

Media in the New Political Order

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Premise

Bhutan is undergoing fundamental changes in politics, economy, social fabric and every other aspect as a nation. This is a defining moment for a country that has seen a peaceful idyllic existence for over a century. Whatever decisions are made, changes proposed, and conclusions drawn will have long-term implications on the country both as a 'State' and as a 'Nation'.

In the new political environment mass media will play a vital role in sustaining the democracy. In fact the success of the new path, so laboriously and single-handedly forged by His Majesty, will in large part depend on how the media is managed and practiced in the country. The *draft* Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech, press and expression in 'letters'.¹ Will these be translated into 'spirit' by the government that would have to regulate these rights and by citizens that would have to exercise these rights?

This paper looks at the development of the modern mass media in Bhutan and the role that it has played in the overall modernisation process. It attempts to answer the questions pertaining to issues such as press freedom in Bhutanese context, the need for a Bhutanese media model, and the role of the public service and the independent press in the changing political scenario. To simplify the argument presented in this paper, mass media shall mean print, radio, and television.

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¹ Article 7.2 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan

Background

To understand the growth of media and its role within the Bhutanese context, one has to appreciate the overall overarching development philosophy. This understanding is vital and it averts any prejudiced assessment or simplistic conclusion often drawn by Bhutan-watch groups and so-called upholders of press freedom in the world.

Bhutan is a tiny kingdom in the Eastern Himalayas still not widely known to the rest of the world. This is because the country remained in a self-imposed isolation until the first half of the twentieth century. The total superficial area of 38,394² square kilometres is sandwiched between India - to the south and China - to the north. Within these borders, the country rises into the higher Himalayas like a giant stairway, dramatically climbing up from the lush green tropical forests to some of the highest mountains in the world. The virtually untouched forest that covers 64.5 percent of the country is home to a large number of flora and fauna making Bhutan one of the world's hotspots in biodiversity.²

Although Bhutan is a comparatively small country in size, it has many diverse language groups among its small population. A total of 18 languages and numerous dialects are spoken among a population of 634,972.³ Having never been colonised, the country developed a distinct culture and tradition over the millennia. Three main ethnic groups – Ngalong, Sharchop, and Nepali, and several other minorities are dispersed across a mountainous and difficult territory. Communication is still undeveloped, and except for a small group of population comprising of government officials and business community, much of the Bhutanese people confine themselves within their farms in rural areas.

Until the sixties, Bhutan remained an isolated country, a forbidden kingdom. Only 13 Western expeditions had entered the country beginning with two Portuguese Jesuit missionaries – Cacella and Cabral in 1642.⁴ This isolationist

² Ninth Plan document, Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2002

³ *National Housing & Population Census, 2005*

⁴ Françoise Pompalet, *Introduction to Bhutan*, Odyssey publications

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policy was to change forever with the enthronement of the third king of the Wangchuck dynasty – King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, in 1952. The King recognised that if Bhutan were to survive as a nation, it had to modernise its economy and open its door to the outside world. Hence he initiated an intense political, social and economic reform starting with the institution of the National Assembly in 1953 as the parliament.⁵

In 1961, the first five-year development plan was launched with the focus on roads and social infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools.⁶ In 1965, the Royal Advisory Council was instituted as a consultative body to advise the king and government and to supervise the implementation of programs and policies laid down by the national assembly.⁷ Three years later in 1968, the Bank of Bhutan was created to regulate the economy and monetary policies.⁸ In the same year, the Royal Court of Justice was established separating the judiciary from the executive arm of the government. In 1971, Bhutan was admitted to the United Nations as an independent and sovereign nation. The present King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who succeeded to the throne in 1972 continued this process of modernisation and gave continuity to the progressive policy of the third King. Forty years of planned development have remarkably improved the living standard. The GDP per-capita now stands at US \$ 1,321 - one of the highest in the South Asia.⁹

While the story of a nation's modernisation process is nothing extraordinary, what singles out Bhutan is the balance that this country has achieved between modernisation and cultural preservation, and between economic development and environmental conservation. In short, Bhutan has drawn on the global development

5 The National Assembly is composed of 150 members. 100 representative of the people elected to the post for three years tenure, 10 members of the clergy and thirty representatives of the government

6 Karma Ura, "The Bhutanese development story", *Kuensel*, 23 January 2004

7 Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 2003, National Statistical Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, March 2004

8 The function of the central bank would later be transferred to the Royal Monetary Authority created in 1982

9 *Bhutan Poverty Analysis Report*, National Statistical Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, August 2004

experience and followed a unique development path carefully adopting what is good and not necessarily accepting everything coming from the West.

