Opening the Gates in Bhutan: Media Gatekeepers and the Agenda of Change

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Abstract

Communication studies refer to the journalistic 'gatekeepers' as professional, trained editors and reporters with professional news values, setting the agenda for discussion in society, thus putting topics for discussion in the public sphere. The definition of 'gatekeeper' is extended to the family and community that have traditionally been important in the teaching and sharing of values in the home and community.

This paper explores the manner in which the new media in Bhutan are changing the traditional role of the gatekeeper in transmitting values, and setting the agenda for the discussion of news and information. It will look at the implications on this tradition in the context of the changing media environment in Bhutan. It examines the new group of gatekeepers who are determining the information we hear, read and see, and influencing emerging social value systems. The paper presents a brief review of current global trends and studies on the role of new media and examines the implications for Bhutan.

Strategies to build a healthy media environment are suggested for Bhutan as society builds a media culture that will give its citizens the kind of information, education, and entertainment it needs to achieve a GNH society.

Opening the gates in Bhutan

One of the most significant developments in the kingdom of Bhutan in recent years is a small explosion of media and ICT. Bhutan has adopted an array of technologies and, with them, a variety of new media forms, including international direct dialling, computer games, CD ROMS, cell phones, new interactive radio, TV and cable channels, online newspapers, and interactive web sites. More than 125,000 people now use the cell phone,

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overcoming Bhutan's main communication challenge of high mountain barriers.

Media penetration continues to extend its reach into Bhutan:

- BBS SW and FM radio reaches all people
- BBS TV (the national TV channel) reaches almost all 20 districts
- Global TV programming reaches people in 46 towns and urban settlements.
- Two new FM radio stations were started in the past year. One of them became a 24 hour station in May 2007.
- Two new newspapers were introduced in 2006.
- B-Mobile, Bhutan's telephone service will provide email and web browsing services on the phone by spring 2008.
- In 2006, the Bhutanese film industry produced a record number of 24 films

All this is serving a country of 630,000 people, a country that, until 1999, did not have television or the internet.

The traditional and new media are changing the way we work, live, do business, and even our view of life. The increasing accessibility of digital media is set to revolutionise the way we communicate and our means of expression and information. It is also developing a new, vibrant, and more democratic culture in Bhutan that can be tapped to build an environment for a GNH society.

In the initial years the media focused on development activities and government oriented news. Social issues like youth, crime, and urban development began to emerge in the early 1990s and now make up a major focus of the news media. Today the focus is shifting to political transformation. The media's role is to expand the boundaries of discourse and debate. It is opening up society to issues previously thought to be 'sensitive' and beyond the public sphere, such as domestic violence, HIV patients sharing their personal views, crime, and political exchange.

Spurred by technological development and, most recently by political transformation, including the draft constitution, the media are giving impetus to political, economic, and social transformation. Television and radio programmes are aiming to be

highly interactive, newspapers are highly politicised, films are propagating a new culture, and the internet is providing a growing medium of expression.

Bhutan's younger generation is now being weaned on a new set of values and beliefs perpetuated through the media, and the experience of a country opening up to travel, trading and globalisation. Today, with historic political changes and the emergence of new media, Bhutan is poised for another phase of the information revolution.

Gatekeepers of values and information – shaping the agenda of change

The traditional role of the media gatekeeper refers to the key persons involved in the decision-making process of news production such as media professionals and owners. Communications theorist, Harold Lasswell calls it the 'surveillance function' of editors and reporters. The agenda-setting role of the media has been the focus of much study. Editors and programme directors filter out what they think is bad (pornography, slander, etc.) and package what is good for their audience, or what they think is worthy of attention. As much as the media sets the news agenda, media also reflect a society's values.

Media gatekeepers are governed by international laws, regulations and codes. In Bhutan, the draft constitution, media law and regulations guide media professionals. The government has adopted a Media Act[1] and media regulations, and initiated a code of ethics. These laws and regulations are based on the concern that media professionals, with limited exposure and training, may not be able to fulfil the gatekeeper role in a changing and vulnerable society.

