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MEDIA AS THE 4TH ESTATE TH

Bhutan Media Dialogue 2010





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Foreword

The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy closed an eventful year of our democratic transition with an educative discourse among journalists, policy-makers, academics, legislators, and representatives of the Bhutanese civil society. It was our first media dialogue, providing a space that brought together a good representation of Bhutanese society in a conversation that led to a better understanding of the important concept of the Fourth Estate.

Participants did not represent their organisation's interests but shared their views as members of Bhutanese society to discuss the role of media in a fast developing democratic environment. It was also significant that the dialogue came two days after His Majesty the King emphasised the importance of civil society in his National Day address to the nation. His Majesty's emphasis on the natural responsibility of citizens was a reminder of the importance of our mandate as professionals in the public sphere.

We know that the election of a government does not achieve a democracy. Citizens must work hard to ensure the evolution of a democratic polity. Professional media will help build a strong civil society and establish the firm foundations for the culture of democracy.

The Media Dialogue 2010 – another first in Bhutan's maturing democracy - was about media as the fourth estate, asking important questions like “What is the responsibility of media in a GNH society?” , “What is the value of public space?”, “What is the role of civil society?”.

An important outcome of the dialogue was the recognition that media enables good governance, not just government. This emphasised the need for quality journalism and the importance of nurturing a professional media industry. Participants shared a range of recommendations on how journalism can better serve Bhutanese society, on the need for media professionals to think deeply about their responsibility, and the need to grow civil society to strengthen the develop of the country.

The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy supports the independence of media and we dedicate this record of the dialogue to all the people who are contributing to the professional growth of a media industry that will best serve the people of Bhutan. We acknowledge UNDEF, UNDP and OSF for supporting the Dialogue.

Siok Sian Dorji
Director, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, 2010

Bhutan Media Dialogue 2010
Media as the 4th Estate

Day 1

December 20, 2010



Kavi Chongkittavorn speaking about the role of media in promoting accountability and transparency.



A radio jockey and journalist reflecting on the presentations made by the facilitators.

MEDIA, GOVERNANCE AND SOCIETY

Cherian George

It is an exceptional privilege to talk to people who are in the forefront of this exciting development that we are seeing in Bhutan. I think there are very few countries in the world where so much is yet unwritten in terms of the system and in terms of norms and so on. It must be an extremely exciting time.

18th – 19th Century: Press freedom for elites.

The first thing that strikes me in Bhutan is how new your democracy is and it may seem like this is a major disadvantage. The fact that other countries became democracies many decades ago, like in Europe or North America, their understanding at that time in the 18th and 19th Century was actually not very democratic, even though press freedom was enshrined in the US constitution more than 200 years ago.

If you look at the way that it was actually practiced it was extremely elitist, very sexist and terribly racist. It was really about press freedom for certain men and it didn't mean much for wider sectors of society. It was only in the 20th Century, after more than a century of experimentation, that we gradually dawned on the Americans that press freedom should be more than just freedom for the elites; that it needed to be tied to a meaningful democracy. But even in the 20th Century it took a long time for human civilisation to understand what press freedom should be all about.

Mid 20th Century: Cold War lens

If you received democracy or press freedom in the middle of 20th Century, yours lens would have been quite distorted by the Cold War. The problem with those countries grappling for democracy for the first time in the middle of the 20th Century, is that they looked at everything through a Cold War lens - the battle between capitalism and communism. So, one of the distortions of that period was that there was a very strong argument being made that in order to have a free press, all they needed to do was have a free market. As a result, capitalism equaled democracy, because the alternative was communism.

It was a very simplistic way of looking at the world, to put a lot of faith and trust, which later on we realised were unjustified in the power of the free market, and commerce as an engine of human rights and democracy.

Now we would like to imagine we are much wiser. Early in the 21st Century, we would like to think that after more than two centuries of experimentation we now have a much clearer idea of what it means to be democratic and what is the role of press in a democracy.

What I would like to present is some of those lessons that we are able to pick and choose from the after centuries of experience in more than 100 countries. This is really just a distillation of some of the best evidence that is out there in the world which makes democracy work.

Right now, there is a consensus among those countries that democracy is a very sound form of government because it is the best known technology for getting rid of bad governments peacefully. It is the best insurance policy against really bad governments. And notice this about democracy: it automatically leads to the highest standards of living.

My own country, Singapore, has tried very hard to prove that you don't need the democracy in the Western form in order to be rich; and they've done it quite well. It is not the argument that you need democracy in order to be rich, rather it is the reverse. However, without democracy, you have no protection against really bad governments other than a final overthrow. After centuries of human experience, we have found no better way for getting rid of bad governments than one man, one woman, one vote.

Independent media

There is also a consensus that independent media are a pre-requisite for democracy. The presence of a free press is, on one hand, the symptom that we have a free society, but it is also a condition for free society. Why is this? It's because media has certain

You need a free media in order to cultivate an informed public. If people are going to have the right to determine their own future, then that determination must be based on adequate information.

democratic roles, but first of all you need a free media in order to cultivate an informed public. If people are going to have the right to determine their own

future, then that determination must be based on adequate information. They must know what are the issues in their society, they must know what their choices are and if there is a problem, what are the possible solutions? Without that kind of information, democracy will be extremely weak and that certainly is the main role of democratic media.

The second is that a democratic media can serve as a watchdog. We know from thousands of years of experience that there is a tendency for power to go corrupt, so there always been a need for checks and balances on power, and a free press is one of those checks and balances.

Thirdly, there is now a strong understanding around the world that another important role of democratic media is to serve as a common forum for different groups to talk about matters of shared interest.

There is no homogenous society on this planet. Every country - even small countries - are internally diverse. They may be diverse ethnically, or they

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may be diverse in terms of language in terms of culture. Even in a small city there will be diverse of class, so the only way to make a democratic government work is to have these different groups come together and talk about how to make a shared future possible.

Professionalism

So, a very important role is providing that forum for discussions and negotiations. It is also understood that in order to perform these roles well, you need a professional class of journalist. What does being professional mean? There was a time when we thought that being a professional just means that you do it for a living and you are good at it. More recently though, we have been forced to redefine what professional means, and the main reason for that is the internet. The internet suddenly made it possible for amateurs to do journalism. Now we have citizen journalists who use blogs to do something similar to what professional journalist do.

As we consider these issues, we realise that it is not so much that we earn a living out of it, while these people are willing to do it for free. It may not have much to do with skills either, because some of these citizen journalists are actually very good and can write well. It may boil down to this: the definition by values. Because it is by the understanding of the professional groups and society that we define professional journalism by the values we have. Similar to the way doctors define themselves, doctors understand that what makes them way doctors is because they all agree on the Hippocratic Oath.