Development of Bhutanese Media

The development of media has followed the same overall development policy of slow, balanced, and calculated growth. Mass media in Bhutan until recently was comprised of *Kuensel*,¹⁰ the national newspaper; BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service), the public service radio; TV; Internet; and cinema. This is not surprising as the country itself embarked on the modernization process only four decades ago.

When the modern economic development started in 1961, priority for development was on creation of basic physical infrastructure, such as roads and power stations, and social infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals. In such a situation, with decision-making concentrated in the capital, it was appropriate and adequate to have only the *Kuensel*, an official bulletin catering mainly to the officialdom. In fact, *Kuensel* did not start as a newspaper. It was more a development newsletter carrying short write-ups on important decisions and events revolving around the capital.

Similarly, radio was first broadcast in 1973 as a weekly service for the Thimphu area. It was initiated by an amateur radio operator and a group of volunteers of the erstwhile National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB). In fact the station was known as Radio NYAB. With the bureaucracy getting bigger and development activities increasing year-by-year, there was a need for wider coverage.

Radio NYAB became a full-fledged public service in 1979 after the station was brought under the erstwhile Department of Information & Broadcasting. The Royal Government, realising the potential of radio to disseminate information, brought Radio NYAB under the wings of the Ministry of Communications. Further support from the government and

¹⁰ *Kuensel* newspaper was started in 1967 as an official bulletin of the Royal Government. It later became a full fledged newspaper in June 1986. In 1992, it became independent of the government by the Royal Decree of 1992. It is published bi-weekly, on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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external aid agencies led to the establishment of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service in June 1986.

As the curtain of the twentieth century drew to a close, Bhutan launched the broadcast television on June 2, 1999 and liberalised the media with foreign television stations beaming into the country from space. The day before, Bhutan was connected to the worldwide web (WWW) and cyberspace.

Finally in January 2005, the first two independent newspapers were licensed under private ownership, marking a new era in the Bhutanese media. While this was a surprise for many who never believed that Bhutan would accept the Western notion of a free press, for Bhutan connoisseurs and operators in the Bhutanese media, this development was seen as a natural progression of the media in the country. The seed for an independent press, in fact, was sown in 1992 when, by a Royal Decree, the two media organisations, BBS and Kuensel, were delinked from the government apparatus. The following is an excerpt of the Royal Decree:

...Today, as the kingdom enters the age of communications, its priorities are geared to meet the needs and demands of the times. The kingdom has seen a dramatic increase in the literacy rate of the population as a result of the special attention given by the Royal Government to the education sector. As technological advancement brings the international community closer together, it has also established the infrastructure to modernize and strengthen communications and information links with the rest of the world.

It is the policy of the Royal Government, therefore, to facilitate and encourage the professional growth of the Bhutanese media, which must play an important and responsible role in all areas of development. Such role is especially relevant to the national policy of decentralization, which aims to involve all sections of the Bhutanese society in the socio-economic and political development of the Kingdom.

The national newspaper, Kuensel, and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service will therefore be delinked from the Ministry of Communications to give them the flexibility to grow in professionalism and to enable them to be more

effective in fulfilling their important responsibility to society. From the fifth day of the eighth Bhutanese month (October 1, 1992) the national newspaper, Kuensel, and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service will be established as two autonomous corporations. The Kuensel and BBS Corporations will be governed by an editorial board comprising of representatives of the government, media professionals, scholars, and eminent citizens.

His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan

The decree clearly specified the mandate and professional role of the Bhutanese media, aside from implying fresh directions and responsibility.¹¹ It is often referred to as the turning point in the history of media development in Bhutan.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the growth of media has been in consonance with the socio-economic development of the country. It reflected the changes taking place in the social, political, and economic evolution of the country.