Therefore, the government is the main gatekeeper. With the first general elections coming up in 2008, the Election Commission (ECB) has introduced specific regulations for media

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[1] Communications and Media Act, 2006

in the bid to ensure fair and free elections.[2] Election advertising regulations determine how much coverage each political party may get on the various media, particularly for election advertising. The Commission appointed a media arbitrator to monitor media coverage. The ECB says the media needs to be tough in its coverage of politics and to expose unlawful activities like "corrupt political practices".[3]

In this atmosphere of change the traditional gatekeepers of family and community value systems are slowly losing their impact. The oral tradition of storytelling, with families sitting around the hearth sharing their beliefs, values, and societal norms, is disappearing. It is evident that this oral tradition was much stronger in the relatively 'pristine' state that Bhutan was prior to modernisation and the advent of mass media [4] and education. Until the early 1980s, Bhutan was largely a traditional society untouched by the world. The family and community had a more dominant role as gatekeepers of our value system.

Today, with traditional story telling on the wane [5] and urbanisation on the rise, the traditional role of family and community elders in sharing values and societal norms through direct communications with the younger generation is weakening. People have less time for their children. In the evenings, many are entertained by television. An increasing practise is for family members to have a second television set, so they are separated according to the programmes of their choice. Some say a second television is necessary to keep peace in the family as father, mother and children all have their own favourite programmes. The

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[2] Media Coverage of Elections Rules and Regulations of the Kingdom of Bhutan, Election Commission of Bhutan.

[3] "Leaders urge media to be tougher", *Bhutan Observer*, Friday 21 September 2007.

[4] John Ardussi and Francoise Pommaret describe the *mani*-walls and *tshechus* as the mass media of Bhutan's early history where values were transmitted through the written words or through drama and songs.

[5] Dorji Penjore in his article "Folktales and education: The role of Bhutanese folktales in Value transmission" states that the "Walls of rural Bhutanese houses may have once echoed and re-echoed with folktales narrations, but frequency of narrations today has become even fainter and lesser."

quality time that families had together is now being replaced with 'entertainment'.

Communications professor, George Gerbner (1995) notes:

> A child today is born into a home in which television is on an average of more than seven hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates who have something to sell (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002).

The increasing numbers of Bhutanese children who are in boarding schools also contribute to the gradually eroding role of families in transmitting and sharing values. These children are home only for part of the year during the holidays and their interaction with family and elders is minimised. The role of teachers in sharing and transmitting values has gained prominence since secular education was offered in Bhutan from the 1960s.

What research and current trends show

With Bhutan on a rapid path to modernisation and democracy, the news media are under increasing pressure to provide the public and cultural space for discussion that is required for the development of a healthy democratic society. The media must engage the citizens and empower them to ensure the functioning of democracy, good governance, and ultimately, Gross National Happiness.

International media trends today show that the internet has eaten into the profits of mainstream media, particularly newspapers, resulting in reduced advertising budgets and job cuts, shrinking international and local news. In South Asia this is yet to happen, but the trends indicate that it will come, and come suddenly. Mainstream newspapers in India continue to enjoy good profits. But, as aggregated news[6] becomes more popular with the

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[6] Such as google news, yahoo news services, bhutantimes.com, which provide a variety of news from a selection of media sources.

internet generation, the new business model will be internet news. This is a trend that deserves watching.

The internet has spurred a powerful new space – the blogosphere[7], where hundreds of thousands of bloggers gather to share insights and experiences, views and news. These gatekeepers of content perform almost similar roles as their peers in the media, they read and filter thousands of media reports and rewrite and post their own versions of the news and information. But bloggers do so without the editorial skills or accountability required by journalism.

The internet gives every citizen an opportunity to collect, report, analyse and disseminate news and information. This initially gave rise to terms like 'civic journalism' and 'public journalism', meaning that every person has a right to disseminate information. But analysis found that this was a misleading concept because the posting on the internet was mostly gossip and, therefore, the need for more professional journalism on the internet.