Furthermore, there is a sense among professional journalists that what makes us journalists is the very fact that we have a shared understanding of what we are all about. There is also a shared understanding that we are in this for public service and this is what makes us different from creative writers or artists.

A creative writer or artist can similarly take advantage of the liberties they have to express themselves freely, but it is usually based on need for self expression. They make a pretence that doing art is some sort of public service. It isn't. Doing art is releasing something that is within you.

Journalists look at it differently. Professional journalists say no, this is not a selfish enterprise. Many of the core principles of journalism are actually intended to bring this about. The core principles of journalism are in fact intended to help suppress our egos. Of course, the personal ego is the major motivation in doing what we do and why we do it. It is wonderful to see a byline in print. It is wonderful to be known among your peers as someone who can write well, but as professional journalists we recognise that while there are these sorts of selfish motivations, that is not what makes us a professional.

What makes a professional is the fact that we serve the public. If you think about the principle of objectivity, why do professional journalists believe that we should try to be neutral and balanced? It is precisely to suppress our egos. We do not deny that we are motivated by our personal values, but when our personal values and personal interests come into conflict with what we understand as the intellectual needs of the public, we try our best to suppress our personal interest and personal values because that's not why we do journalism for. We do journalism to serve the public.

This commitment to ethics and to public service mission is understood by professionals to be more important than loyalty to an employer. This is a very tough thing to do, but it is important as professionals to understand that. What makes you a professional journalist is that at the end of the day you are answering a call that is greater, that is loftier than just the hold that your employer has on you just because they pay you.

The best, most reputable and most credible news organisations in the world understand this. If you look at the New York Times or the BBC and so on, these organisations try their best to make sure that whatever demands they have on their employees, they do not force their employees to compromise on their professional values. On the best newspapers, the marketing departments that are in charge of getting advertisements are not allowed to talk to the journalists within the same organisations.

It is considered completely unacceptable for a marketing boss to try and get the journalist to write something positive about a company that is trying to get advertisements from a newspaper. These companies understand that you cannot get the best of a professional journalist if you force them to compromise their professionalism just for the sake of their company's bottom-line. So that is what we now understand by professional journalism, not just by skills and doing it full-time, but about values.

Tensions

I have tried to bring the broad consensus that is out there but I would be lying if I told you that it is all resolved; that we now have a perfect formula. In fact, there are many unresolved issues. There are lot of tensions and contradictions within what we consider to be best practice in journalism. One of them is the tension between liberty and responsibility. Obviously, in order to do well, journalists must have press freedom

and must guard their liberty. It is sometimes difficult to balance this with responsibility.

What often happens around the world is that when we ask journalists to be responsible they take it as something threatening, as if you are encroaching on their liberty: 'How dare you ask me to be responsible, are you trying to infringe on my liberty?' This is always an unresolved tension and it is difficult to get journalists to voluntarily accept responsibility as part of the exchange enjoined with the liberty.

Another interesting tension is that journalism is an open profession and unfortunately this means there is often no quality control. Journalists are not like doctors and lawyers who have to pass very difficult exams in order to qualify to be a professional, and if they breach certain professional codes, they lose their license.

Only the most repressive countries in the world have the licensing of individual journalists, where you must have a practicing license to do journalism. Almost all countries accept that if they treat freedom of expression seriously, anyone can be a journalist. But this also means that we don't just get good journalists, we often get bad journalists too. We haven't quite figured out how to improve the quality of journalists without closing up the profession.

Another interesting tension is between professionalism and being the people's voice. We often assume that being professional is a good thing. But, in many mature democracies, what we have seen is that as journalists have become more professional, they become more highly educated. It has become less of a working class vocation and more of a middle class and upper middle class vocation. Suddenly, journalists have stopped talking to ordinary people.

Journalists now spend much of their time talking to their fellow elites and elite newspapers and big businessmen, politicians, and so on. We have seen this in many countries with mature democracies and a mature press, where gradually as a result of professionalism, as an unintended consequence of professionalism, journalists have lost touch with the people who actually need them the most; the people who do not have a voice. This is a serious problem.

Finally, there is a tension between being an aggressive watchdog and an encouraging participation. This tension was first noticed in the US around the 1970's or later. When they studied the values of the elector they realised that many Americans were not even bothering to vote. Large sections of the electorate were getting totally turned off by politics and the fingers were pointed at the media because they felt that the media was constantly searching for scandals, and constantly assuming that politicians were crooks. This made the public cynical.

The public thought the politics according to what journalists were telling them was so distasteful, so full of crooks, that maybe they should just mind my own business. As a result, in a very paradoxical and un-intended way, serving the watchdog role came into conflict with another important democratic purpose of journalist, which is to encourage

citizens to participate in politics.

Increasingly, in some mature democracies, we have seen where the democratic role of the press has become an elite conversation. The press is fighting with the political elites, leaving the ordinary masses completely turned off and unwilling to participate.

And nothing in the history of civilisation tells us that we should always assume that the media will always be able to live up to the highest expectations.

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Accountability systems

Regulation internationally is seen as necessary, as even free countries have laws against defamation because people need the right to protect their reputation if the press is lying about them. But the principle is that the regulations must be as minimal as possible, they must not squeeze the life out of the freedom of expression. If the regulation is intended to cure some social problem, the cure should not be worse than the disease.

Another important principle to address this problem of an imperfect media, is that maybe we need to invest in the accountability of systems - instead of regulations. They are voluntary systems where the media voluntarily adopt codes of ethics. Many high quality newspapers, TV and radio stations have reader or viewer representatives or ombudsmen within their own staff. You may wonder why they would have someone whose job is to represent the readers, and to help the readers criticise the media. These news organisations have come to realise that credibility is the most important thing, and they can enhance their credibility by showing that they are accountable and open to the public, by showing the public that we are as open to scrutiny as we demand others to be open to our scrutiny. If you ask tough questions to other institutions, you should be prepared to be asked tough questions yourself.

In mature democracies you have a watchdog media, NGOs and so on, who shine the light on the wrongdoings of the media, and that is also an important aspect of democratic media.

Finally, you have an increasing number of countries that have press councils or complaints commissions, that allow the public to complain about specific articles that they feel are unethical, or unfair. Again, it is important to bear in mind that this is a non-legal approach. What makes this an improvement over regulation is that it is voluntary. The other thing that we have learned over the years is that maybe it's a mistake to think in terms of developing a perfect news organisation because the perfect news organisation does not exist. It is more meaningful to try and develop a healthy ecosystem.

Think of the media system as a whole rather than thinking of a perfect organisation. The system as a whole should have different types of media, each of them will have their own strengths and weaknesses; but the important thing is that they will have different

strengths and weaknesses. So, instead of the society putting all the eggs in just one basket, breaking up one type of media will compensate for weaknesses for another type of media. As long as the media system is healthy we need not worry too much about individual news organisations.