Freedom of Press - Absolute or Relative

One of the most recurrent questions a Bhutanese pressman hears is *how free is the Bhutanese media?* There is no straightforward answer to this simple enquiry, for freedom of press is not an absolute concept but a relative term. Nowhere in the world, not even in the greatest democracies such as the US, is there anything called 'absolute' press freedom. The pro-American views adopted by American media on during the last war in Afghanistan and the ongoing occupation of Iraq are latest examples of how nations, who preach the idea of free press, actually carry out such practices in reality. On the other hand, the American Constitution does not mention press freedom as fundamental rights *per se*. Rather, it is only mentioned as an off-shoot of freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment passed by Congress in 1791. Across the Atlantic, Article 10 of the European Convention even suggests 'permissible' modification of the press freedom to protect the security of a nation, public health and moral, and to oppose

¹¹ *Kuensel* editorial, 19 February 2005

racism and violence.¹² Hence, press freedom in an absolute sense is an ideal and like any ideal it remains enshrined somewhere distant from reality.

Having accepted that freedom is actually *relative*, one can affirm that Bhutanese pressmen have always enjoyed *relative* press freedom. It has never been a state policy to stop the growth of the media. If situations, circumstances and conditions have proved otherwise, it is because certain bureaucrats and individuals equated themselves to the 'State' or to the 'Government'. And even when personal or institutional weaknesses were revealed or shortcomings exposed, senior government officials often linked the action of the press as an attack to the "Tsa wa sum" (King, country, and the people). Other times, bureaucrats maintained a defensive stand against the media. The most common occurrences were over-zealous subordinates who would make the press a scapegoat to win favours from the rich or the powerful.

The draft Constitution of Bhutan explicitly guarantees the freedom of speech, press, and expression. This is a big commitment rarely seen in other countries of the world. But as the country gets closer to adopting this Constitution, there is a growing misconception that some sort of *grand* free-for-all situation is on the horizon. But freedom entails sense of responsibility. In fact a *great* sense of responsibility, both for operators as well as for ordinary citizens. Freedom of press does not mean freedom to write anything one likes. Freedom of speech does not mean freedom to insult or defame somebody. There are individual rights and privacy to be respected and social well being of the community to be taken care of. Unless the media gives more weight to such social norms, it will become far from a credible source of information working for the social good.

Nor can an individual media-person use the press and people around him or her to gather solidarity around his or her beliefs. Freedom of speech is an *individual* freedom while freedom of press is that of an *institution*. While journalists

¹² Chua Lee Hoong, *Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia*, AMIC, Singapore

and producers may exercise their freedom of speech as individuals, they may not use the press as platforms to reach thousands of Bhutanese. This is as unethical as barring the freedom itself.

Factors Limiting the Press Freedom and Responsibility of Free Press

Having practiced and having to practice the press freedom what are then the variables or factors that determine, or limit, the press freedom? What does it really mean by the term a *responsible* press?

Media in different countries plays different roles. These roles are based on historical experiences, racial mixtures, cultural settings, political systems and levels of human development. The combination of these factors in varying degrees is what defines the media in a country. Every country therefore works out a media model that suits itself the best. There is no universal standard or yardstick, although quite often, Western nations have tried, and continue to insist on the Western model as the universal media model.

Historical Background

All over the globe, there has been a basic consideration in the way the concepts of press freedom historically shaped themselves. In the UK, the distinguishing stamp on the press freedom is undoubtedly the Official Secret Act. In India, the growth of a vibrant anti-colonial nationalist press before the independence was the watermark of the press that subsequently developed as a powerful element of freedom and democracy. Singapore always played by the motto of less-freedom-and-more-prosperity and went on to achieve the material wealth comparable with any Western nation. The Philippines is perhaps a good model of how a press should *not* be, with a grand free-for-all situation where the infamous *envelope journalism* has its roots and is still a widespread practice today.

In all above cases it is evident that every country has developed the media in relation to the historical experiences

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that the country has gone through. Modern Bhutanese media is an off-shoot of the modern development process initiated in 1961. Both the press and the broadcast media focused on development communications. In fact, the mission statement of BBS is “to act as a bridge between the people and the government and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country”.¹³ Much of the programming on BBS radio reflects this statement in that a large chunk is dedicated to development programmes such as improved farming methods, better livestock management, non-formal education, etc. The historical role of the BBS was therefore purely developmental, whereby the media would assist the government in the overall effort of nation building.