But newspapers, and the concept of the newspaper, is moving to the internet. For example, Oh My News (OMN), a South Korean online news service with the motto "Every Citizen is a Reporter", has attracted global attention with its open source news reporting provided by about 60,000 citizen 'reporters' worldwide.[8] While it acknowledges that many citizen reporters would not subscribe to a prescribed code of ethics, it has appointed 35 full time editors to edit the reports; they are the gatekeepers to maintain journalistic tenets like accuracy, lack of plagiarism, and to ensure that OMN reports are not "offensive or prejudiced".[9]

The world of the net

Digital communications takes a bottom-up approach. Compare this to the old modes of communication which are top-down and

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[7] There are 53 million blogs on the internet and the number doubles every six months according to Andrew Keen in *The Cult of the Amateur*.
[8] Citizen reporters submit about 200 articles every day, and about 1 million readers visit OhmyNews each day.
[9] Quoted from an interview with an editor on Ohmynews International website, Claire George. www.ohmynews.com Accessed 9 October 2007.

hierarchical, and opaque rather than transparent. The digital age has made it possible for the power of expression to go to the periphery or the edges. It is characterised by mobility, wide reach, instant communications and greater creativity. Ordinary people are now able to create content, capture pictures and write comments on any issue of their interest, thus creating a new public space for the exchange of communications.

Technology has forced open formerly closed systems of authority. Today's digital world is a place with free and open spaces that have no gatekeepers. The co-founder of the Personal Democracy Forum in the U.S., Micah Sifry, says:

> It's one thing when the editors of a handful of op-ed pages and magazines can set the agenda. It's another thing when 10,000 bloggers networking with each other boil up an agenda. And as you can see, the agenda in the latter case is much more open and responsive to a much wider range of viewpoints and it is much harder to get away with bullshit.[10]

Most research and writings about the internet tend to paint a utopic picture of digital media – its ability to democratise information and communications to create a more level playing field for everyone. Governments that regulate are, therefore, seen as being less democratic, and besides, the media itself does not lend to easy regulation. There is now an emerging critique to this viewpoint that recognises the negative impacts of digital media.

A former Silicon valley entrepreneur, Andrew Keen calls it the cult of amateurs, and warns:

> In a flattened, editor–free world where independent videographers, podcasters, and bloggers can post their amateurish creations at will, and no one is being paid to check their credentials or evaluate their material, media is vulnerable to untrustworthy content of every stripe…from duplicitous PR companies, multinational corporations like Wal-Mart and McDonald's, anonymous bloggers, or sexual predators with sophisticated invented identities (Keen, 2007).

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[10] Interview with Micah Sifry: Co-founder of Personal Democracy Forum and Techpresident.com in Mother Jones magazine, Interviews with Bloggers, Poiticos, and Netizens on Politics, 20 June 2007.

He cites the example of Wikipedia – founded on the premise that it is constantly being corrected by web citizens, and now the third most visited site for information and current affairs. But there are no reporters or editors, and none of the content has been vetted for accuracy, thus "perpetuating a cycle of misinformation and ignorance" (Keen, 2007).

Keen warns:

> Say goodbye to today's experts and cultural gatekeepers – our reporters, news anchors, editors, music composers, and Hollywood movie studios. In today's cult of the amateur, the monkeys are running the show. With their infinite typewriters, they are anchoring the future. And we may not like how it reads.

The digital world has lowered costs making it possible for everyone to engage in creating content, and self-expression. The high costs that prohibited people in the old analog world from becoming political actors or creators of cultural content, for example, is now less restrictive. What this means is that more people are engaged in the media and that the formats and presentation look more sophisticated, but it does not necessarily mean that the quality of discussion is raised. It simply means that we have a wider variety of discussion available in the digital world.

Lawrence Lessig, a lawyer and promoter of the Creative Commons [11], has been studying how people are using digital technology for creative activities like remixing content. He acknowledges that there will be illegal creativity and people will resist regulation. Proponents of media regulations believe that society has to resort to legal action and enforce technology agreements to block certain kinds of content to regain control over the discourse. But as Lessig and many people who work with the internet believe, it is very hard to sustain that kind of control. Experience the world over also shows that the younger generation is more actively engaged in cultural production and distribution in today's age of instant access. This has wide implications for the role of the traditional media gatekeeper.