Diverse media ecosystem

The three key types of media that are now the important part of the healthy system are:

1. Commercial media
2. Independent public service media, which are usually public service broadcasters. It is important to recognise that when we talk about public service media the best practice involves media that is publicly funded by the state, but does not answer to the government of the day on a day to day basis. It does not need to worry about getting advertisement money because it gets state funding, but there is no quid pro quo in order to get public funding.
3. Community media, largely civic media, grassroots media or media which are operated by NGOs, are seen as very important to bring the grassroots voices or the voices of minorities.

Local context

Finally, while I have tried to present to you the best practices internationally, they do not add up to a set formula we have been following, because it is also recognised internationally that you now have to pay attention to local content.

Different countries have different priorities and different cultures. You may have an internationally understood sense of what it is to be a good doctor, but a good doctor will practice medicine differently in two countries. In Singapore we have a very low fertility rate, so just as we need doctors to boost fertility we also need doctors to help us prepare for old age because our people live very long. In other countries, the medical problems might be things like tropical diseases, so disease prevention will be a major priority. Similarly, when you talk about the press it is important for the journalist not to simply adopt models from influential countries, whether it is the US or India. You need to take a look at your own society and ask how best can we serve based on the priorities and problems of our own society.

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Participants of the Bhutan Media Dialogue.



Journalists talking on the need for accountability in media.

MEDIA'S ROLE IN PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Kavi Chongkittavorn

It is a great honour to return to Bhutan again. Every time I come, I have a renewed sense of vitality. As Cherian George said, this is a country where you don't want to make mistakes.

Developments and contradictions

What is important is that Bhutan is a young democracy and people are pretty used to the concept of Gross National Happiness. But you also have to understand that there are many contradictions in this world.

There is massive progress in wealth and development, but there are also environmental problems, and while there is an explosion in media like Facebook, Twitter and social networking, there is no increase in the corresponding accountability and justice. This is the issue we will discuss.

Then you have electoral democracy but distrust in elected leaders and institutions of governance. Put all this together holistically, then as journalists you have a part of the engine that helps to build a good society.

The next question is where Bhutan is in the global scheme of things? Certainly Bhutan is on the top of the world, but let's see what people think. These ranks come from Freedom House. Forget about Finland, it's always No1. Bhutan is pretty good, ranking 124 after

two years of democracy. Look at Thailand, 78, and couldn't survive. But Bhutan is ranked 124. This is what they think about you. Do you think that you fared well? You look at Malaysia, 142. All South East Asian countries are not free.

You look at China, the Asian powerhouse, the number two economy and ranked 181. Singapore, surprisingly, is ranked 151. That's what Freedom House thinks.

South East Asia likes to claim that they are free but the level of freedom depends on local interpretation. The Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia are essentially free. Malaysia is less free, but it is not the kind of freedom most of us is talking about. Brunei is less free, Vietnam is slightly better, but Burma and Laos are not free. That's what we see.

It is about the amount of freedom we are discussing. The West says: 'Oh, you lack certain things, you are not free,' yet we still say that we are free.

Role of media

In a free society the question of freedom is the arena for debate where you can reconcile the differences so that we can come up with common objectives, common goals. But it is far more difficult than people think. You have a free media, which can create plenty of friction, because of the levels of understanding, the levels of interpretation and awareness, are completely different.

Being a journalist is very unusual. In Thailand a criminal can be a journalist. You know we have many cases where Thai journalists have kidnapped children. In Thailand 50 years ago, journalists started out as criminal reporters. So there is no trust in journalists because they work with crime and so become criminals themselves.

Thailand is non-pluralistic media society, and the media reinforces the rulers, the powers, and promotes conflicts. You look at South Africa before apartheid, you look at Africa in Rwanda, you see that promotion of conflict radio or hate media.

Pek mentioned about His Majesty the King's speech on a vibrant democracy and actually I'm very happy to hear such a frank speech by the King. We also have speeches by the Thai King on National Day, but the content by His Majesty the King of Bhutan and the Thai King are completely different. You are talking about vibrant democracies and civil societies; ours are little different. We focus on different subjects.

We need to have journalists who can explain complex government issues, list policy options (some of the things that Cherian talked about), but in a democracy you need to be more sensitive, especially in Bhutan. Now you have elected politicians, I think that the biggest issue is when a journalist writes about "who elected you, why don't you write about me in certain issues, or, why do you pick on me?"

We journalists have to analyse, we have to list policy options, and we have to educate the public to make an informed choice, reconcile different views in society and provide hope.

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to make an informed choice, reconcile different views in society and provide hope.

The Thai media always acts as an opposition party, and I think there is a tendency in Bhutanese journalism that sometimes they take issues seriously. They think that I can be better as an opposition representative, and you forget that you are a journalist. Then you tackle the issue like you are a politician of the opposition party. As a journalist, I often did this because sometimes the opposition did not do their job very well. So we took that role unconsciously. The media maybe a part of the problem, or it may not. I'm raising this so that we can consider the nature of our own profession. This is the most important aspect of journalism in a young democracy because we journalists tend to do all these things to compete and to boost our egos.

While we have to focus on our profit, especially in a tight market like Bhutan, I think the most important thing for us today is that we lack a holistic approach to reporting and most journalists don't really understand the holistic approach. As a journalist for 30 years I make mistakes every day. I make mistakes because my knowledge is incomplete. New issues are introduced to me every day. Its challenging, because a journalist now needs to understand international laws, and understand the new protocols of the world. You can't write on any issue without referring to the international context. It is very difficult, so you need a holistic approach, despite all the frame work, despite all the code of ethics.

As you must know, during the past months we have had a political crisis in Thailand. The journalists focused on the reporting of the political conflict and they were very sympathetic to those who demonstrated on the streets. Some gave a very good account on what happened during the crisis, but what they forgot was the democratic practice that had been going on in Thailand from the last 78 years. They did not take into account the historical background, and only took one approach.

Journalists should also believe that the editorial guidelines must be published, must be known externally.

I think if you have to write or report on anything, you need to have a big picture of what's going on. Within Bhutan's context, I think we only focus on the reference that you have had 100 years of continuous development, and the harmonious society that you are involved in. As a result, the two years of democratic rule should not change what you have achieved in the past 100 years. Just like in Thailand, people focused on those particular months as if there was no connection with the past, so it is very important to understand the broader picture.

Press and standard of quality

So what can be done? In my job we try to figure out a workable, doable approach. You have no doubt heard this before, but what you haven't heard is this: when you have guidelines from editors, it is only for internal, not external use. Now there is a new kind of code of conduct or ethics that you must know about. Among journalists we share these guidelines, but we also need to share it with the outside. You shouldn't think that these guidelines are only for my newspaper. They are not. Outsiders should also know the guidelines if you want to improve your credibility.

