio: http://www.facebook.com/ownerofthefuture?sk=app_208195102528120
Indonesian blogger: http://theunspunblog.com/2012/10/01/blog-fest-by-angkor-wat/
Cambodia Daily: http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/in-countrys-nascent-blogs-critical-speakers-are-scarce-5256/
Sovathary Bon: http://duckorino.blogspot.com/2012/11/my-days-in-city-of-temples-angkor.html
Raina: http://rainnamail.wordpress.com/2012/11/03/siem-reap-do-what-youve-never-done/#comment-8889
Blogie: http://blogpress.ph/2012/11/blogfest-asia-2012/
Ed: http://soloflighted.com/why-i-keep-coming-back-to-siem-reap/
Tamab: http://tamabloveyaymab.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/getting-to-know/
Awarded bloggers:
First prize: The Tail of the Girl in a Blue Bike (Gael Hilotin)
http://www.thepinaysolobackpacker.com/2012/11/04/siem-reap-the-tale-of-the-girl-in-a-blue-bike/
2nd: (Sithen Sum) http://sithenfreedom.blogspot.com/2012/11/siem-reap-rewarding-and-rewarded-capital.html#links
3rd: (Ethel Merioles) http://lifestylemanila.blog.com/2012/11/03/siem-reap-more-than-meets-eye/

The jury was composed of two journalism professors/experienced bloggers (Sam Hui & Jeremiah Foo) from Shantou University from China; another experienced educator (Preetam Rai) from Singapore, as well as one of the main organizers, Anirudh Bhati from India. The deadline for the blog competition was originally at 5pm on November 4th, however, to get more entries, the organizers decided to postpone it till 8pm in the evening. It turned out that our blog competition could receive up to 60 blog entries from 60 bloggers, among 200 participants. The criteria of selection includes good quality texts, pictures and insights of the blogpost. The three winning blogposts had different strength such as the ability to write beautifully and bring the best imagination of a place, which is a great quality or criteria of a good blogger while others could capture attention with vivid narration of the place. The jury had to spend time after the deadline toward the morning of November 5th to select the best entries which were announced by Preetam Rai in front of the participants the next morning. The top prize was $500, second prize $300 and third prizes $200 - they were all handed by Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith.

2012 November 12
Organizing Team of the BlogFest Asia 2012