Ethnic Consideration

Although a small kingdom, Bhutan is a very diverse country in terms of racial mixtures and ethnic composition. The long isolation with the outside world and within the districts and regions has sown the seeds for intense regionalist feelings. And though planned economic development has connected every district in the country, encouraging massive movement of people and goods from one region to another, it will still take some more generations for Bhutanese to think as a nation. Hence the notion that “the rules of news judgment call for ignoring story implication”¹⁴ would be disastrous. In simple terms, if a man rapes a woman, the press cannot report that the perpetrator is a *ngalop* (western Bhutanese) and the victim is a *sharchop* (eastern Bhutanese) or vice versa. Little does it matter that these *are* the facts. Such disregard for ethnic sensitivity could inflame the delicate balance between different ethnic groups in the country. The overall effect on journalism, one could argue, is that there is a loss of news objectivity. However, in exchange for social harmony, reporters should often compromise their professionalism and ethics. In neighbouring India, in 1992, it is believed that the demolition of the Babri Mosque shown *live*

¹³ BBS Mission Statement, Ninth Plan Document, 2002

¹⁴ Sunanda Dutta Ray, *Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia* AMIC, Singapore

on BBC TV via satellite had spurred communal violence all over India. The TV channel should have considered the social implication of showing jubilant religious fanatics at work. Similarly, multi-ethnic countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and even UK have adopted this editorial policy.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is defined as a set of behaviours, attributes and policies enabling an agency or an individual to work in cross-cultural settings and situations. The rugged mountainous terrain of Bhutan has for thousands of years impeded the intra-regional communications and cultural exchange. This has led to the evolution of distinct culture and tradition between regions. Cultural conservation is considered one of the four pillars of the GNH (gross national happiness). Hence, media persons should exercise cultural competence in their line of duty. If local traditions call for certain behaviours and ethics, which reporters may find unusual or comical, they should not criticize or mock at the ways things happen.

In Bhutan, culture is almost synonymous with religion and hence any disdain on the culture could be viewed as direct blasphemy or act of profanity. In a country where religious sentiments still run high, such acts would entail problems within communities and groups.

A story goes that in a village in Africa, a documentary screening session ended up in a brawl because the documentary contained a scene of a chicken crossing the screen. Apparently this act was inauspicious and the owner of the chicken (on screen) had to be identified and reprimanded for not taking a good care of the chicken. Only after that could the evening resume.

Political System

A political system and its evolution play an important role in shaping the media in a country. The political history of America has enabled the development of a press which unfortunately cannot be transplanted in Bhutan which has

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been a medieval-state until the nineteen sixties. Democratic societies have been in the forefront in promoting press freedom. This is not to say that other forms of governance have not encouraged a free press. Monarchies such as Japan, Thailand, and even Italy (before World War II) have a vibrant press and journalism.

In Bhutan, the political system has definitely shaped the modern media. A significant deviation from the Western norm is a strong sense of national loyalty. The traditional *zhung-dang-mitse-damtsi* (government – people relation) extended to media-persons. This is mainly because Bhutan has been blessed with a leadership whose concern for the welfare of the people has never been in doubt. Hence, the media, with rare exception, ended up adopting the government's position on almost everything. Patriotism or national loyalty may be a *passé* in the west. In Bhutan, it is still very strong. This practice gave the view that the media was under the strict control of the government. In reality, the common editorial policy practiced by Bhutanese media has been that of forging a sense of national identity and sense of nation-hood under the figure head of the monarchy. This is for obvious reasons. A country sandwiched between two giants can only survive through a strong sense of national unity.

Freedom of Expression and Censorship

Freedom of expression is termed as a means of seeking, receiving, and imparting information or ideas regardless of the medium used. It goes beyond the freedom of speech into non-verbal form of communication such as art, films, pictures, songs, dances, way of dressing, looks, etc.

If freedom of expression is explicitly guaranteed by the constitution, then the existing government mechanisms to control or censor, such as the national film & TV review board, become unconstitutional. This board has been set up to censor and certify Bhutanese films for public consumption, which is sensible in light of social, political and cultural implications that a film might possibly have, not to mention the breach in state security and safety. But as people become self-centred and greedy, some unpleasant events might

overrun the otherwise good work of the board. It may be necessary therefore to review the mandate, functions, and responsibility of such boards and committees taking into consideration the freedom of expression on one side and responsibility on the other.