Journalists should also believe that the editorial guidelines must be published, must be known externally, so that when you have readers who are familiar with your newspaper they can make comments and point out the weaknesses of the paper, and also to avoid questioning the transparency and ownership of the paper, which today it is a big question in South East Asia. Sometimes you know the owner sometimes you don't.

For example, I recently returned from Mongolia, and everybody knows that the newspaper in Mongolia is owned by a politician. Every politician must have a newspaper, so what I'm trying to say here is that the transparency of ownership is very important. We should know or question who owns the newspaper, what their objectives are, and do they really want to have a good newspaper or not. For me, the most important aspect is that the editorial guidelines must be published.

Three years ago, a Geneva-based organisation came up with the so called ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation), and they tried to come up with ISO standard for the media, which is very difficult. I know this because I happened to be one of the committee members who drafted the criteria.

Nurturing media culture

One of the most important things, if you look at the media development in various countries, is the nurturing of a media culture in a cultural setting and this is what makes Bhutan more likeable - your unique culture. Your country was given the gift of democracy two years ago, so the question is, how you can nurture your media culture so that you will start off in the right direction? There are things which I think are important. You need to have a clear mission for editorial viewpoints, report the facts accurately and make a distinction between opinion and facts. When you are journalist, when you write, sometimes you forget because of the deadlines, because of the current crisis, and whenever you experience certain circumstances journalists tend to forget the distinction between opinion and fact. There is nothing wrong with that, but you have to be well aware while reporting of the difference between facts and opinion.

Responsiveness to feedback from readers and other stakeholders is easy, but a lot of journalists never publish letters. Even if they do publish letters, they seldom give equal space to readers, to complaints; widely disseminate guidelines on ethics, the qualifications, training, and evaluation of staff.

One of the biggest problems in journalism today, is the training of staff within the media organisation. This is a big problem in media around the world. To get journalists to attend a 2-hour training, a one-week training, is very difficult because editors do not

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allow them to go. You have to invest. This is the most important. Journalists need training, need to be acquainted with new issues

all the time. In 1997, there was only one journalist in Thailand that could write about financial matters. When Thailand faced economic crisis, we copied all the analyses from the Wall Street Journal, but don't tell my Thai colleagues. It's the worst kept secret. We

copied because we didn't understand. How many people can write about crime and change? And now you have to write about nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, how many people understand the language of nuclear competition. You have to learn new issues, you cannot just say, we are journalists, we know best. Often times in our countries, journalists think they can do almost everything because they have to multi-task, they report and they speak on the radio. They make mistakes in print, then make the same mistake on radio, and will make a third mistake because they have to do TV as well; like myself.

These are the things we need to cultivate in our new organisation. It's very simple, but when it comes to practice, we always forget. Now, how can you realise, and do these things in practice? You must have an environment, an equal system. We must create a new environment where your colleague has the same attitude, so you know, when it comes to the crisis, you have shared norms, shared values, and shared assessments; otherwise you will have problems. Ordinary times, normal deadlines, no problem because you check facts once, twice, maybe even four times, no problem. It's when you are under pressure that you forget all these rules. Believe me, you will forget all these rules. How you can make sure you do not forget? That is the profession. I stress this because it is very important.

Media quality management system

The management side, a lot of times you talk about journalists, but people don't talk about the management, behind the marketing. Survival of a news organisation depends on the management. And management needs a new way of managing. So now, popular courses in media are in Media Management, it's a big, big area. You need to know how to manage media.

I read the paper for about an hour since I arrived yesterday. They said there are problems of auditing in Bhutanese media. I read letters from the Secretary of Ministry of Information about auditing. Auditing is very important. My newspaper refused to audit for many years, until recently. I know the problem; you have to deal with it, you cannot escape. These are standard things. These are not international or universal of the West, but necessary to be good media, you have to audit.

The relationships with public authorities, with advertisers, will come to play in Bhutanese media in the future. This is a big problem here, in Thailand too, especially when you have a small market because advertisements are limited. Relations with external bodies can influence your content and the measurement of leadership satisfaction that is why auditing is very important. You know all this, but when it comes to practice, to implementation there is a huge gap. It takes time. These are the issues we have to tackle. This thing will be discussed even more in modern day because newspapers, media credibility is under question everywhere in the world, so you need to improve on it. Bhutan is a great place to do it because you start anew, you are a very young democracy, and you have a press system, to me, that is very vibrant. You have six or seven newspapers competing, it's like the premiere league. If I'm a politician in Bhutan, I have a big problem; I have to be worried because journalists want to do more. I think politicians and those who run the country have to understand the role of the media.

What is missing?

I come to the end. I did not talk about online media and you have a very dynamic online activity because you do not impose censorship. In Thailand, it's a very unique country; we are a free country that imposes censorship. Even Cuba, Cuba doesn't have a free press, but online is pretty free. So we are ranking like Cuba, China, when it comes to the Internet in media freedom. If you judge Thailand's press freedom online, we have no future because we have problems with the anti-monarchy websites. I will finish here, I hope my presentation complements Cherian's. What is missing is the media revolution I mentioned, which I think we should not dwell on it. But I give you one slide, we can discuss further later because, as Cherian also mentioned, anyone can be a journalist and in Thailand we are far ahead. We are talking about Citizen Journalism, which is archaic now. In Thailand we talk about Twitter Journalism, I write three words and I am a journalist, don't touch me. You must not touch me because I am a Twitter Journalist. Twitter Journalist? We are the first country where Twitter Journalism is proliferated, it's crazy. I write three words and I need to be protected. I will end here, but when we break into groups, we

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can discuss more. I think it's important for us as journalists to follow the fundamental code of ethics, even though the medium has changed. You have modern technology, you have social networking, but good journalism is something

that will never change. That you report facts accurately, that you write. I think, to be a journalist, you must have good intentions and with that I will end my discussion. Thank you very much.

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Bhutan Media Dialogue 2010
Media as the 4th Estate

Day 2

December 21, 2010



The Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigmi Y. Thinley sharing his views on media. The Ministers from the Ministry of Work and Human Settlement, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Information and Communication also attended the 2nd day of the dialogue.



Sharing findings from group discussions on the state of media in Bhutan.

THE FOURTH ESTATE UNPLUGGED

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Your Excellences, Ministers and Friends.

I am a journalist and have spent many years commenting on Thai politics. I must say that I love Bhutanese politics, so I will try to be both practical and entertaining, because people always look so serious when they talk about media and governance.

The media and governments are not rivals. We are partners. But at times we turn our face away from each other. I hope you have heard of Jayson Blair, who said: “I fixed stories on the Iraq war veterans so convincingly nobody got caught. One editor finally said, “You are a liar.”

