

Role of Media in the Changing Socio-Political Situations in Bhutan

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All sentient beings, including the small insects, cherish themselves. All have the right to overcome suffering and achieve happiness. I therefore pray that we show love and compassion to all.

- H.H. Dalai Lama

Abstract

We live in changing times. Significant political, economic, and social developments are taking place in Bhutan. With the coming of democracy and elections in 2008, the impact of media on Bhutanese society is going to be far more increased. Newer challenges are ahead and how to cope up with these challenges is going to be a Herculean task. In most countries, the mass media has moved away from the positive expectations of civil society. Global competition and the profit motive have made the media forget its social responsibility. Instead, it is busy transforming citizens into spectators by offering them entertainment in the name of knowledge and communication. A major challenge for media in Bhutan will be “how to get the people out this whirlpool of consumerism?”. What role will the media have in making the people at large rise from their individual selves to the spiritual level of responsible citizenship? To what extent will the media in Bhutan be circumscribed by neutrality, impartiality, security, anonymity, and meritocracy? These are some major issues requiring attention in our discussion.

With the passage of time, the fourth estate, the press and and

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the media, has not only become an important factor in Bhutan but is playing a major role in educating the public. Irrespective of age or qualification, the language of a large number of people is being significantly influenced by it. The general use of phrases, syntax, and idiom is often being determined by the way media use them. The electronic media has really made the world a global village. Just by pressing a button one gets to know the happenings in virtually any part of the globe. In the days to come the extent to which the media is going to control people's aspirations in Bhutan cannot be undermined. The political changes that are to take shape in 2008, the general election and democracy, are going to bring a lot more uncertainties about the role of the media. The world over what one sees today is the media is trying to set out a pattern which is held to be sacrosanct. It projects its views in such ways that there is a general feeling among the public that those who do not conform to this pattern are to be considered backward. The pattern is essentially a copy of the West and the English-educated urban population is just trying to imitate it and become 'street smart'.

Our effort in this article would be to explore the ways and means of monitoring the media's impact on the society and also to examine how the media should play a positive role in building up the society towards more knowledgeable, rational, and analytical citizens. How will the media address issues like enlightening the citizens and overhauling the education system to make it value-based so as to obtain the best results? The media will have to play a very major role in shaping the opinions and attitudes of the people of Bhutan. It should become the watchdog of the society and at the same time its role needs to be monitored by an established autonomous institution.

Positive aspect of the Media and its Influence

Media, like a coin, has two sides, one positive and the other negative. The positive side of the media has not been given much attention. The media, in general, has been playing a significant role in shaping society today. Media is the term closely associated with the fourth estate (which includes both print and visual media), and it has not only become an

important factor in democracy but is playing a major role in educating the public. Irrespective of age or qualification, the language of a large number of people is being significantly influenced by it. The general use of phrases, syntax, and idiom is often being determined by the way journalists use them. The electronic media has really made the world a global village. Just by pressing a button one gets to know the happenings in virtually any part of the world. The satellite television has brought into our lives the kind of things that we could not even imagine a few decades ago. Even the hair-style or the one-ear ring style of Beckham or Ronaldinho has become popular in some rural areas of the country, thanks to the media coverage of club and country football in Europe and South America.

It is an undeniable fact that the electronic media has increased our knowledge base and we have quite a few mobile encyclopedias amidst us, at least among the educated public. The media keeps providing information to young students and educated youth to build up their careers. It has opened up a new horizon for these youngsters to unravel their own hidden talents and the media is providing some ventilation to their feelings, creativities, and aspirations. In Kuensel, for example, there are pages where school-going and college students can write poems, essays, articles, or even short stories. There are also programmes on television where experts from different fields are invited to give talks or to participate in discussions so that it helps them in choosing their careers, or finding solutions to their problems. There are also career-counseling sessions on television, and students are immensely benefited by such programmes. Our pBibliography for various items, including daily needs, are being highly influenced by the advertisements in both print and visual presentations. We should admit that today, knowingly or unknowingly, we are being controlled by the media.

