

# TRUTH IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: THE VIRAL FRONTLINE BHUTAN COUNTRY REPORT

# BHUTAN

## REACHING FOR PROFESSIONALISM AND SUSTAINABILITY

The tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is probably the safest place in the region to be a journalist; The 2020 World Press Freedom Index ranked Bhutan 67 out of 180 countries, a big jump from 80 in 2019.

The ranking is based on a range of criteria that includes media pluralism and independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, the legislative framework, transparency and the institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate. Bhutan could score well on most. Media pluralism has improved over the years and the country has not experienced any threat or violence unlike elsewhere in the region. If journalists value their independence, the elected government respects it.

There are, however, challenges, mostly related to the financial environment. Investment in media is lacking and without financial independence, press freedom can be compromised. Media is not a lucrative business and media owners or managers do not risk investing in journalism.

### UNHEALTHY TREND

In keeping with the worldwide trend, the profile of the Bhutanese media has been changing. In an age of rapidly evolving technology. While the form of media is unpredictable but the mandate and character of media – freedom of expression – are not.

However, the focus of discussion today is the sustainability of private media, and media as a whole. In 2006, Bhutanese private media was encouraged by royal command, as the country prepared for an historic political transformation into a democracy with the first elections scheduled for 2008. The media peaked with 12 newspapers and six radio stations during the term of the first elected government. Over the next 12 years it was clear that the private media could not survive unfair competition from the more established state-owned media.

**INVESTMENT IN MEDIA IS LACKING AND WITHOUT FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE, PRESS FREEDOM CAN BE COMPROMISED.**

Six private newspapers were closed over the last 15 years because of poor financial health, two news magazines went out of print and had to close down. Three private radio stations have gone off air; private media houses that have braved the storm continue to fight a daunting battle merely to stay afloat. The common understanding is that the private media are not financially stable and lack the capacity in human resources to be in competition with the state-owned media.

There are two immediate problems with this. First, "state-owned enterprise" is generally understood as an

arrangement whereby the government owns at least 51 percent of the shares and private investors the rest. Government investment in media houses is a public service like the BBC in the UK, ABC in Australia and NHK in Japan, which are fully supported by public funds but given editorial freedom. Editorially, the media has the responsibility to inform the people based on the freedom and responsibility mandated by the Constitution of Bhutan.

Second, an unequal playing field meant that government advertisements were not "shared" equally among the media houses and that the major share was given to the Kuensel newspaper because it was partially (51 percent) government-owned and the fully subsidised national broadcaster, Bhutan Broadcasting service, both of which have a wide reach.

Newspapers around the world survive on advertising and the private media appealed for government advertising. The government is by far the largest advertiser, with more than 80 percent of media advertisement being from government agencies. This presented a significant conundrum for champions of the independent press.

For media to grow, it must be free and independent. Free and independent here means content, and not ownership. This is the biggest challenge that the media industry in Bhutan is facing today.

Since the government had slashed advertisement budgets as part of austerity measures even before the Covid-19 pandemic, private media houses again appealed for government subsidies to survive. Today, the government provides a subsidy of Nu 4.3 million (USD 58,900) annually to private newspapers. This situation begs many questions.

"If the public service role of the media required that they find the right balance between government control and commercial pressures, our media failed, especially in the latter," the former managing editor of Kuensel, Ugyen Penjor, stated in JAB's Bhutan Press Mirror.

The private media came up against the reality that owners, managers and advertisers are restricting them. In the process, journalism suffered. What is even more distressing, according to the former editor of Business Bhutan, Kinley Tshering, is the poor standard of journalism.

The Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) set up in 2018, played a watchdog role over the media until the establishment of the Media Council of Bhutan in 2019. BICMA is now a converged regulatory body responsible for the regulation of information, communications and the media sector in Bhutan. Its main mandates, amongst others, are licensing and enforcement of cable TV, broadcast media, printing presses, publications, ICT facility and service, and managing access to the radio-frequency spectrum and monitoring usage. Yet, there is far to go.

### PATCHY ACCESS

At the heart of freedom of speech or expression lies access to information, which is still a major issue that Bhutanese journalists face today, compounded by red tape and bureaucracy.

This arises from a lack of understanding about the media among newsmakers or those who control information. This is not helped by the layers of bureaucratic procedures and rigid hierarchies involved in getting timely information. Beyond media, researchers and scholars are also dealing with the same obstacles.



In an age when media is relaying news and information in real-time, authorities expect permission to be sought even to take a picture or shoot a video. Then the coverage is misunderstood as attacking the organisation or the institution if it highlights their inefficiency or incompetency. Indeed, there is a misunderstanding that sharing information with media is doing media a favour.

There were some instances where authorities threatened journalists and media houses. In 2020, Royal Audit Authority officials charged a newspaper for publishing its report on dredging of riverbed materials. In another incident, a bureaucrat had lodged a complaint against the newspaper for publishing content the individual claimed was not on the record. The complaint was resolved after the Media Council of Bhutan intervened. The usual modus operandi is to intimidate reporters through such complaints and harass them over calls and summons to meeting with authorities.