Blair is the greatest journalist in the world. Do you know why? He faked the whole story for nine years, but nobody knew that he was the biggest liar in America.

One of the greatest things about being a journalist in Asia is that we are so bad. We lack imagination. We cannot write beautiful, lying prose like Jayson Blair. We twist quotations. We misquote them. It’s very bad. Jayson Blair faked entire stories for nine years and nobody knew. He faked emails, voice mails, accounts, exhibitions, and nobody knew. And in the end he simply told the editor, “I made all the stories up. They were all lies.”

Do you know why he said that? He said that as a journalist he loved it when he came up with a story that nobody knew anything about. It gave him an incredible adrenalin buzz. That is the ego of a journalist. I also get a real buzz when I get a scoop.

You know him. (pointing to Power Point). He is William Mark Felt. He was known as Deep Throat. Nobody knows how he destroyed President Nixon because Bob Woodward and Howard Stem from the Washington Post were very good. Mark Felt kept his ethics and never revealed his sources. That is how the Fourth Estate works. And the moment he died, his identity was revealed.

Do you know this man? (pointing to Power Point). He is very famous. His name is Julian Assange. I was in London just 72 hours ago when he was arrested. Assuage told his lawyer, "Please don't give my address to anyone." That was a lovely piece of irony coming from a man who had leaked so much secret information and made world leaders keep their mouths shut, including a lot of people in Thailand.

In 2003, the late Prime Minister Samak Sunderavej spent Bt250 million to come up with a campaign to make him look good. But an unflattering picture came out. Samak complained he looked "too rural" and ordered it to be changed. I am the only one who keeps his pictures because I knew his strategies and his media PR team.

Samak once said: "It's better to be making the news than to be taking it and to act as critics." He was a famous Prime Minister for just eight months and died recently. He was kicked out because he appeared in his own cooking show on TV, for which he was paid Bt3,000. In Thailand, you are not allowed to make money from a commercial business if you are a politician. So they kicked him out. Samak was a big chap who died in shallow water.

It is said that, "A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself". So what is the challenge? My Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjejiva, said that his government will provide a stable environment for the media to do their job professionally, but unfortunately there are more people in jail than ever. This is not because the government has imposed tough regulations. It is because of the very strict 'lese majeste' laws (that forbid any criticism of the Royal Family), which is one of the key issues in Thailand.

I want to make the point that when some journalists know all the facts, they then quietly distort or twist them. I don't know whether you journalists agree with me or not, but while we believe in development in media reporting, we are still not very sophisticated. For Presidents in America, every frame, every word has gone through vigorous training. But Prime Ministers and Presidents do make mistakes. So, the rule is: never talk to journalists without practicing.

A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself.

Who on earth is the Fourth Estate? We all know it comes in different forms, shapes, colours and sizes. For politicians, it is far

better to be friends with journalists. I would say that after 30 years, I have many enemies. So, be friends with journalists at all costs.

How to engage with journalists? We laugh when we talk about journalists. They are funny people. They want scoops. But don't lie to a journalist, even a small lie. Always give knowledge and information to the reporter. Do you know why? Because politicians

don't know life as well as they do, so don't blame journalists all the time. Believe me, the worst thing you can do is blame a journalist. Blame your wife, blame your sister, but never a journalist...

And please, never describe journalists as ignorant. Sometimes they can be pretty naïve, but never say that. Let other people say it for you. And don't repeat negative questions, please. Journalists always asks questions 80% negatively. Well trained politicians never answer negatively.

Anand Panyarachun, one of the greatest Thai Prime Ministers once said: "You ask me anything, and I will choose to answer with what I would like to say." I love this because he never made a mistake. So, be friendly and relaxed, and always look the journalist in the eye when you answer the questions. It is a very simple technique, but very difficult when you practice it.

Believe me, even President Obama makes mistakes. He did not look compassionate enough when meeting soldiers returning from Afghanistan, so his critics claimed that he lacks connectivity with the people. My own Prime Minister has also been criticised for lacking connectivity with the people - not passionate enough.

If a government officer wants news, he must call a journalist. One of the biggest problems of the government in Thailand - and other parts of the world - is that they simply don't have the right telephone numbers. They don't know the reporters' office hours. It is very important to know exactly when a newspaper's daily deadline is. You can write the greatest story or give the greatest interview, but quite often it's just too late; the deadline has been missed. (For English language newspapers in Bangkok it's usually about 8.30 to 9pm. Max.)

Singapore has the best press management system. They always have the big news on the weekends, because they know that on the weekends they have no competing news. Therefore, the papers give them front page coverage.

When you read the Singapore newspapers, you know everything the government wants you to do, but if you read Thai newspapers, you know everything the government does not want you to know. That is the difference.

You have to read the local papers and identify the journalists - if you want to know them. A lot of politicians and government officers don't bother to read newspapers. They don't know the journalists. After an initial meeting with a journalist, many politicians will say 'nice to meet you, give me your card, give me your phone number.' They promise to call you but they never make the call. In that case, it's far better not to give your telephone number if you don't want to talk to anyone. I have come across this many times in my experience.

In a crisis, everybody forgets about everything. Reporters never wait for official information. If you have a crisis, be prepared. You must practice. I have been trained in several senior corporations so I will give you one good example. A top CEO came to Thailand and we had a scenario where there was a fire in the factory. The CEO wanted

to know how to deal with the media and the crisis. So, I confronted this gentleman CEO from England, and told him the fire was a mock operation. Even when he understood this, he was so scared because he would be appearing on camera. Everything was fake, but he was still very nervous to meet with journalists asking so many questions over and over again. Even though he knew it was a fake situation, he realised that he would have to go through this at least four times to calm down, so that when he was asked an impromptu question, he would be able to answer normally, without getting emotional.

So, in a time of crisis, journalists never wait for official information. They go and ask the people. You have to be prepared. They will interview any administrator or bystander for a comment. This can cause enormous problems because lots of people who are outside, and who do not know what is really going on inside, are more than happy to give a comment.

One of things I have discovered is that when government officers are dealing with reporters, they don't know what to say in a time of crisis. You have to identify the person who will give out information. Otherwise, the media will get the information themselves and all the problems will start because their information is incorrect. Never deny the journalist nor speculate what the press is thinking. It is very simple. I have seen so many disasters whenever the government or the people in power make political comments on such matters.

I am a Thai and the great thing about Thailand is that when we come to Bhutan, we feel at home. We have a similar culture and we like chillies - but without the cheese. Thai culture is very strange. We believe easily and forget easily. The Thai politicians form our deep south never care or are mindful of what they say because they know that the Thais will soon forget it.