The media has become the most important purveyor of information and its importance is fast-growing with the spread of education. This looks to be a healthy sign so far as the progresses of nations like Bhutan or other Asian nations. In an unstable national and international environment where

hostile external stimuli often seek to initiate internal instability, as at present, nation-building and preservation of national culture have become the primary responsibilities of the media which brings it into close contact with the rest of the society.

In this era of globalization, the media seems to be playing a crucial role in inculcating many Western /alien cultural values into the life-style of people in various parts of oriental cultures; countries like Bhutan which are able to maintain and follow an unique pattern of value system strengthened by age-old tradition and customs, will have to work out a master-plan to counter the ill-effects of the media, which is fast-pervading the life-style of people in many parts of Bhutan. It is most unfortunate that most of us do not want to discuss the negative side of media influence because it will pull us further down. But, unless we discuss its negative side, how can we make media more beneficial to society?

Negative Impact of the Media

A major harm that the media has caused in the minds of urban youth in Bhutan is that it has set out a pattern which is held to be sacrosanct. It projects its views in such ways that there is a general feeling among the public that those who do not conform to this pattern are to be treated as 'country' and 'not-modern'. In fact, this is a typical Western influence on our young Bhutanese youth and they imitate the West much better than the Western youth themselves. In all our higher learning institutions, in the evenings and on holidays (unless they have some office functions/classes, etc) our girls are seen in public places only in jeans and T shirts, many of them seem to have forgotten the national dress! Due to peer-group pressure students are taking to the latest fashion in trousers and tops, and those who cannot wear such dresses, either because of financial constraints or due to family pressure, often suffer from an inferiority complex. It is most surprising to see how the media is brain-washing people

of all ages into believing that the so-called 'beauty products' really enhance personal appearance; so much so that it is common nowadays to see advertisements of beauty parlours in our national newspapers.

The biggest harm that the media has been doing to the youth of the world is eroding their self-confidence. Most of the media programmes highlight the corruption, insincerity, poor work culture, and lack of discipline in the society. Not much effort is made to correct the situation through positive write-ups and programmes. While the positive side of the West is highlighted, its darker aspects are hidden very cleverly. It is never revealed how selfish and lonely the Westerner often is, how depression has forced a large number of Western youths to take to drugs, or how mental unrest has shattered the concept of a happy family in the West. All this would have adverse effects of the psyche of the media-fans. A person lacking self-confidence cannot lead a happy life because it produces a feeling of insecurity. The feeling of insecurity is transmitted to other members of the family, thus making the home a living hell, but never the happy home where others' opinions are respected and where all members live harmoniously. At the workplace, people who inwardly feel inferior to their colleagues make the environment a veritable hell. The boss may be highly qualified, but because of that lack of self-confidence he always tries to find a scapegoat for his own faults. Loss of self-confidence is often a result of lack of self-respect. A man who does not respect himself, does not respect anything. This is the real reason why we backstab our friends, flout rules, yield to temptations, and indulge in all sorts of pettiness. It is impossible for such people to love their motherland.

It is here, the role of media becomes important—either it can play a positive role by minimizing such tendencies, or, a negative role by escalating it further, ultimately to the loss of societal welfare. The media has a special role for small and compact societies like Bhutan, because it plays a crucial role in sovereign governance. It provides an option for the state in protecting its citizens and way of life against external and internal cultural threats. A great deal of effort has to be put in

to develop and motivate the media personnel so that they play a positive role in strengthening the national ethos and culture, and in incorporating unquantifiables like discipline, morale, pride, and self-esteem within its scope. There has to be a great emphasis on the development of a high degree of integrity and mental resilience through a positive democratic culture based on moral and spiritual value systems. In the years to come, if one were to go by the assertion of the Chairperson of the Anti-Corruption Commission, the media will have to play an active role in enlightening the masses of the need for corruption-free governance. Because corruption is the worst enemy of the country, it being anti-national and anti-development, hence, the role of media becomes even more important in a free atmosphere.

Media's Role in Directing Diplomacy

In an atmosphere of freedom, democracy, party-based politics, and governance, the media in Bhutan is going to be far more important than what it is now. In fact, the media may even promote and popularize a certain ideology or a group of party-based individuals as the ideal choice for peoples' representatives. In that situation, unless some rational choices and logical analysis is done, then, perhaps, the system as a whole may go under wrong policies and wrong governances, as is the case in many parts of the world. For example, presently, under the illustrious leadership of His Majesty the King of Bhutan, it is possible for the state to ensure safety and security from external and internal threats and the people of Bhutan have been enjoying peace and stability.