Media improves transparency in governance. If something is going wrong in the government, it has to be reported. If big decisions are taken that impact the masses, people have to be informed. And if there are plans and programmes intended for the people, transparency is important to ensure that it reaches the intended target and builds confidence in the system.

The only time media receives information, is when the newsmakers have reason to benefit by way of publicity, and young journalists are even dictated their copy.

In addition, the judiciary has become increasingly impenetrable to journalists seeking information. Current practice sees only reporters with "connections" gaining access to information. The judge or court official will readily share information if a reporter has good relations with them.

The lack of access to information about the ongoing case of criminal conspiracy, mutiny, abettor of mutiny and other criminal offences involving the senior most justice the of Supreme Court, former commandant of Royal Body Guard and a district court judge at the Thimphu district court is a testament to the impenetrability of these institutions.

The media was not allowed to enter the courtroom on grounds that it is a "high profile" and "sensitive" case. Court officials instead asked reporters to seek information from the defendants.

The media's duty is to report facts, but with hostile officials and authorities, this is often compromised. The freedom of the media is not about the media. It is about the basic rights of the citizens to be informed and be able to make the legislature, executive, and judiciary accountability for their actions and strengthen democracy in the country.

The media's role in scrutinising the judicial actions and impact of its decisions on the public is almost non-existent. The decisions of the courts are all public documents and the media has the right to scrutinise how a court has reached a particular decision and whether the decision has caused injustice to any party involved in a case. This will make the judiciary accountable for decisions it makes.

However, the media mostly remained silent on any decisions of the courts, let alone reporting what the courts have said in their decisions and proceedings. The media's own shortcomings also preclude accurate reporting when it comes to legal matters, about which the media lacks specialisation.

Given all these issues concerning access to information, the Right to Information (RTI) Act becomes all the more crucial. The National Assembly of Bhutan had passed the RTI Bill in 2014 to curb corruption and ensure transparency in the government. However, the National Council (Upper House) did not deliberate the bill and it has now become a dead bill.

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## PANDEMIC YEAR

With the outbreak of Covid-19 in Bhutan, every public office and authority including the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and health ministry took to social media to break news and share information. In most cases, journalists were playing catch up and regurgitating what was already out there. The year 2020 saw journalists immersed in increased competition with various platforms and sources to disseminate information.

Bhutan confirmed its first Covid-19 case in a 76-year-old tourist on March 5, 2020. On March 25, the first Bhutanese to test positive for the virus was a student who returned from Europe.

Bhutan experienced two episodes of nationwide lockdown. First, the entire country was locked down on August 11, 2020 for 21 days. It was not the smoothest of lockdowns. Despite having the best of standard operating procedures (SoPs) on paper, many teething issues surfaced during the first lockdown. Communication gaps, poor coordination and shortage of essential goods exposed the lack of preparedness and inadequate response to the pandemic.

People remained stranded, as movement was restricted. While information was heavily filtered before it was made public during the initial days, officials struggled with a lack of data themselves.

On December 20, Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering told the public to stay home, again. It started with locking down the capital city, home to about 150,000 people. Although the government holds that the lockdown this time was more organised, the outbreak was 10 times bigger than the one in August. The number of Covid-19 cases in Bhutan, which has a total population of little over 750,000, reached 927 in early April 2021.

Many believe that Bhutan could not have been any more prepared for a public health emergency of this magnitude. The Prime Minister, health and foreign ministers, all had decades of experience in health care, an experience that reassured the people. Health Minister Dechen Wangmo, a public health expert said that having medical professionals leading the country's response against a health crisis was an added advantage. "It helped in making rational and well-informed decisions."

On the positive side, the pandemic brought out the

good side of the Bhutanese people. The country's success story so far in the fight against the pandemic, according to officials, was because of the cooperation rendered by the people. Public solidarity was at a high, and farmers sent vegetables, rice, and dairy products to quarantine centres and landlords waived rents, banks deferred loans instalments and interest was waived.

## JOURNALISTS CHALLENGED

The 100 journalists registered and accredited with the Media Council of Bhutan and Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) faced a new low during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected the media not only financially but also in terms of reporting.

The interaction of journalists with government officials was restricted. Most information was censored during press conferences, where even questions media asked were selectively answered. Instead, the media had to follow social media pages of the ministries and the PMO. There was also the challenge of providing timely news when journalists were not allowed to move freely and could not be at the scene or conduct in-person interviews.

There was immense pressure on the media, from social media as well as from gossip and rumour, which is more powerful than the formal media. Due to a lack of cyber laws in the country, people spreading fake news through social media were not held accountable.

Established in September 2019, the role of the Media Council of Bhutan is to promote and protect independence of the media, serve as a standard setting body to promote and enhance ethical and professional standards amongst journalists and media enterprises for media practitioners, accredit and certify the journalists practicing in Bhutan, and regulate or curtail any harmful, offensive, illegal or antithetical content on the internet and other ICT and media services. The council is also mandated to hear complaints and settle disputes in relation to offences of content not amounting to criminal offences and provides recommendations on matters affecting the media sector to the Ministry of Information and Communications and Regularity Authority.