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[11] Creative Commons, a non-profit organisation devoted to expanding the range of creative work available to others legally to build upon and share.

A critic and writer on modern media, Howard Rheingold, describes the tools for cultural production and distribution – the mobile phone camera, digital camera and the internet – as being in the "pockets of the 14 year olds" (Rheingold, 2007). New media technologies have had an extensive influence over the way in which youth are exposed to information. The media saturated global community today poses many questions for the next generation of children.

No longer passive media consumers, new media provides the opportunity for people to have their say no matter how naive they may sound. People become participants and not just an audience. Bhutan's experience is no different. Digital media have launched us into a process of a social and cultural transformation. Facebook, Youtube and Hi5 are internet sites with wide appeal, giving people the opportunity to adopt and invent ways to participate in cultural production.

In such a media saturated world, media researchers and academics are supporting the need for media literacy programmes to make people more aware of, and to be able to critically analyse, media content. Research shows that a media literate society is better able to make good use of all that the media has to offer, and to reinforce positive values rather than being passive and unthinking adopters of new ideas driven home by global television and media.

The internet is also described as a collective intelligence where people pool their knowledge and share what they've found. Do it yourself video and cell phone technology enable people to voice their views, report injustice, broadcast misconduct and voice political opinions. The young generation today are able to multi-task far better than their parents' generation. The digital nomad of the 1990s has become a digital superhuman undertaking numerous tasks all at once. There are as many media gatekeepers today as there are millions of pages on the internet. Put another way, there are many more users without enough gatekeepers.

The new gatekeepers in a new culture: some observations

Internet in Bhutan

The internet in Bhutan is very quickly providing a much needed space for public discourse. Over the years, online forums have become highly popular among a certain group of e-literate Bhutanese. Bhutanese technophiles often find solutions to their daily questions on line and many have built strong community friendship (Dorji, 2003). Bhutanese online discussants are a dedicated group of users much like a collective intelligence on contemporary issues. Their bold voices have been criticised particularly due to their 'anonymous' nature. The Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) asked internet providers in June, 2007 to block a website, Bhutantimes.com, for being defamatory. Dedicated followers of the website continued to access it through proxy servers. One of the key attractions of the site is the aggregation of news on Bhutan, both from local and international media. Another is the boldness of the topics broached that question authorities, judicial decisions, etc.

People in the industry and those who use the internet as their source of news and information about Bhutan say that the issues raised in online forums are a great way to discuss critical issues. They acknowledge that some of the discussions often get too personal and slanderous. But they point out that such messages are often ignored and/or receive very little response. This is a natural censorship by the community, and is considered more effective than government regulation.

The internet is a democratic process that builds communities and enables a section of society to debate issues. With the political changes taking place in Bhutan, new websites are popping up like thunderboltnews.com, bhutandemocracy.com (established in September 2007), aggregating news on Bhutan and providing forums for online discussion.

There is a growing diaspora of Bhutanese, and friends of Bhutan, all over the world, who are connected via the internet. Thirty four million hits show up when we google the word Bhutan. Compare this to Thailand – 92,600,000 hits, Singapore – 104,000,000, Japan – 315,000,000 and USA – 536,000.000.

Bhutan's presence is growing on the blogosphere. Google search shows more than 2,130,000 results for Bhutan blogs, although most of these are blogs written outside of Bhutan. Youtube, the video sharing website shows 392 posts (in October, 2007), with the earliest posted just barely a year ago. Most of these are travel videos, Bhutanese songs and film clips. Bhutanese students tend to use Hi5 as a forum for communication. At the same time, the presence of Bhutan's critics are increasing, particularly the Nepal-based critics of government who dominate some online discussions.