In America, if you said something ten years ago, they will use it against you. But not in Thailand. You can say something over and over again. You can make a mistake over and over again. And that is the problem. Sometimes, our politicians are not very good. Nor are they very articulate. When they speak to journalists, sometimes the politician makes mistakes, particularly when English newspapers have to translate Thai into English. There are a lot of mistakes. There is no fact checking. This happens everywhere in Thailand and in some of the other developing countries.

In America when you say something, the TV executives will demand that it is fact checked. They demand the truth. But in Thailand, we do not have that kind of mechanism of fact checking. So you can repeat it. And a rumour repeated enough can become fact. This is the greatest danger because

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the media then publishes untrue stories and rumours. Much of the time, a rumour is treated as fact. The Philippines has one of most respected media in South Asia, but the newspapers are full of rumours because there is no fact checking.

A journalist has to read. You have to know international law. You have to know everything, and that's not easy.

In Thailand, sometimes we get very personal so we don't write the truth. Thailand has no tradition like America. We never tell any secrets of your

boss to other journalists. The thing is, we take things very personally. So when we write a story, we quote anonymous sources all the time. Sometimes it leads to speculation that the story simply isn't true, or its emotionally driven. We feel good. We feel bad. And sometimes journalists mix their own opinions with their writing. I also think Thailand is like Bhutan in that we are both listening societies. We listen to the radio, it is important. People who speak the loudest get all the attention.

Please don't tell a journalist everything you know. You must give them your information, bit by bit. But you do have to tell the truth. No reporter knows better than you do. So, you must educate them. Be patient. Thai journalists are actually the worst, because they never learn. Why? Because their job is to get the worst comment of the day and then use it in the paper the next day. They never learn the complexity of the issues.

And these days, my goodness, to follow one issue (like climate change) you have to study international law. You have to know the reality and conditions of every country. How can you know about terrorism if you don't understand the whole world structure since September 11? How can you understand the southern Thailand Muslim problem if you don't understand Al Qaida, or the network of Islamic Uhlama teachings? A journalist has to read. You have to know international law. You have to know everything, and that's not easy.

Don't think that journalists will write whatever you have said. I can speak for one hour, but they will just write a few words. It's a real problem. But if it's the journalists' problem, it is also your problem because you say things that are not newsworthy.

In America, I studied under David Gergen, an advisor to the sixth president, Ronald Reagan. He said that the President had to practice his speech every day. If you look at a portrait of Reagan, you will notice he has a twisted chin. He said that every time he appeared in front of the White House, he always had to stand slightly above the crowd of journalists, so that when they took photographs, they had to be of his right profile, to make him look good. Everything was planned to a tee. No chance of making a mistake.

Obama also has to practice his speeches day and night. You wonder why senators and presidents in America speak so well? Because they have been practicing for years. You only meet them at press conferences. So you have to practice when you meet journalists. Never treat journalists lightly.

Reporters always want to interview the most senior official in the government. If they can't, then what is the point? So as the highest officer, I think the Prime Minister has the hardest job. You have to prepare what to say day to day.

In America, a leader can prepare what to say weeks, months, and even years ahead. They mark their calendar on certain days because they have an institutional memory. They

know that exactly when they will have to say certain things. But not in Thailand. We just say the things we want to say. We don't plan.

This is why journalists love Thai politicians because they always make mistakes. And we love it because we can write about it. And this is why journalists dislike our current Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, because he is so intelligent. He never makes mistake. And we hate him because when you write anything it's such flat news. They love Thaksin Shinawatra, they love Samak. You ask the former Prime Minister Thaksin about UN, and he will tell you, 'The UN is not my father...' But if you ask Prime Minister Abhisit hundreds of questions, he will say, 'Oh yes, it's true.' You can never spin, or interpret what he says in any other way.

In Thailand, one of government spokesmen told me that if you talk to ten reporters, tomorrow in the newspaper there will be 11 versions of it.

If journalists make mistakes, you have the right to ask the reporter to correct them. But in Thailand, we don't correct mistakes. This is terrible. As a result, Thai journalists have to learn that we must correct mistakes if we are wrong. But sometimes we say, it's already done. It's too late. It's in the past. They don't care. So, if you see any mistakes made by a journalist, you can call them and say please check the mistake. If they don't bother, then you know right away the true character of that journalist or the publisher of that newspaper.

Many government officers treat journalists as their employees. They are not. Journalists are very independent. Of course, they often listen to their boss and editors or to the publisher - but never to government officers. So don't give your phone number, if you don't want to answer calls.

And lastly, no "off the record". Never say something is off the record to journalists if you want to keep it confidential, believe me. I have known many Prime Ministers throwing me off the records. (I never wrote what they told me, by the way.) If you want to keep something secret, don't ever say it's "off the record". There is no such thing as "off the record". If you want to speak "off the record" make sure the ground rules are observed.

Many a politician has been toppled because of loose talk. I will give one very good example. General McChrystal was a US commander in Afghanistan. He did not expect he would have to fly to a NATO meeting in Berlin. He thought he could speak to journalists along the way with a team of media spinners. Then he gets stuck in Berlin because of the ash clouds from the volcano in Iceland. He ends up spending seven days with a journalist from Rolling Stone magazine. It became a nightmare. Even though he was with this media team, they started talking and he became friends with this journalist. As a veteran of the Afghanistan war, he was digging his own grave in Berlin every day, just by talking casually.

So, never stay with journalists more than one night. The lesson is, the longer you stay with them, the more careful you have to be. As a journalist, I love to go on tour with the Prime Minister and catch him during his leisure time. That is when he will reveal things. You will get to know his temperament, how he really looks at the world. I love it when

they talk like this. I always say, if you are going on tour, just let me know. I will pay for the price of the trip, and I will go with them no matter how far, because you get to have this so called 'prime time' with the PM when he least expects it. That is how I survive in journalism.

Lastly, I need to tell you that the nature of the news today means there are no hiding places. You know this. We have a 24 hour information cycle. You watch TV. You have to respond to CNN and the BBC, but luckily, access to Himalayas is still fairly minimal. So you don't have to respond. Otherwise, you would be in deep trouble. You would have to answer. You would have to quote certain points with accuracy. This is very important and sometimes it is good to have a tape recorder, so that both you and the journalist know exactly what has been said.

I once interviewed N. Kotak, the former Foreign Minister of Vietnam. He was very experienced. He even gave me the background of Vietnam's relations with China during the Vietnam war. He told me: "Mr Kavi, I will tell you this. If you decide to write something which I have said is "off the record" and you publish it, I will tell the world that you are a liar. And who is going to believe in you?"

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If you break these ground rules of journalism in France, the politician will just walk away. If your first question is about their girl friend, then it's "bye-bye". But we don't do that in Asia, because it's very rude. The ground rules are a kind of contract. If anybody violates them, they just walk away.