The genuine rapport in Bhutan's relations with its close friend and neighbour, India, has reached a new height and the country also enjoys growing relations with its development partners, as well as other countries that appreciated the kingdom's wholesome policies for development and change. But, supposedly, in the changed

circumstances of the post-2008 era, a change of government or ideology can significantly shift bi-lateral or multi-lateral relationships of Bhutan, be it in economic, social, cultural, or political spheres. So, here comes the importance of a responsible media and media culture; unless we start working towards some fair and highly conscientious media, it may not be possible to set things right overnight.

It would not be out of place to mention here the impact of media in shaping the diplomatic relations of India with that of the U.S.A. or with the erstwhile Soviet Russia in the cold-war era. In fact, it was the dominant print media which played a significant role in projecting India as a close ally of the erstwhile U.S.S.R. during the 1970s and early 1980s and that made all the difference in the U.S.A.'s approach towards the sub-continent's geo-politics and its biased outlook towards the 'Kashmir issue'; even today its stand in support of Pakistan's position. However, Indo-U.S. relations have come of age and presently, it has been so good as never before, but the strains it created in the 1970s and early 1980s (which was mostly the print media projecting India as anti-American) and even today such wrong projection has its ill-effects on the bilateral relations between India and the U.S.A. So, similar such happenings cannot be overruled in the changed political scenario in Bhutan after 2008; after all, party politics is nothing but the politics of individual parties and for their survival one cannot rule out the possibility of selling out the national interests, sometimes for winning the polls. Perhaps, such a scenario may not emerge in Bhutan, but still cautions can very well be raised. Because diplomacy is one area where not many would show attention or give special focus and this lack of adequate scrutiny from the reading public the media, sometimes take it for granted and play their own tune depending on prevailing circumstances. One more example is being explained below which would throw more light on the role of media in times of political and diplomatic crises.

Imagine a situation like that of Nepal, where there is complete breakdown of law and order or any proper functioning of the public institutions like that the judiciary, etc. In fact, the media projects to the outside world "as if

everything has got collapsed in Nepal; and the life of the common man in great jeopardy". To a large extent, the people, whether within the country or outside, go by what the media project. In reality, the ground situation can be completely different from what the media keeps projecting to the outside world. But, unfortunately, people believe what these media, both the Eastern and Western press, had to offer to the people. Before the King of Nepal took over the complete control of the government, the situation in Nepal was far more worse, the Marxist-Leninist party members created all sorts of trouble for the government lead by the Nepali-congress and these "so called" revolutionaries did everything to disrupt the public life by both damaging the property and lives of common people; but later when the King took over power, both these parties, viz. the Nepali congress and the M.L activists, joined hands and again created a joint strike by damaging the public life and property! If they can join under one banner against the relatively peaceful rule of the King, why did not they join hands and create a peaceful atmosphere when an elected government was in power? This question was neither asked nor debated in the Nepal media or other such media which supported these "*bandh* culture" in the sub-continent. Here, lies the important role of media to be fair, honest, and unbiased in their functioning style.

If the political parties fulfilled their responsibilities, the Monarch would not have any role in the governance of the country, but if there were serious problems, he would still have an important and constructive role to play in ensuring that the Constitution is adhered to and upheld by all political parties.

This was the comment of our beloved H.M. to one of the questions raised during the public meetings recently held in Wangdi Phodrang; if one were to study the observation made by His Majesty the King, it throws much light to our discussion in the earlier paragraph in connection with the 'mass unrest' in Nepal. Perhaps, here the media as a whole need to play a positive and constructive role in educating the masses, particularly, the younger generation for they are the

source of all kinds of mass movements against either pro or anti-people protests. How far the media in Bhutan is going to play a responsible role in the changed circumstance with freedom and democracy and party-based politics, is going to be the order of the day in Bhutan in 2008.