Radio

The emergence of commercial talk radio spurred by FM technology is worthy of some attention. First of all, talk radio is not a journalistic medium, hence some people find it both refreshing and yet disturbing as the boundaries of accepted speech are stretched. Talk radio hosts and other speakers often employ persuasive communication techniques on the shows, and the overall contents of any radio talk show exhibit clear and strong biases. The participating audience and people calling into the show give talk radio messages the legitimacy it needs. Hence, the gatekeepers are the audience themselves who decide how far to take a discussion.

Talk radio listeners are found to be active participants in public life and studies show that listening to talk radio may reinforce people's interest in participating. Talk radio is useful as a channel for citizens to actively engage in public discourse, at times challenging elite discourse in the process.

The two new radio stations are fast gaining popularity in Thimphu and some of the districts that receive their signals. These are young, dynamic radio stations that target the young, and young at heart.

Kuzoo FM, established in September 2006, claims an almost similar mission as the BBS to inform, educate and entertain. Kuzoo, describes itself as the voice of the youth and targets a young listenership. It has 16 full time staff and provides a Dzongkha and English radio service that now reaches six districts, and is quickly expanding. In May 2007, Kuzoo FM

became a 24-hour radio station. Its website, Kuzoo.net, has 6,000 members. The website itself provides blogs, news and videos.

> Kuzoo aspires to be the voice of the youth of Bhutan.

> Kuzoo aspires to inform the youth of Bhutan.

> Kuzoo *is* the youth of Bhutan.

This statement from Kuzoo's website describes aptly the profile of Kuzoo – youthful, bright and dynamic. Listeners point out a new accent, often described as being an American accent, on Kuzoo. It is the accent of a less 'schooled' or less 'authoritative'/professional voice that many Bhutanese have grown up with on the BBS. The subjects and the level of discourse on Kuzoo are also fairly new by Bhutanese standards, from democracy and youth to a person with HIV coming on air. For example, on an evening broadcast in September 2007, a rather hesitant presenter talked about an emergency contraceptive that should be taken 72 hours after sexual intercourse. In describing the new contraceptive, the presenter said: "It's really hard for me and my friend to say this on the air, but I think it's important information for you to know." This gatekeeper decided that the information was important enough to warrant sharing publicly on air despite her obvious discomfort in talking about contraception.

Talk of love and relationships also tend to dominate the banter on air with callers. This is contributing to a new and open culture that is defining urban Bhutan today. Kuzoo has three news bulletins a day, largely re-written from the newspapers and news from the Bhutan Broadcasting Service. Most of the full time staff have had little formal training and are learning on the job.

Radio Valley, established in April 2007 is Bhutan's first commercial radio station that aspires to provide "musical joy and entertainment through the radio". It also has a stated objective to encourage and acknowledge Bhutanese musicians and singers. The station models itself on successful commercial FM in India and in the West. It has two full time radio jockeys (RJs) and nine part time RJs, all with limited formal training, learning largely while on the job.

Radio Valley's radio jockeys follow a global RJ template and adopt nicknames for themselves. There is "superman", "the crazy

little girl called Phama", etc. This has spurred a trend for callers to give themselves nicknames too, hence, a regular listener who is a 14 year old boy named "little romeo", "aum wangzam"[12], "disco Pema" (a Kuzoo FM caller) and others like them.

Station manager Kinley Wangchuk says this is a policy to encourage more communication and callers as people in a small society like Thimphu may be deterred from calling when they have to use their real names. Radio Valley is a commercial radio station that's enjoying a regular following six months after its establishment. Many people like the relaxed, informal style that the station exudes along with the almost non-stop music it offers.

Like the free spirit that characterises FM radio, Radio Valley gives the impression of a station that is daring, young and fun. It is outward looking and questionnaires on its website asks listeners for their zodiac sign and what they would do if they were made the president of America for a day. It also sometimes borders on the extremes of accepted radio norms, as many people notice that the radio jockeys sometimes flirt with their callers.