Finally, I would like to leave you with this. Journalists can help to promote your country and its activities – they are the so called Fourth Estate - but how best they can serve you will depend on the method and approach of all of you sitting here today. It's very easy actually.

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Cherian George making his presentation on media, governance and society.

MEDIA AS THE 4TH ESTATE

Cherian George

The Fourth Estate type of press acts as a watchdog. Why is it necessary that the press serves as a check and balance on the government? This is based on the idea that governments, like all human beings, are essentially fallible. They can make mistakes. We know from thousands of years of experience that power tends to corrupt. It is almost inevitable that unchecked power will corrupt. Even good leaders, with the best of intentions, need checks. They need watchdogs. Even if they manage to remain clean, in the sense of being free from financial corruption, there is a very human tendency – no matter how wise or how well intentioned you are as a leader – to neglect other points of view. If your heart is in the right place and you have done all your research and so on, you may be utterly convinced of the wisdom of what you are doing. Then, there is always a danger, even among good leaders, that they will stop listening to other points of view. And that can, in the long term, be a danger. So, there is that sort of fallibility as well. Fallibility does not only strike leaders who are evil at heart. It can even strike good leaders.

We have seen across the world, and across Asia especially in the last decade or so, the rise of watchdog journalism as in line with this Fourth Estate Mission. More and more media systems are being deregulated and answering the call of the market. We have seen in India, for example, broadcasting explode with private sector cable TV news. Even in China, where the media remains technically owned by the communist party, more and more media are required to be commercially viable. So, while they are owned by the party, they are required to make a profit, and this means answering to the market. These

media have found that they need to answer the public's demand for greater information. So across Asia, what you are seeing – including in the largest countries, India, China, and Indonesia – a rise of watchdog journalism. It is largely seen as a positive trend, because it results in more accountable governments. It makes it harder to get away with corruption. It is harder to get away with gross abuses of power, human rights abuses and so on if there is constant scrutiny by a team of professional journalists. But there are also doubts about this rise of watchdog journalism, and I think these concerns need to be taken seriously. One of these doubts is that being an aggressive watchdog is not the only democratic role that the media must play.

Democratic media also have an important role in partnering the government in the pursuit of the national goals. And this should not be something that the journalist automatically or instinctively resists. After all, at the end of the day, members of the government and members of the press are ultimately the citizens of the same country. Surely, it is not inconceivable that, as fellow citizens, they have some shared goals. Who, for example, could argue against alleviating poverty, fighting against child mortality and so on? So, if there are shared goals that both media and government agree are important for the society, there should not be any problem collaborating in pursuing those goals. But sometimes, when media are too fixated on being adversarial, they forget that there is also democratic value in working together with governments.

Another trend that is being observed in many countries, including advanced democracies, is media negativity, discouraging public participation. When journalists are so fixated on the idea of rooting out evil politicians that they start out with the assumption that every politician is a crook and focus only on the negative, citizens become cynical about the political process. This has been observed in the United States, where negativity translates low voter turnouts. Large numbers of voters don't bother with the political process because they have been convinced over the decades by the media that the whole system is corrupt and that there is nothing they can do to change it. That, of course, is extremely unhealthy for democracy. Related to this is the idea of non-stop scandals. If the media sees itself as nothing more than a scandal-exposing machine, this is a form of sensationalism that may neglect important issues. This is another trend that has been observed in some countries.

Finally, another worrying trend that has been seen in some countries is watchdog journalists being co-opted by powerful interests within the society. Journalists become a tool in broader political conflicts – conflicts between competing business interests, conflicts between competing factions in the political structure, and so on. This should not be what watchdog journalism is about. Watchdog journalism should be about representing the voices of the public, not about being an instrument in elite competition.

Finally, there has been concern, especially in India recently, about how watchdog journalism is carried out – the use of hidden cameras, surreptitious recording and other methods that professional codes of

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ethics are highly skeptical of. These are extreme methods that should only be used when there's a very strong public interest justification – and not just to expose the fact that a politician slept with another man's wife and so on, which, immoral as it might be, is not necessarily a matter of pressing public interest.

Some of these doubts have been so great that some countries have rejected the idea of the press as a Fourth Estate. My own country, unfortunately, is one of them. In Singapore, the government has a very clear policy that we do not believe in the press as a Fourth Estate. The press should be independent, but the press must never imagine that it has the authority to act as a check and balance on the government, because the government is elected, and journalists are not elected. The Singaporean government says that rather than trust the press to be a check and balance on the government, trust the government to pick the right people: trust us, and we will have our own internal checks. So, the ruling party in Singapore is convinced that this problem of fallibility can be fixed through sheer political will, by having a political party that is disciplined enough and committed enough never to fail. The funny thing about the system is that, so far, it seems to have worked. It works partly because of a fiercely independent internal corruption watchdog, the CPIB (Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau), which has been so effective that many citizens do believe that the government is capable of keeping its own house in order. They believe Singapore does not need a strong watchdog press to keep the government clean.

But while it seems to have worked for Singapore, I would be very cautious – and I think even the Singaporean government would be very cautious – about recommending Singapore as a model for any other country. Thankfully, the only countries that have regarded the Singapore system as model or prescription are countries that are far more repressive. These are some communist countries (China, Vietnam and other totalitarian countries like Myanmar) that look at the Singapore model as a positive step towards slightly greater freedom. They are not ready for the American style or the Indian style Fourth Estate, but they recognise that they need to open up a little bit. So maybe they can open up to Singapore's level.

Most Singaporeans – even those who believe very strongly in our ruling party – do worry that ours could be a very high-stakes, high-risk strategy. To trust so much in centralised government, to trust so much in the wisdom of good men that we don't need checks, has worked so far, but is extremely risky. One way to think of the press as a Fourth Estate is as a kind of insurance policy against that risk of fallible government. And like any insurance policy, it can be painful in the short term. Last week, I received my invoice for my car insurance in Singapore, more than a thousand dollars for one year's insurance (cars are very expensive in Singapore). It is short-term pain, but of course it gives me peace of mind that if anything happens, my car is insured. And the same goes with the press as a Fourth Estate. In the short term, it may be a nuisance, it may be inconvenient, it may slow things down. But it gives you the peace of mind that if things go wrong, there are checks and balances within your society that will limit the damage that's caused. And that is what I think most societies have accepted.

There is a global democratic consensus view which basically says that no matter how irresponsible the press can be, no matter how inconvenient it can be to have a free,

rambunctious, adversarial press, it is still better to rely mainly on self-regulation rather than on government control. So, encourage the press to come up with its own codes of ethics, press councils and so on, rather than to rely on the law. If you do need to have regulation – and every country does have some sort of media regulation – make sure that the regulation preserves the essence of the right to freedom of expression. Make sure that the regulation is for a legitimate social purpose.

