

BHUTAN

INFORMATION DIVIDE

Bhutan's news media industry is at a crossroads. Other than the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, which is fully subsidised by the government, and *Kuensel*, where 51 per cent shares are owned by the government, all private entities are struggling to find a firm financial footing.

After seeing a brief heyday following the privatisation of the media in 2007, the Bhutanese media has been on the decline. Of the 12 newspapers, five radio stations, and one TV station, most have closed down or are on the verge of doing so. The number of newspapers was down from 12 in 2012 to seven in 2019. Several magazines and radio stations have shut down since then.

The last newspaper to fold in early 2019 was *Druk Neytshul*, a private Dzongkha language weekly newspaper. In the same year, *Gyalchi Sarshog*, another private Dzongkha weekly, suspended its publication for several months. "The surviving private newspapers are shadows of their former selves," Bhutan Media Foundation's executive director, Needrup Zangpo lamented.

Media analysts say that Bhutan has too many media houses for its tiny population. So, the only hope for a vibrant media is the death of more media houses so that the advertising base can support the remaining ones.

Unless this trend is somehow reversed, the impact will be dire for a country that has just begun to experiment with western-style democracy. Specifically, what is at stake is public accountability, transparency, a platform for debate and discourse, and disseminating and sharing knowledge and information.

In 1999, Bhutan introduced the internet. Seven years later, the popularity of internet usage picked up so much that the traditional news media began to lose their market, both in terms of readership and advertising revenue. Social and online media, like in other parts of the world, took over and overnight the very concept of information gathering, processing and dissemination changed. The role of journalism has been taken over by the social media. The traditional mainstream media thus found itself on the fringe, without a clue as to how to negotiate the transition.

Media analysts also say that the sustainability of the Bhutanese media and other attendant problems need to be addressed urgently because the future of Bhutanese democracy itself is at stake. Without an independent, pluralistic and self-sustaining news media industry a vital platform for debate and discussion, critical to foster a transparent and accountable society, would perish.

Prior to 2010, when Bhutan's first democratic government was sworn in with a mere two-member opposition in the 47-member lower house of parliament, the media acted as the key critic of the government. It kept the government and politicians literally on their toes while the people in general were provided ample space to express themselves. This shows that Bhutan's experiment with democracy can succeed only by reviving or strengthening the news media.

We are also seeing the tell-tale signs of an ominous 'information divide' between rural and urban Bhutan. Dictated by dire financial realities, media houses, except Bhutan's daily newspaper, *Kuensel*, have pulled out correspondents from the agrarian belts of Bhutan where the majority of the people live. Today, in a bid to cut costs, most of the newspapers do not reach the far-flung villages. The impact of this move has been that



A Buddhist monk inside the Gantey Buddhist Monastery in Wangdue Phodrang province in Bhutan on December 7, 2019. The remote kingdom is nestled in the Himalayas between powerful neighbours, India and China and has a fragile media industry at the crossroads. Analysts say media sustainability needs to be addressed urgently because the future of Bhutanese democracy itself is at stake. CREDIT: LILLIAN SUWANRUMPHA / AFP

the rural population has not only lost its voice in the making of national policies but is also deprived of the information it needs to take part in the overall democratic discourse.

In order to address this challenge, the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) launched a rural reporting grant in 2019, with the objective of enhancing coverage of news and issues from rural pockets of the country. In addition, the award was instituted to promote rural journalism, and community media workshops were held to improve coverage of rural issues in mainstream media and also to create a link between rural communities and broader media coverage.

EXODUS OF JOURNALISTS

As media houses were in financial doldrums, the overall quality of journalism suffered. The Bhutanese media has lost some of its finest reporters and editors. To fill the gap, news organisations

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began hiring inexperienced young university graduates but, as expected, the quality of reporting went downhill as did overall news content. Today, the industry lies in tatters, and no one has any idea how to resuscitate it.

Those who have remained in the industry continue to work under difficult circumstances. The Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) has been receiving reports and complaints that some private media houses take advantage of the country's unemployment situation and do not pay them for months.