Then there is the restriction on civil servants to sing, act in films, write articles and columns, and talk to the press. On one hand freedom of speech and expression are granted and on the other, age-old methods still seem to prevail in Bhutan. Democracy and free press are concepts that unfortunately come as a package. One cannot welcome Democracy and shut the door to free press. There cannot be a vibrant democracy without a dynamic press.

Threats to Freedom

When one refers to threat to press freedom, one is immediately inclined to think of regulators, legislators, dictators, and autocrats who *either* don't believe in free press or fear them. The fact is that there can be two kinds of threats – threats from *external restrictions* and threats from *within*.

External Restrictions

Threats from external restrictions include censorship, legislation, government regulations, and other measures and practices that restrict the job of pressmen. In an editorial for Bhutan Times, Editor Tashi Phuntsho writes: "Media may be granted freedom but when there is censorship at the source of events, it defeats the purpose. The door is increasingly shut to us." Despite the rapid pace of progress and the overall achievement in socio-economic spheres, the sad reality is that restrictions exist. Not so much as state policies, but rather as personal considerations or individual decisions. Perhaps it is owing to the feudal past, or may be it is because of the Bhutanese modesty and humility at work. Whatever the reason, people still prefer to operate in secrecy, within their little 'pond', totally apprehensive of any external presence. Any intrusion or attempt to intrude is met with disapproving

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faces and defensive actions. Defensiveness reflects fear, the fear of discovered dishonesty, revealed complicity or, at best, lack of self-confidence. Such an attitude neither augurs well for the establishment nor for the press itself. For it undermines the national policy of efficiency, accountability, and transparency. Not to mention the breach in Article 7.5 of the Constitution that guarantees the citizens right to information. How much these rights are respected by those in power will remain to be seen.

Internal Threats

Threats from within are internal (individual or institutional) threats. These are as dangerous as external threats. In case of Bhutan, they are even more. They stem from self-censorship, irresponsibility, inaccuracy, and lack of professionalism by media personnel, as well as outright corruption by reporters and editors for personal gain. Again the fault does not lie entirely with the journalist. Sometimes the reason could be simple: low salary and poor working conditions. Unless a journalist enjoys a good pay and a decent living standard, he or she would fall prey to corruption and envelope-journalism.

Institutional threats are caused by childish delight of owners and chief executives masquerading as editors and journalists. Managers, who have no background in media, do not recognise media-persons as professionals and moreover tend to 'advise' the subordinates. Internal threats degrade the credibility, responsibility, and journalistic ethics of the press.

Consequences of Threats

Threats, whether internal or external, do achieve one common goal – they weaken the press. Such a scenario will be disastrous in the wake of the political reforms in the country. The necessary condition for a vibrant democracy is a dynamic and responsible press. A feeble or a muzzled press would therefore undermine the whole democratic experiment. For, it is only through the media that people can express their wishes freely thereby holding the authorities accountable to

the populace and redirecting their plans and priorities. However, it is a well-known fact, though generally not accepted, that Bhutanese at all levels are allergic to criticisms no matter how well-intended or how best they are worded. Even in the lower level of bureaucracy, to submit even a constructive criticism to an individual would be to invite a fierce defensive, and sometimes offensive, stance by the entire institution. Worse still, the issue is given higher importance attracting counter-suits and allegations of being judgmental, biased, and detrimental to the image of the State.

One of the flaws of democracy is that there could be a leader who is incapable, inept, and inefficient, or a combination of all three. Such a leader could nevertheless equate himself to the State, and any attempt to uncover his wrongdoings or shortcomings could be likened to an attack against the State. Any criticism to his plans and policies could be taken as an assault to the social harmony of the nation.

In India, the government-press relation is still governed by Mahatma Gandhi's enlightened statement that "the national cause will never suffer by honest criticism of national institution and national policies". This far-reaching and visionary dictum explains perhaps the very high quality of journalism standards in India – some comparable to the best in the world.

As new leadership take the helm of governance in Bhutan, would they accept positive comments and constructive criticisms? Or will they also retaliate with vague reasons and restrictive regulations in the name of national security, identity and harmony and good relations with friendly countries?

Role of Media in a Changing Political Scenario

Bhutan is going through fundamental changes. Unlike other countries that greet the changes with political turmoil and civil unrest, Bhutan is blessed with a leadership that is managing the changes as a peaceful evolution rather than as a violent transition. However, for such peaceful means to fully succeed, media - both public service and independent - must

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play a crucial role. They must inform and shape public opinion. They must educate the masses on the changes, challenges, choices, and eventual benefits. Only then can people make informed choices and play a significant role by actively participating in political changes.