**MOST INFORMATION WAS CENSORED DURING PRESS CONFERENCES, EVEN QUESTIONS THE MEDIA ASKED WERE SELECTED.**

Despite the establishment of the Media Council, digital media and social media continue to be largely unregulated. To some extent there is freedom of digital media, and social media users sometimes use fake accounts to express their grievances or defame, abuse or threaten others, although the government has endorsed a social media policy in 2016.

The mainstream media's role, therefore, changed from watchdog to verification of information on social media and to combat fake news, as misinformation and rumours on the pandemic spread.

According to Tashi Dema, assignment editor of Kuensel, such a shift undermined the role of the

media and impacted the public's trust in the media.

The role of social media in disseminating information during the pandemic can be seen even among medical professionals. A cross-sectional study conducted amongst medical students revealed the main source of information on Covid-19 was social media sites, of which 85 percent of the respondents said they got information from Facebook pages of the health ministry and 80 percent of them from PMO's page.

The study basically shows how mainstream media, with its limited access to information, could not fulfil its mandate to inform the people despite the best efforts of many journalists.

Journalists too had their own challenges. With limited knowledge of infectious diseases, there was no capacity or expertise to conduct investigations and detailed analysis of the situation. Subject knowledge on Covid-19, medicines, microbiology and tests were minimal, almost non-existent, increasing challenges for those doing articles. In addition, journalists were also vulnerable to infection. The first journalist in Bhutan tested positive for Covid-19 while in the line of duty on April 6. The government pays the costs of all patients of the coronavirus.

With a plethora of social media users breaking news every day, the media landscape in the country has changed drastically over the last year. The mainstream media today is battling rapid falls in revenue and is challenged with decreasing readership. Their sustenance is at stake more than ever before.

Access to information has remained a challenge despite having a Prime Minister who is open to the press and even responds to late-night calls. The bureaucracy has devised more ways to delay access to information and inconvenience reporters to discourage many from pursuing impactful stories.

Given the high attrition rate in the industry, media houses have constraints in developing capacity to cover critical issues. Most of the newsrooms have young journalists with limited experience and lack the insight and understanding of matters that need time.

## ENHANCING PROFESSIONALISM

The need for professionalism in Bhutanese journalism has consistently been flagged as a gap that must be addressed. The focus of organisations involved in media-related activities should be on training to upskill the entire industry. Today, many private newspapers are run by young recruits, some on the payroll of the government, and college students on internship.

In the past, Bhutanese media, particularly some private media owners, would not respond to training programmes initiated by the government, the Bhutan Media Foundation or the JAB, citing time constraints.

In order to meet this challenge, JAB in collaboration with the Bhutan Media and Communication Institute (BMCI) organised a year-long Multimedia Journalism course for Bhutanese journalists. BMCI also supported JAB with some funding to buy masks, sanitisers and face shields. JAB has been able to provide free care packages to the journalists in the beginning of 2020 when the coronavirus just hit the country.

Bhutanese media are mostly urban-centric and as

part of the objective to promote rural journalism, 32 reporters from different media houses have been trained in long-form narrative story writing for five days in Thimphu over the last two years. The training pedagogy included both theoretical and practical sessions.

JAB also took the initiative of fact-checking the spread of fake news on Covid-19 on various social media platforms. The spread of fake news has created fear among the public and has spread disinformation. JAB and Bhutan Media Foundation fact-checked any misinformation being spread then corrected and posted the right information on their social media sites.

As a part of Helvetas EU project, JAB organised a three-day training on Women Leadership in Haa. The training session is aimed at building leadership skills and confidence among women journalists and other women leaders. Thirty-five participants attended the training. The participants include women and youth from various media organisations, Haa district administration and women from various civil society organisations.

Radio is the most powerful, and most neglected, medium in Bhutan. Radio, which reaches nearly 100 percent of the population, was totally neglected by the governments because television was already a more popular medium.

JAB organised a three-day training on community/campus radio in 2020. JAB told the participants about the opportunity for them to apply for the rural reporting journalism awards and grants.

During the training, those radio stations without a Facebook page were made to create a Facebook page to share community issues for the media to pick up and write/broadcast. The training is aiming to professionalise community radio stations through organisational, managerial, and technical skills development.

Close to 70 percent of Bhutan is rural, and a large percentage semi-literate and a majority of rural communities are unreachable by mainstream media and government agencies. Radio represents one of the most powerful media to reach out to this populace. To educate and create awareness among rural communities on the importance of using the mainstream media not just for news but also to engage with the media, JAB conducted community media workshops in four rural communities of Bhutan over the past year. The workshops were funded by United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF).

The objective of this process of engagement with rural communities is to enable them to take advantage of the power and influence of mainstream media even as they increasingly use different forms of media for news, education, entertainment and interaction. It is only when almost three fourths of the country's population is actively engaged with the media that democracy and freedom of expression can be strengthened.

Simultaneously, capacity building of journalists – particularly those in the private media – remains an important factor that will not only enhance the sustainability of the private media but also encourage a high standard of journalism.

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