Will the new system and the political parties fulfill the responsibilities mandated in the Constitution? Looking at the democracies and democratic forms of government in different parts of the world, with more and more income disparities, social inequalities, nepotism, favouritism, and corruption at the higher bureaucratic levels, can Bhutan escape from this syndrome? How far is the media going to play a crucial role in keeping Bhutan above all these problems? These are some million dollar questions and time alone can answer these critical issues. Presently, we can only hope that the media will be responsible and accountable to both the people and its institutions.

The media has a greater role in taking the messages of change to the larger section of the society and in making the people as a whole understand the importance of Articles like the Political Party and Elections:

The success of democracy will be determined by the ability of the people to elect the best political party that would provide good governance and fulfill the aspirations of the people. The important responsibility to elect the right people, therefore, lay in the hands of the people.

His Majesty the King makes this observation time and again in all public meetings, of late. Governance is the art of administering the affairs of the state through the legislative, executive, and judicial wings, and other institutions within the overall ideological framework of the accepted political system, as is envisaged in the draft Constitution of Bhutan. The entire philosophy underlying the above principles can be summarized in the twin concepts of a democracy and welfare state. The new constitution requires the administration of the country to be committed to these concepts in order to cater to the needs of the people of the country whom the administration is meant primarily to serve.

The role and impact of media should be seen from the above context, and that too with more changes likely to come in the private television channels going to follow the suit of the private press in the form of Bhutan Times and Bhutan Observer. How these private channels and the press will perform the functions of a responsible public media—is a big question! In the atmosphere of competition and market survival, whether these private media would play the role of the responsible agencies of mobilizing the public opinion about various national, regional, and local issues in Bhutan—only time will have to test it. At the moment we can only hope for the best, because the press and the visual media elsewhere focus mostly on their profits and market share rather than the quality or reliability of their news coverage or way of coverage, etc. How are we to bring in a check and balance system of media in Bhutan?

The eminent statesman and economic-historian, Gunnar Myrdal, observes that in many third world countries, particularly under democratic systems, there is a lack of social discipline, and the systems suffer from deficiency in respect for law, law enforcement, and observance, and from collusion between officials who are responsible for implementing policies and programmes, leading to rampant corruption. One of the main causes of this deterioration is the inability or failure of the media, in general, to arouse public consciousness and providing an alternative for better governance and able leaders and their ideology.

Abhijit Bhattacharji, a noted columnist, after experiencing first-hand polling in several Indian states during general election, wrote a series of articles in *The Pioneer* ending with the one titled “Dark Alleys of Democracy”. He lamented: “one wonders as to when we will have candidates—scholarly, politically alive, but at the same time balanced people—at the helm to navigate Indian political, economic, and radical destiny? Should we not confront and combat the uneducated criminals and gangsters?” In spite of innumerable recommendations of different committees and

the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), no major electoral reform has so far been undertaken to stem the downward slide of the entire electoral process. But, in Bhutan one has to take into account of all these ill effects of democracy and work towards a proper and just system for the peace-loving and non-violent people of this Himalayan Kingdom.

Now that the Office of the ECB has been formed in Bhutan, its role does not end in conducting fair and free poll in 2008, but lies in establishing high standards and streamlining the entire body-politic for years to come. The media has the biggest responsibility of taking the role and objectives of the ECB to the people. Each and every eligible voter in Bhutan should know the fundamental principles and the functioning nature of the election commission in ensuring a free and fair poll. The Commission is an autonomous agency and its primary role is to conduct the general election and hold the ECB above corruption, nepotism, favouritism, etc. It has the responsibility to maintain the freedom and proper behaviour of all the political parties and the contesting candidates in the election. With the help of the police (which is under the rule of the Home Ministry), the Commission has to maintain the law and order in the country during the times of public election. In fact, the police and *dzongkhag* administration have to play a subordinate role during the times of elections, and it is the election commission takes the full responsibility of conducting the free and fair election. This is a new set-up for many Bhutanese; hence, the media has to take an important role in taking this message across the different sections of the population. Perhaps, only then, larger participation of people in the election process becomes possible. Besides, the very objective of bringing all these grass-roots level changes envisaged by His Majesty the King of Bhutan will be fulfilled only when the media and these newly formed institutions do their duty with complete commitment for the nation's welfare.