Role of Public Service Media

One of the sacred roles of the public service media is to offer citizens universal, equal, and unimpeded access to information. Public service media also has the societal and cultural obligation to help bind the nation together by promoting social equity (that rich and poor alike should have the same opportunities to receive programs).

The public service media has in large part operated as an extension of the government within the overall context of nation-building. However, employees of the two public service media have been given the step-motherly treatment. Neither do the employees get the benefits rendered to the civil servant nor the financial incentives enjoyed by other corporate workers. In this period when the wisdom of having public enterprises is being questioned, publicly owned media cannot be taken for granted, and their objectives and obligations are no longer self-evident. Therefore, there is a need to redefine the roles, mandate, and funding mechanisms for the public service media.

There is no question of whether Bhutan needs the public service media or not. It is clear that as independent media gets their financing from corporate entities (which will have political inclinations), the role of the public service as a credible source of balanced reports, unbiased analysis, and impartial programming is vital for the success of a democratic society. This is again not to question the professionalism of the independent press. The Media Act in fact bars the editorial interventions of owners and CEOs. But how much this is applied and monitored is another issue.

If an appropriate funding mechanism is not worked out for the public service media, what could also happen is that instead of reaching out to the districts, the public service media could be bogged down competing for a share of

audience, improving the ratings, and capturing the urban market where money flows. This will leave the un-economical areas like rural Bhutan unreported in the mainstream media.

Public Service Radio

Few years back, a government minister was visiting the remote valley of Merak Sakten in the higher Himalayas, inhabited by a semi-nomadic group, known among others for the foul smell that radiates from their body and dress. Every morning from the window of the guesthouse where our minister was hosted, he would see an old man defying the early morning chill to go and wash in the cold icy waters of the Himalayas. On enquiring the man, our minister was told, "I am having my regular bath". Amused, the minister carried on, "But don't you feel the cold?" "Well I was told I should take regular bath if I am to stay healthy," the man replied. More amused, our minister asked, "And who told you that?" "I heard it on the radio," came the reply. This short story portrays the power of the radio and the presence of this medium in the daily lives of rural Bhutan, comprising about 70 percent of the country's total population.

Radio is by far the most important media for the Bhutanese people. The very mountainous terrain, deep gorges, fast flowing rivers, and dense jungles make radio the effective tool for disseminating information. In some remote isolated communities, especially among semi-nomadic pastoral groups of Laya, Lingshi, Lunana, and Merak Sakten, radio is the only source of entertainment, information, and education.

Bhutan is still very much an agrarian society with 70 percent of Bhutanese still living in the rural area¹⁵ on subsistence farming. It is here among the simple and often illiterate farmers that radio has the widest audience. Media Impact Study 2006 commissioned by the Ministry of Information shows that there are around 83,000 radio receivers in the country with a total listening population of

15 *Bhutan Poverty Analysis Report*, National Statistical Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, August 2004

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400,000,¹⁶ which is equivalent to 88.6 percent¹⁷ of the total population. The study also shows that in terms of people's specific preferences, it is radio, closely followed by television. About 45.93 percent of the respondents preferred the radio while 45.72 percent prefer TV.

Public Service TV

I would like to remind our youth that the television and the Internet provide a whole range of possibilities which can be both beneficial as well as negative for the individual and the society. I trust that you will exercise your good sense and judgment in using the Internet and television.

- King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, 2 June 1999

Broadcast television came to Bhutan in 1999. From one-hour transmissions confined to the capital city of Thimphu the service has been extended nation-wide with a daily programming of five hours. While the public service radio models itself as a developmental radio, television has successfully established itself as a public forum for discussions on issues facing the society. Hence, in light of the fundamental political changes, TV more than radio, has the potential for providing public space for discussion on issues facing the society. Such debates are vital in shaping public opinion, which is but a crystallization of the freely expressed wishes of the people. Public opinion will have bearing on the governance of the country, thereby fulfilling the ideals of democracy.