Journalists who are currently working in the private media earn less than Nu 15,000 (USD 200). Low salary packages, professional hazards and lack of public recognition of professionals are the main reasons for the lack of appeal of journalism as a profession.

An interesting phenomenon in Bhutan today is that most of the private newsrooms are staffed by young women journalists. Of the 26 journalists working in six private newspapers today, as many as 16 are women.

CLAIM

FAKE

NEWS FOOTAGE OF ARREST OF PROF. CHARLES LIEBER PROVES SARS-COV-2 IS A MANUFACTURED BIOWEAPON.

THE TRUTH

1. PROF. LIEBER WAS ARRESTED LYING ABOUT NOT BEING A CHINA'S THOUSAND TALEN WHICH THE US GOVT CALLS TO NATIONAL SECURITY.

2. VIDEO DOES NOT MENT CORONAVIRUS ONCE.

3. TWO CHINESE ARRESTS SAME STORY WERE SEPAR, UNRELATED TO PROF. LIEB

JAB btf

CLAIM

FAKE

"A CHINESE EXPERT ASSURES EVERYBODY THAT INHALATION OF STEAM FROM HOT WATER KILLS CORONAVIRUS 100% STEAM INHALATION THERAPY IS 'SIT'."

THE TRUTH

1. NEITHER THE WHO NOR THE US-CDC RECOMMENDS 'SIT' AS A TREATMENT OF COVID-19.

A CDC REPRESENTATIVE SAID THEY WERE NOT AWARE OF ANY SCIENTIFIC STUDY THAT SHOWED IT WAS HELPFUL.

2. IN FACT, SIT CARRIES BURN RISK (IT ONLY TAKES 3 SECS OF CONTACT WITH WATER OVER 60C TO CAUSE SURGERY-REQUIRING BURNS).

JAB btf

Most rural Bhutanese people are semi-literate and are mostly unreached by mainstream media and government agencies. The Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB) conducted a series of community media workshops aimed at enhancing media knowledge for rural people, who comprise 70 per cent of the population.

CREDIT: SANGAY CHOKI



THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A SMALL AND CLOSE-KNIT SOCIETY AND BHUTANESE JOURNALISTS HAVING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES TO RELY ON FOR TIP OFFS IS ALSO BACKFIRING, AS 'AUTHORITIES' TRY TO HUNT DOWN OFFICIALS WITH RELATIVES WORKING IN THE MEDIA.

Another challenge related to sustainability and revenue is the fact that media houses are dependent on the government for up to 80 per cent of their revenue. Meanwhile, journalists lack resources to carry out in-depth reporting and investigative stories and are often caught in the dilemma of being critical of the government at the cost of advertising revenue, forcing a choice between survival and playing a watchdog role.

In 2008, Bhutan adopted a Constitution, which categorically spells out “freedom of print, broadcast and online media” under “Fundamental Rights”. These specific clauses are designed to inspire a healthy growth of the media: freedom of speech, opinion, and expression; freedom of the media; and the right to information.

These clauses, however, would remain unfulfilled if Bhutanese society cannot find ways to build an enabling environment for the growth of a pluralistic, independent and vibrant news media.

Members of the public generally think that the media lacks independence and professional maturity. Bhutan Information and Media Impact Study 2017 conducted by the Department of Information and Media (most current findings), the media users reported “severe lack of media independence” although around 81 per cent of households reported that media had enhanced transparency, accountability and efficiency of the government compared to before.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to information is still seen as a stumbling block for journalism in Bhutan. It has more to do with political sensitivity, which the bureaucrats handle with care. Journalists find it hard to get public information from the bureaucracy. In doing so, all critical information becomes “off-the-record.”

The government machinery still does not have a robust system of information dissemination. For example, there are information and media officers who do not have the authority to talk to the media even as their bosses remain mostly away. The elected government, however, has been supportive of media development and to ensure that media is effectively involved in governance. The government is committed to give more access to media in its day-to-day activity.