There are, however, strong countervailing factors like an independent judiciary, free press and emerging grass-roots level democratic bodies at the *Gewog* level should ensure the survival of the democratic spirit in Bhutan. Besides, as

Winston Churchill said, “democracy, as of now, is not the most ideal form of government but...no better system has yet been evolved.” The media could play a major role in ensuring a constant and vibrant people’s culture in a country like Bhutan with its commitment and unbiased outlook. The true character of good media services in a country should be circumscribed by neutrality, impartiality, security, anonymity, and meritocracy. It has to play a positive role in strengthening the concept of responsive administration which means a proper understanding of the people’s problems and a speedy and fair disposal of their grievances.

In His Majesty’s definition, an administrator “is not the commandant ordering people about. He has to understand the people in human way and stoop to conquer.” The spirit of service should be reinforced by a commitment to the constitution and not any particular party in power, or to a person who forms a part of the political executive. The basic value of the spirit of service has to be guided by the highest ideals and principle. The new forces that are at work have to be reckoned with and while on the one hand you have to ensure advance in the material and economic field, you also have to give equal if not greater importance to spiritual and cultural aspects. Here lies the greatest challenge for the media as a whole in Bhutan.

Today, in Bhutan, in spite of the repeated efforts of His Majesty the King, the initiatives of various government departments, and the participatory democratic system envisaged by His Majesty, the people in general do not see themselves as having the wherewithal to influence a political process that is firstly incomprehensible in its complexity and secondly happens at a time when the country is going through a crucial phase in its modernization. It is an unprecedented experiment in the modern history of the world as a whole. The future direction remains uncertain, given the experience of various countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; but the extra-ordinary faith and trust the King has in his people can be reciprocated only, and, if only, the media

in Bhutan play a completely different role than its counterparts have played in these areas mentioned above. The big question that we now face is: What should be done to make journalism and media-based jobs an enlightened profession? However, it is not only a question of journalism. In order to raise a new generation of enlightened citizens, it becomes necessary to overhaul our education system as it exists now and make it value-based so as to obtain the best results. It may sound utopian, but this is the only remedy. Unless we inject good values into the body politic through the education system we will be unable to conquer the oppression of false values that are destroying the cultures of different societies in the world.

Unless we make attempts to develop the right attitude, positive changes will not come. Journalists and media correspondents with large hearts, open minds, and clear reasoning, should take up their pens (and cameras) which are mightier than swords, and fight against all odds to protect and preserve the uniqueness of Bhutan in its entirety. They must highlight reports that help foster positive attitudes in the people. Great things can be done only when people think more positively and optimistically. There has to be a complete unanimity in the approach of educationists, administrators, future political aspirants, and social thinkers so that there are serious discussions and measures taken to strengthen Bhutan's future. Its future is bright; Bhutan is projected to play a much more constructive role in the SAARC region in the years to come. If that be so, the media will have to play a very major role in shaping the opinions and attitudes of the people.

Social Responsibilities of the Media in Bhutan

The social responsibility of media, be it the print, radio, or the television, cannot be undermined in any society. In fact, in countries like Bhutan, it becomes even more relevant and important that the media take enough interest in this social responsibility. Because the Bhutanese society is more cohesive and there are central organs like culture, language,

religion, and the non-violent nature of the Bhutanese people. With the changes going to come in the areas of polity, judiciary, administration and the over-all constitution, this role is going to be a big challenge. Many Bhutanese are not much aware of the changes that are going to occur in the near future; and given the remote location of their settlements, they got to be educated of the changes as well as they got to be continuously made aware of the requirements in various fields of life. Besides, the proper understanding of the concept of GNH also is a major agenda for the media. Only when people, at large, understand the concept of GNH properly, will it lead to long term social stability and prosperity of the country as a whole.

Today, the living style of people in urban areas of Bhutan, particularly in Thimphu, is in no way different from that of any of the cities in the West. The people have become highly individualistic, self-interested, and not bothered to know or have time to know about their own neighbours. They consider material success as the biggest thing in life. The bank savings against their name would procure them much happiness, and they have become 'spiritually empty'. There is a 'rat race' in out-doing others, in the name of competition and survival; many seem to be losing their traditional values which are very essential for the sustainability of the individual identity of Bhutan. Even among the educated (getting education from different institutions in Bhutan) people, there is an undue expectation that the Government should provide them everything—job, promotions, comforts, etc. It is a wrong notion that the younger generation of this country thinks and expects too much from the government; the government can provide them the opportunities, avenues for growth, but it is they who have to find the ways and means of attaining them. Our young graduates should look out on their own to various non-government sectors for their growth and career ambitions; this kind of awareness is presently lacking amongst our youth. Here, media of all types have a great role in making them understand the reality and

prepare them for future assignments; this will go a long way in the overall development of the country.