What is not very clear is the capacity of the present public service TV to organize evocative public debates on meaningful issues confronting the society. The broadcast media has been managed by civil servants, of different managerial capacities, some good and some who left much to be desired. The one common result was the limitation of the journalistic and professional growth. Although by a Royal Decree of 1992, BBS was to function as an autonomous corporation, for all practical matters, it had to "abide" by

¹⁶ BBS Audience Survey 2000, Danida/Roots Consultancy

¹⁷ Media Impact Study 2003, Siok Sian Pek

some unwritten code of management. This was often some casual remarks here, some indiscriminate views there, passed by some prominent people. The management would often put producers, reporters and editors at the receiving end of unpleasant “briefings”. The net result has been a flourishing practice of self-censorship where reporters and editors would censor out facts even before any reaction has been received.

Then there is the unique Bhutanese journalism which one could term as ‘speech’ journalism where the prime time news is dominated by speeches, workshops, and inaugurations by senior government officials. Editors often wait for press handouts and reporters are often “invited” to, and attend, the numerous workshops and conferences. This has left the major chunk of the population either un-reported or under-reported.

Although the newest of the three traditional media, TV, has caught on to the audience who prefer watching TV more than reading paper or listening to radio. Besides, television, being the most powerful medium, has the social responsibility to conduct and encourage TV debates on various issues affecting the nation. It can bring the nation together through socially and culturally diverse programming and content.

Public Service Print

Kuensel (meaning clarity) was started in 1967 as an official bulletin. It was brought to the present tabloid format in 1986. From 500 copies, *Kuensel* now sells over 15,000 (Saturday issue) and 12,000 (Wednesday issue) copies with an estimated readership of 200,000 (*Source: Kuensel*). *Kuensel* is increasingly opening up and becoming a credible source of news. However, many still believe that *Kuensel* is government-controlled. While the broadcast media caters to the rural population, *Kuensel* has the potential to stir public debate, shape the opinion, and contribute to the overall political discourse—mainly for the educated elite. In fact it has grown to be a powerful force of democracy having initiated online debates and editorials that touch on issues of social and national importance.

Endowment Fund

As Bhutan moves unenthusiastically towards 2008 when democracy and party politics will take hold, the role of the media remains crucial to the success of the political reforms. Once the transition to 2008 has been made, the position of the public service media, especially BBS, will remain a dilemma. BBS receives much of its funding as a subsidy from the government. This funding mechanism could prove to be “tricky” as the government in power could use the annual subsidy to impose their terms and conditions. What could happen is that the public service media, that is suppose to stay out of partisan politics, will have to foster closer ties with political decision-makers to keep the show going. One cannot argue that *sin qua*; both BBS and Kuensel were often considered as an extension of the “civil service”, which was synonymous for government, state or the nation. In the new political order, the single sacrosanct *Zhung* (government) will be replaced by many state entities—the political debates dominated by two opposing factions, the ruling and the opposition parties. Hence, the public service media cannot, and should not, represent the ruling government if they are to maintain public credibility and faith.

Hence, the operation of the public service media should be met through an “endowment fund” to be granted to the public service print, radio, and TV. This fund should not be at the discretion of any government. Rather it should come with an Act passed by the National Assembly that would require the government to release the money with no conditions attached.

Challenges - Globalisation

One of the challenges for the Bhutanese media is to contain the impact of global media. Globalisation has not spared even this Lost Horizon. *Coca Cola* is already operational with its first plant in the kingdom. *Pepsi* has been around for quite sometime now. *Nokia* has started connecting the Bhutanese people while the Airbus ferries fresh *sushis* and *Hagen Daz* ice cream under the Druk Air banner. Fortunately, with the

recent nation-wide ban on the sale of tobacco products, Bhutan is not a *Marlboro country*.

Yet, more than these commodities, it is the direct-to-home satellites that may have an irreversible impact on the age-old culture and tradition that have survived till the dawn of this millennium. Today, nothing less than 45 foreign channels are available in every urban home in Bhutan—with CNN International being the first to tell us what we should know and *Fashion TV* showing us how our girls should look.