In what was seen as a positive development and the government’s reconfirmation of the “media as the fourth estate and its role in a fledgling democracy” was the “meet the press” initiative launched by the first democratically elected government in 2008. Since then the meet-the-press has been an established forum for the media and government as a part of a democratic exercise.

It is an unprecedented and unique move, the cabinet of the ruling government makes itself available to the press every month to answer questions and clarify doubts about actions and omissions of the government. Such an interaction goes to show that greater transparency benefits all players involved.

The government gets a chance to make itself heard and clarify doubts that might be lingering in the minds of the public and journalists; and journalists and the public, in turn, get a clearer picture of what is going on, resulting in more accurate reporting.

Politicians, including the prime minister, are accessible to almost every journalist through phone, e-mail or any other communication channel. This is one of the reasons why Bhutan ranks high on international press freedom indices. In 2019, Bhutan climbed 14 points on the World Press Freedom Index to 80 from 94 in 2018.

The improvement in ranking should encourage those in the media to continue carrying out their primary duty of informing

The tiny and isolated Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan prepared for the worst during Covid-19. The King of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, in an address to the nation announced the closure of borders from 23 March. The country stocked fuel and essential food items to last for at least 12 days before closing its borders. CREDIT: ROYAL OFFICE OF MEDIA BHUTAN



the people. The improved ranking will also encourage policymakers to appreciate the role, no matter how small, the Bhutanese media is playing and allow its press to function freely and responsibly.

However, although access to information has improved over the years, there is much to be desired to achieve the kind of freedom of press that will shoulder responsibilities without fear and favour for the benefit of the country and its people.

The Bhutanese media still faces some serious challenges when it comes to the free flow of information which is sometimes thwarted by bureaucratic norms. The fear of reprisal from senior bureaucrats or bosses, has caused an excessively tight-lipped culture among Bhutanese bureaucracy.

Government had earlier made an attempt to appoint media focal persons for all ministries and autonomous agencies to make information widely available. This move however was unsuccessful.

The appointment of spokespersons had only proven to be a barricade, making things more difficult for reporters, disallowing them from contacting officials directly.

Journalists were made to submit questions and the response depended on the gravity of the questions. The advantage of being a small and close-knit society and Bhutanese journalists having friends and relatives to rely on for tip offs is also backfiring, as 'authorities' try to hunt down officials with relatives working in the media.

SELF-CENSORSHIP

News media are often accused of self-censorship because they can face serious backlash for controversial or hasty reporting. Besides market pressures, journalists quote various forms of peer and social pressures that force them to exercise self-censorship.

Some working journalists say that it is necessary to exercise self-censorship for the greater social good. They claim a fear

of embarrassment or potential career damage as a factor for avoiding newsworthy stories like corruption involving high-profile public officials.

With its small population, all these pressures are heightened in Bhutan. The media's tensions with politicians, senior bureaucrats, and business houses are emerging although, in the context of a young democracy, it might be described as creative tensions.

OPPORTUNITIES

The government is providing a two-year printing subsidy for private newspapers which meets 50 per cent of the printing cost. This is a temporary measure to support media houses to stay afloat until long-term measures are in place. One long-term measure for sustainability could be transitioning online.

The world of online possibilities is virtually unexplored by the Bhutanese media. While media houses everywhere are adopting or adapting to technologies to stay afloat, Bhutanese media houses are mostly in the traditional mode. Only a few newspapers have a website and take advantage of social media. None of them has any plan to monetise online content.

In order to maximise social media outreach, community media forums set up by JAB used chat platforms for rapid communication from community members to journalists. Training in community radio has also went hand in hand with training on optimising social media tools for effective communication and dissemination.

In terms of institutional set-up, the Bhutanese media is well-placed, with institutions such as the Department of Information and Media; Bhutan Media Foundation; Journalists' Association of Bhutan; Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy and the Bhutan Media and Communication Centre. They are all dedicated to the development of the media and if they join forces, collaboration could provide an opportunity for substantial support to help haul the media out of its current precarious state.