Suggestions and Recommendations

According to the latest Census in May 2005, still there are about 30 per cent of Bhutanese population living below poverty line and more than two-thirds of our population living in rural areas, and unless the difficulties of these people are alleviated, the GNH cannot be attained. Here, the role media will be playing is going to have an important contribution in either making GNH a complete success or a failure. Alcoholism is becoming a big threat in various parts of Bhutan, given its natural entry into our homes in the name of traditions and treating others with love and affection. But, the impact of alcohol use in our youth and young population needs to be analysed and the ill-effects of alcohol use cannot be underestimated in any society. Moreover, the other vices like 'drug abuse' and 'substance abuse' are also becoming a menace in some parts of Bhutan, including some educational institutions. Here, also the media can play a positive role in educating our youth and young student population about the various ill-effects of these habits and they can contribute towards social welfare and happiness of the population as a whole. In a completely non-violent society, like that of the Bhutanese, of late, one comes across instances of 'suicide', 'rape', 'murder', etc. The crime rates in different parts of Bhutan (though very insignificant compared to other countries in the sub-continent) are becoming the concern of all peace-loving people of Bhutan. What role is the media going to play here? How are they going to educate our youth/people? Will the media have time and interest in doing so (given their commercial and marketing objectives)? Do we have enough legislation to enforce upon the media all these concerns? These are some questions need to be answered well before the process starts happening.

The most important thing in one's life is to be 'happy'. But, can this happiness be given to people like the way they are given various facilities such as a good road network,

water, electricity, telephone network, education, health facilities, and remunerative jobs? It is a big question, because, happiness is not a commodity and hence it cannot be distributed to the people. It can only be realized by the people, the government can only provide the avenues to the people so that they can live in happiness. And, it is the responsibility of the people to realize what happiness is all about and to strive to attain it. Happiness lies in being together, being with one's own family members, with one's friends and relatives. A well connected family network of relationships is an indication of happiness. How is the media going to inculcate these values into our younger generation?

The media has a combination of two conflicting, sometimes, contradicting objectives viz. survival goals and social goals. To what extent the media can balance between these two goals is not an easy question to answer. It depends on the nature of the media personnel themselves, their ethics, morale, social consciousness, etc. To become commercially viable is a major objective of not only the media but also any business or industrial adventure. Because financial viability (making a reasonable rate of return from their financial investment) is a basic objective of all business activities, media cannot be exempted from that goal. On the other hand, to meet the social objectives is completely different from financial goals; in a highly competitive environment (more so when private media come to play a role in Bhutan) survival in the competition and in the market becomes, sometimes, the sole objective of many media enterprises in the world today.

This can be explained with the recent introduction of two more newspapers in Bhutan. Till recently there was only Kuensel in the print media and it had its own freedom and way of functioning. But now that there are two competitors, Kuensel had to change its style, coverage and presentation of items, etc. In the days to come, the competition will become more prominent and we will be in a better position to understand and analyse the impact of private newspapers in Bhutan. Similarly, there is soon likely to be private television

channels and also private radio broad casting services along with BBS. To predict the course of action these media will take for their survival cannot be possible at the moment. But what is sure is there is going to be a tough competition and in order to survive in the competition, and to have a reasonable market share, the media may follow any kind of path which suits its objectives; but when that happens, there arises the questions of how the government and society will have their views expressed, of how the media is going to be controlled, to what extent the media becomes accountable to the people, and how we are going to establish the mechanisms to bring the media under public. However, it will not be an altogether impossible task to streamline the role of media in a free and democratic Bhutan. We have enlisted a number of concerns in this paper, and, we have also made explicitly clear of the issues to be tackled and the concerns to be kept while dealing with this important issue.

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