In a spontaneous moment in September 2007, a female radio jockey described an advertiser who had just visited the station. She says in rapid fire speech:

> You should see the owner of 'XYZ'[13] shop who just walked in to the station with her skinny jeans and stilettos, she's looking really hot. Even the other RJs here are all looking at her. It really makes me want to go to her shop and get something from there. Boys and men – go get something special from 'XYZ' shop for your special girl.

Here's a female RJ describing another woman as looking "really hot" – not an expression women would use on their own gender, and perhaps an indication of an unfiltered acceptance of the language of global radio jockeys who tend to be more male. When asked for her reaction, the woman described said she was embarrassed by the remark: "She should have used the words

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[12] A term that is customarily considered impolite (meaning wench) but in this case used tongue in cheek and perhaps to denote a sense of being risqué and daring.
[13] Name changed.

'looking nice' or something like that. After all I'm married with children," she said. "I'm going to call the station and ask them not to use such descriptions." And so starts a process of negotiating a new cultural space on Bhutan's talk radio.

The new radio stations have spurned a youthful culture and will continue to push back the boundaries of accepted speech just like the internet. Talk radio setting a new agenda of love and relationships for the younger generation with the danger that it may swamp all other priorities. New to the experience, talk radio in Bhutan has not yet resulted in people becoming active participants in public life but has vast potential for doing so.

The new stations have had an impact on BBS radio. BBS is also seeking ways to become less formal and more interactive, and to acquire new music that is a main draw for its listeners.

TV

TV soap operas are popular. Indian soap operas have a fan following, while Korean soaps are becoming popular. Korean films and music have become a favourite of Bhutanese youths.

Cable operators continue to broadcast local community videos. One cable channel in Thimphu runs advertisements and music fillers to attract local advertisements. Low cost productions, re-runs and programmes that include advertisements taken from TV channels in India make up an eclectic, and unfortunately, low quality programme offering. The gatekeepers in most cases continue to be the technical staff on duty. Many amateur video efforts are surfacing on the local cable TV channels, while trailers of Bhutanese films attract some attention.

Film

The film industry continues to grow and a record number of films were shown in 2006. Despite being commercial ventures, the film and music industry are thriving. The latest films are expressions of the change taking place in Bhutan. A film released in 2006 is called "Aum Chum", the story of a singer and stepmother to a child who loves hip hop. The film's original cut features a six minute clip of Bhutanese boys taking part in a breakdancing

competition. This was later cut to four minutes and the rap song in English was removed on request of the film review board[14] (which represents a government and industry gatekeeper) which stated that Bhutan is not yet ready for the culture of breakdancing, and objected to the expletives in the song.

The director of the film[15] said breakdancing was already popular and all the film did was to reflect a reality of youth. The Bhutanese film industry is an example of a media that's exploring and negotiating cultural space, but it has a big impact due to its popularity. There were 92 films produced by 2007, 24 of them last year. Overall, Bhutanese films and local soap operas have helped to improve an understanding of the Dzongkha language, are reinforcing Bhutanese culture and music although many are based on Bollywood templates. Most significantly, these local films are replacing the screening of Hindi movies in the local cinemas and there is a waitlist for films to be screened in Thimphu's only cinema.

Music

Music is a vibrant industry with 12 music studios producing 50 albums last year.[16] Music videos and new music today include songs that combine languages, 'Dzonglish' has become a term to describe songs in Dzongkha that include some English words and lines. While the mainstream broadcaster, BBS, has emphasised proper Dzongkha, the national language is now less formal in tone and is even mixing languages in the new media scene. Bhutanese hip hop and rap music are making their debut in a growing market. Music videos show strong Bollywood-inspired dance sequences.

