**BHUTAN**

### Information Blockade

For journalists in Bhutan, access to information has never been as challenging as over the last few years. The shifting media landscape coupled with the high turnover of journalists is compounded by shrinking access to information, all of which is impacting news coverage and people’s access to information.

In other countries, he said, access to official information is regulated by law on the citizen’s right to information and secrecy. "There is no such law in Bhutan." The commissioner said the model code was not intended to impinge the constitutional right to freedom of speech. “It is, rather, intended to complement the duty to exercise freedom of speech,” he said. "No constitutional rights are absolute. All the fundamental rights are accorded with limitations." However, such a code coming from a constitutional office mandated to promote transparency and accountability has caused concern. Media professionals say this worrying trend violates the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression as well as the right to information enshrined in the Constitution of Bhutan. Such a rule aggravates the already poor access to information, they say.

Tenzing Lamsang, the editor-in-chief of The Bhutanese, said that the model code should not stop public agencies and officials from sharing public information. "If it is not in keeping with the Constitution, it is null and void. All of these should not be ultra vires to the Constitution," he said.

“The right to information is not about state secrets, but about public information which is needed for the public,” Lamsang said, adding that if the government shared it since the media works to advance the public interest.

This would only impede journalists from covering investigative stories against corruption, he said. "If only authorised civil servants are allowed to talk, how will they expose corruption?”

The editor of Business Bhutan, Kinley Tsering, said such red tape and formalities are unhealthy for democracy and that media has a pivotal role to ensure that a democratic government upholds transparency, sincerity, and accountability. Strengthening free media will ultimately strengthen democracy and promote liberty, he added. "If democracy allows people to determine their own future, that choice or determination must be based on factual and accurate information.”

Another senior journalist said that from now on, the media will struggle to perform its duties. “Such a rule would promote corruption, nepotism, and favouritism in the country with people disallowed to share information,” he said. “This indirectly means that the system does not require media, and it is a really dangerous trend.”

### Transparency please

Deeply concerned that the people and agencies holding information or expertise are becoming increasingly cocooned, editors, publishers, the media community and the Journalists’ Association of Bhutan (JAB) appealed to the Media Council of Bhutan to help facilitate better access to information from public institutions.

In their appeal letter, the group stated that access to information had become restricted by “red tape” and bureaucracy, leading to journalists’ inability to write stories of public interest with adequate clarity and depth.

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Abandoning ship

There are seven newspapers in the country today: Bhutan Times, Bhutan Today, Business Bhutan, Gyalcho Sarbog, Kuensel, The Bhotaneve, and The Journalist. The only television broadcasting station is Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS). There are five FM radio stations (BBS Radio, Centenial Radio, Kuzesu FM, Radio Valley, and Yiga Radio). More than 80 journalists, including 20 from the print media, quit journalism in the past year. In a country the size of Bhutan, with a relatively small industry, the departures represent a significant blow. BBS alone lost 60 employees with news reporters, producers, camerapersons, and editors resigning from their jobs. BBS’s chief executive officer, Kaka Tshering, said that the management is recruiting, endeavouring to fill the human resource gap.

A total of 12 newsroom employees, both new recruits and experienced journalists, resigned from Kuensel in the past 12 months also. Business Bhutan’s editor Ugyen Tenzin said that the number of journalists leaving Bhutan is higher than ever before. Another newspaper editor said that many are choosing to leave for better opportunities. “Reporters look for better pay and a good working environment,” he said.

Today, newsrooms are stretched to their limits with only a few seniors or experienced journalists, and new recruits frequently leave the profession. Low salaries, a poor working environment and difficulty in getting information are seen as factors influencing journalists to seek other careers or leave the profession for opportunities overseas.

The way forward

Despite repeated editorials and stories on the lack of access to information published by different newspapers, the situation in Bhutan’s media continues to deteriorate. For years, journalists have been encouraging the public to be active in media and to involve citizens to operationalise democracy, but the media itself is hitting a wall when attempting to access credible information.

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Government institutions and ministries have a responsibility to appoint media spokespersons and conduct regular press briefings. They should also relax restrictions on official communications and set a timeline to share public information.

Past attempts to appoint spokespersons in ministries and organisations have not worked because they still had to seek permission to talk to the media. Since time and information is vital, the system of dissemination needs to be made more efficient and transparent.

Public institutions must uphold the supreme law of the country, the Constitution, which explicitly states that power belongs to the people and not to the authorities. The media is merely an information facilitator, and citizens use such verified information to hold the government accountable. •

Access To Information Shrinks in Bhutan

After two foresters were sacked for speaking to media, public institutions are stonewalling information under the guise of reformation.

In July 2022, the government issued rules that prohibit civil servants from disclosing “critical information” to an "inappropriate person, audience, platform or forum".

Issued in December 2022, the Anti Corruption Commission’s model code of conduct bars public servants from sharing information. They could face disciplinary or criminal sanction if they share official information without authorisation.

24 out of 50 journalists interviewed by Journalists’ Association of Bhutan said that access to information is worse now than in previous years.

The National Assembly issued a rule prohibiting the media from interviewing members of parliament during session. This included taking photos of members of parliament that could be considered negative.