The effects of global television are very visible. Cricket, which was virtually unknown before the advent of cable television, is today the fastest growing sport among our youngsters. Cricket may perhaps be the brighter side of the story depending on whether or not one loves this sport. What is more alarming for any sensitive observer is the fact that global television is connected with the ideology of global capitalism, a force intent on distraction, cultural assimilation, and consumer creation. Traditionally, the Bhutanese, as pious Buddhists, cultivate from an early age a slow and subtle appreciation for values of life and simplicity. Commercial television promotes just the opposite—individualism and unscrupulous consumerism and puts life on the fast lane. It is not surprising therefore, that in the few years since the arrival of TV in Bhutan, private ownership of cars have grown from 7,438 in 1999 to 11, 428 in 2003.¹⁸

The explosion of capitalism and the growth of the urban centres are fuelling another problem—the rural-urban migration. Studies have shown that this migration is taking place at an alarming rate of 10 percent per annum¹⁹. On the other hand, the average age of the general population is going down and youngsters are more inclined towards foreign media and commodities. In either of the above cases, radio will not have any listeners a few years down the line.

Finally, the presence of international media in even the remotest villages is now inevitable. New technologies continue to bring civilisations closer and yet at the same time threaten

¹⁸ *Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 2003*, National Statistical Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, March 2004

¹⁹ Pem Gyeltshen, *Rural Urban Migration*, Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok

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to tear the world apart. Under such a scenario, decision makers, media executives, and professionals should have a better understanding of national policies and local priorities. Eventually there is the need to develop a strong sense of local identity of the media to suit local needs. This localisation of programme content is what will give the ownership and sense of identity to the listeners. Oddly, in the age of globalisation, the secret of survival is staying local. To paraphrase, more or less, one Indian media executive, it does not matter, to an ordinary Indian farmer, whether it rains or shines in New York or London. What he needs to know is whether there would be enough rain before the rice plantation season. And this information is something only a local media can give.

Quo vadis - From there to here to where?

From development journalism that the Bhutanese media has always been, where does it go from here? What direction does it take in light of the fundamental changes in the country? There are three areas of recommendations:

Need to develop a 'Bhutanese' Media Model

Media, as we have seen, does not have a universal standard that can be applied in every country. It varies from country to country and from region to region. On one hand there is the need for the media to reflect the Bhutanese culture and society. On the other, the influence of the media in a "new" Bhutan is so great that one cannot overlook the need to understand the media itself.

Hence, there is the need to develop a Bhutanese media model--considering the nation's history, culture, ethnic composition, level of human development, and the role the Bhutanese media has played thus far.

Re-define the Role of Public Service Media

There is also the need to redefine the role of the public service media. From development journalism there is the need to go further into shaping the public opinion on national issues, providing equitable coverage, enhancing the cause of

nationhood, and watering the seeds of a democratic society. There is the need to go from just plain reporting to involve and encourage discussions and debates and carry the country forward.

Carryout Massive Media Literacy Programme

The absence of an independent media has created a *quasi*-divine status for the mass media which is synonymous with BBS and Kuensel. As commercial media comes into the market there is the need to educate the people on how to view media more critically, in essence to become media-literate. People need to understand that whatever comes from the media is not the absolute truth. Media literacy programmes should be carried out among all sections of the society--especially students.

Legislation – the New Dilemma

The job of the media has never been an easy one. Until now it had to understand the target audience and tailor-make any information that was disseminated. On different occasions, media is often accused of being on opposite sides by warring parties. In worst of cases it becomes the sacrificial lamb. The general expectation, again, was that with the adoption of the Constitution and media legislation, things would improve. In fact the opposite was expected and that exactly what has happened. The job of the pressmen has become even harder because the line that marks the borders between do's and don'ts will become hazy. And with no clear directives or professional maturity to decide what can be reported and what should be left out, journalists and editors are in a total dilemma.

Closing words

Bhutan has always had the wisdom and political commitment to balance growth and happiness. As the doors were flung open to modernisation and winds of change blew across the Eastern Himalayas, Bhutan has not adopted everything coming from the West but has had the ingenuity to choose

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skilfully things that can best serve its interests. At times, Bhutan seems to have perfected the art of modifying Western concepts and culture to suit her own needs.

With the entry of global concepts like free press and democracy into the homes of every Bhutanese where evening dinner talks around the kitchen fireplace could be centred on multi-party politics, it may not be a surprise if Bhutan again skilfully responds by reconciling politics and press freedom with traditional “Bhutanese” values and ways of doing things. If the new mantra of the Bhutanese continues, it will be similar to a Bollywood classic *Shri 420* where Raj Kapoor sings: “my shoes are Japanese/these pants are British/the cap on my head is Russian/but my heart is Indian.”