Newspapers

Newspapers are also showing signs of reaching out to an urban and youthful readership. Kuensel publishes a weekly City Bytes section that targets the urban youth. The Observer, which professes to focus on rural news, and bills itself as citizen's news,

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[14] Bhutan's Film and TV Review Board.
[15] Pelden Dorji in personal communications
[16] From a UNDP workshop on creative industries, 2007.

citizen's views, has stories on prêt -a porter, where to get hip hop clothes for children.[17] Bhutan Times provides a regular fare of film idols (both Bollywood and Hollywood actors), and Western fashion trends including scantily clad models. It runs stories that would not have appeared in Bhutanese media a few years ago – e.g. "Bouncing breasts spark new bra challenge" with a picture that barely conceals a woman's breasts (Sept. 20th 2007 edition). Even as newspapers try to set a certain standard in reporting, there is a growing tendency to look for sensationalism ranging from the portrayal of Western women, to trivial news.

Gatekeeping

As the gates are opening wider and more news, information and entertainment are reaching the average citizen in Bhutan, it's a good time to ponder the role of the media gatekeepers. How wide should we open the gates? Can we control the trend? How can we negotiate the new media environment to help build a more open society and strengthen civic engagement in issues of concern?

Similarly with the family growing up in a more media saturated environment than ever before, what role do families play in filtering the cultural change that is taking place in Bhutan? Messages can be healthy or unhealthy, positive or negative and what is perfectly acceptable in one society may be considered risqué in another. What we see today are new media gatekeepers each trying to find their own niche in the media market, and to set their own boundaries. Digital media are enabling Bhutanese to become not just consumers of news, information and entertainment, but producers of news, information and entertainment although the quality of such efforts may not always be of the highest standards.

Strategies for the growth of a healthy media

Media is evolving in Bhutan and the emergence of new media is providing new, vibrant and challenging spaces for public discourse and cultural expression. This section suggests

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[17] *Bhutan Observer*, 21 September 2007

strategies for the healthy growth of media in Bhutan so as to create an environment conducive to GNH.

'Many to many' communications does not guarantee civic engagement by populations that have not been used to, or had a chance to express, public voices. The mainstream media now have the responsibility to give voice to the voiceless and the unreached. People must be encouraged to speak up and the media must continue to focus on people's views. BBS is making efforts to that extent through new technology that will permit more regular relay of voices and pictures from the districts. Media must remember their public service obligations in a society where the majority of people are still subsistence farmers.

The new media emerging in Bhutan must promote wholesome civic engagement based on an accepted code of ethics and practices. Just as OMY, a citizen's news site, has acknowledged the need for editors to maintain standards, the role of the professional gatekeeper will always be required. Similarly, the Bhutanese media must maintain ethical standards if it is to take on issues like corrupt practices in a democractic society.

The role of the government as gatekeeper

The gatekeeping trend needs to be watched and, if necessary, regulated. While regulations are meant to guide the healthy development of media, they must be introduced with a light touch to enable media to be professional. Tight regulations, no matter how well meaning, will strangle the media at a stage when they need to be strengthened and allowed to grow to be effective in a democracy. The best approach to the healthy development of the media will remain dependent on training and education.

Media gatekeepers encourage anonymity to encourage greater participation. While understandable for more sensitive issues, it is important that media in Bhutan encourage people to reveal their identity to make discourse honest and transparent. Today the newspapers continue to use comments from anonymous contributors on their online forums. It would be a grave setback to Bhutan's emerging democracy if anonymity becomes a trend in the media. The argument that anonymity protects sources, or gets people to come out of their shell, loses out to the need for honest, democratic, and free speech. While some may see it as a matter of

time before we're comfortable to say what we think, we have to begin now.

Regulators like the government and the media need to encourage people to speak out clearly and in a non-offensive manner for their views to be heard. Media are a reflection of the social world and we would like to imagine a civil society that's civil rather than one that is petty and slanderous.

For democracy to work, media has the role to establish a diverse and vibrant public and cultural sphere, one that is truly Bhutanese and not copied. The media's voice must be relevant to the average citizen. Plagiarism and intellectual piracy, so rampant in blogging and the internet, needs to be watched in Bhutan's new media to avoid a generation that's freely acquiring others' work as their own. Instead, we must encourage people to produce their own narratives.

Being relatively young in terms of media development we can create a media environment that truly suits Bhutan and our goal of Gross National Happiness. We must aim for media that are more culturally sensitive, more spiritual, more compassionate and more thought-provoking. We must develop media that do not succumb to commercial influences and that recognise public service as a priority even while we try to make media sustainable through advertising and corporate support. We have to shape the power that shapes the community – advertising. If GNH is a policy for contentment, it is essential that we have guidelines for advertising that targets children and the rural community so that rampant commercialism does not replace quality programming.

There is a need for Bhutan's media gatekeepers to play the important role of community building (now more than ever in a new democratic environment) and to provide a healthy forum for discourse – be it political, social, economic or cultural.

There is a lack of training and professionalism and the new radio scenario runs the risk of putting out the wrong messages to the youth. The language used can be improved as it represents gatekeepers who set social standards. There is also an unchecked use of reading news from the mainstream media, often without crediting, a form of plagiarism that has become commonplace on the internet.

Gatekeepers in the family must continue to play their role as communicators of values and beliefs, and to engage the young generation in discussing the changing values and culture in Bhutan. Parent and media literacy programmes will help to spread an awareness of the role of media and skills necessary to make the most of what media offer today. Parents need to guide their children in media use. Media literacy will also help us bridge the transition from a speak-only culture to a watch-only culture with a recognition of the need to read and write that is so essential in a media-filled world. Today's media culture is a read/write culture as digital technology gives everyone the ability to create content. Bhutanese children must have a good foundation in reading and writing to be able to fully participate in this new media world. To be effective, we have to begin by introducing media studies in the school and college level curriculum.

Recognising that multi-tasking is also becoming a way of life in Bhutan, we should monitor and regulate our media use. More is not necessarily better. We have 35 television channels 24 hours a day, and the internet is soon to be available on our cell phones. We do not want to spend all our waking moments reliant on the media, or being filled with distractions from media, particularly television viewing that has been described as a "weapon of mass distraction". As a GNH society, we need quiet time, down time and time for contemplation and spiritual pursuits.

The government has to play the balanced monitoring role; Bhutan can regulate without strangling creativity, through the open portrayal of our changing culture. In an open source and bottom-up world of postmodern media, we have little choice as traditional norms of control are no longer effective, nor desirable. The minds of our youth have been opened to the world and to new ideas, and there's no turning back. The youthfulness of the media can be groomed and guided (through guidelines, training, regulations) to ensure quality discussions on the agenda, and to ensure that society's values are upheld.

Media organisations need to adopt GNH as a policy for setting targets and planning. GNH in media means addressing public service obligations above all else. It also means media should question themselves about the intention of each story, programme and content and what they hope to contribute to society with their

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work. With GNH as a guiding principle, media have to empower citizens to achieve wellbeing rather than creating a passive audience of consumerism.

We should be wary of the possible entanglement of social and commercial interests, and understand the need for public service that distinguishes the consumer (based on economics or who can pay for what) and the citizen. Media have the responsibility to develop a vibrant civil society by addressing citizens' needs, and interests. The media can seek feedback and consult with citizens to prioritise information, news and entertainment that are relevant in a changing society, and not merely reiterate what the commercial world thinks we want or should have.

We should avoid the 'dumbing down' of media that is happening elsewhere in the world, where media feed misinformation and provide sensationalism producing a Disney-type happiness and entertainment; this will lead us far from the path to GNH. No matter how tempting it is to pander to gossip, titillation and commercial interests, media have a bigger role in ensuring quality media and discussion as Bhutan journeys towards democracy today.

All these strategies show the important role of the gatekeeper that filters the news, information and values we hold in Bhutanese society. Bhutan's constitution guarantees the freedom of information and media. Government regulations the world over have been difficult to implement. The best approach is to enhance professionalism of the media through education and training.

Only through a healthy, open discourse can we truly try to build an environment in which every Bhutanese can decide how to achieve the state of GNH that is the inspiration for our development and future. Bhutan survived and thrived as a unique nation in the past because it kept a tight hold on its gates. It has inevitably decided to open up to the world, but cautiously. In doing so it cannot allow its gates to be pried open but must be in control of the pace. That is the essence of GNH.

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