According to international law, the legitimate purposes are to protect national security, public order, public morals and the right to one's reputation, through defamation law. Making the job of government easier is not a valid justification for restricting freedom of expression. In Singapore, the big difference is that the ruling party thinks that it is okay to restrict the press purely to make the government's job easier. That is not the international democratic consensus, according to which that's the worst kind of restriction.

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Secondly, any restriction must be necessary. It must be the least restrictive way to achieve the social purpose. In other words, it must not be overkill. So some of what the Chinese government does is repulsive because it fails this test. Yes, there is a need preserve order and, yes, maybe some kind of fine would be necessary if a blogger promotes disorder. But, to lock up a blogger for ten years, twelve years, simply for words that he has expressed would be internationally recognised as a kind of regulatory overkill.

Third, any regulation must be content neutral. It should not discriminate based on political orientation of news organisations. If it does discriminate, that would be seen as a clear-cut case of political censorship. Let me give you an interesting example from Scandinavia of the way this principle works. In Scandinavia, they have a policy of providing subsidies for news media. As long as you are not the top media in town, you get the subsidy. But, of course, the state is concerned that that subsidy abused. What if a purely entertainment magazine wants a subsidy? Does it deserve taxpayers' money? So the state says you must be a daily newspaper to get a subsidy. Most entertainment publications are not dailies. It must also have a minimum circulation and it must charge for that circulation, to ensure that there is in fact a public demand for what you are doing. Once you meet the benchmark, you get the money. Notice that there is no content requirement. This means that even if you run a communist newspaper and the current government is vehemently opposed to communism, it still has to fund your communist newspaper. So, that is an example of how liberal democratic society would approach regulation. Yes, there must be rules but the rules must be politically neutral. You cannot be biased against one or for another simply on the basis of political stands they take.

When we are talking about developing democratic media, I think that it is important in all our discussions to recognise that we are talking about an evolutionary process. If you look back at the experience of different countries, you will see that things have moved from, first of all, setting up of a constitution and introducing elections – which is the easy part – followed by the gradual building of the institutions, and then – probably

the toughest – building the political culture. It can take decades or more to build the norms that are necessary for democratic life. What is that political culture that needs to be brought about? I think that it needs to involve a commitment to peaceful resolution of differences – that in the end is what democracy is all about – and also accepting the so-called “rules of the game”. It is often difficult for people to remember that democracy is not just a way to win power. A commitment to democracy must involve accepting that you will often lose, and that you must often compromise. So, the strength of a democracy is not just shown in whether a winner surfaces. The strength of democracy is shown in whether the losers accept their defeat with good grace. It involves accepting the results of the democratic will. This refers not just to elections but to political discourse at large. There needs to be an acceptance in all interested parties that, in day-to-day political debate, democracy does not mean that you will always get your way. Quite the contrary, democracy is actually a commitment to understanding that others have the right to their view too, and often you may be the one who loses.

Let me end by saying something about the difficult task of managing the relationship between the government and media. I think a healthy relationship is one that recognises that each has its own role and that each must protect its autonomy fiercely. Government would not be serving its role properly if it tries to do everything the media asks it to do. That would be government by the media. Similarly, the media would not be serving its role if it did everything the government asks them to do. So the whole point of having these different “estates”, these different branches of governance, is surely to acknowledge that each has its own unique role that it will defend fiercely and play to the best of its abilities. And whether one is in the government or one is in the media, there is another important player, which is, of course, the people.

If I think back to my own time as a journalist in Singapore, especially when covering politics, most of my dealings were actually with government officials. You rarely talk to real people. And government officials, similarly, talk to each other, talk to fellow elites, talk to journalists and forget to talk to people. It can be useful for officials to treat the media as proxies for the people. One thing that we have try to convince officials in Singapore is that, yes, you may find it irritating to deal with journalist’s queries and to answer these ignorant questions and to read these half-baked columns and in the press. But what would you rather do? Would you rather deal with a few newspapers’ ignorance and misunderstanding? Or would you rather deal directly with the public – a few hundred thousand in Bhutan, five million in Singapore? Surely it is easier to deal with the media than directly with the people. Why not treat the media as sparring partners because eventually, after all, you do need to deal with the people. Elections will come and the politicians who do better will be the ones that have trained better in the lead-up to elections. And what better form of training is there than to deal day-to-day with questioning journalists, even if they are somewhat ignorant, even if they seem irresponsible or selfish. What better training is there than to deal with them, because in a sense they are a reflection of your constituents too. It is not as if your constituents are full of wisdom and know all the policy facts and all the policy constraints. If you cannot convince journalists, whose job is to study these policies, what hope do you have of convincing the wider electorate?

So, if you are in government, this can be a healthy way of building up your tolerance for the kind of inevitable irritation that journalist will provide you. Similarly, journalists need to recognise that the people count, and not get so caught up in their own way of doing things, caught up with their own egos, that they forget the people. Journalists should not underestimate the people's ability in the long term to judge them. Ultimately – and I think most countries' experience has shown this – people can tell the difference between credible news outlets and those that are not credible; between news outlets that have their people's interest at heart and those that are just mouth pieces of their owners or journalists who are not accountable to anyone. As long as we can keep in mind this image of the people out there, we can work towards healthier government-media relations.

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Group Recommendations

Group 1: What is the social responsibility of the media?

1. Treating your readers/audience as citizens/human beings rather than consumers.
2. Having the Right to Information act so that the public is empowered right from the grassroot level. E.g., a villager getting information on gewog budget.
3. Creating a public platform and encouraging the common man/woman's voice in our news coverage
4. Balanced coverage as in avoiding just 'Thimphu News' and going to the rural areas. Here, the government could provide help.
5. Write or cover more news/articles on social problem like drugs, alcohol, etc but avoiding stereotyping and with good research, which is coherent to the ordinary reader. Also write on inspirational stories.
6. Neutral and non-biased news coverage. The powerful should also be held accountable instead of just the common man. Eg. Disco
7. Alert society to existing and eminent problems. Eg. Corruption.
8. Media should avoid sensationalism, inaccuracy and generally uphold the media ethics. Eg. Anonymous sources as opinion.
9. Educational mandate. Explain laws, acts, systems and people involved in decisions that affect the public.
10. Avoid polarisation, regionalism, cultivated religion differences, racism, and promote social harmony and unity.

Group 2: To whom should the media be responsible? And whom should media serve?

1. Serve the people by publishing what they need
2. Responsibility to newsmakers for accuracy
3. Internal dynamics – external integrity

Group 3: How should the media give the people voice?

Voices: 1. Bringing out people's issues

2. promoting debate/dialogue

Who: 1. Unheard voices – youth, women, farmers, not mafia

What: 1. Agree that media is not giving enough voice to people – media, print, urban-centred

What: 2. No equitable coverage, lack of value for information, people shy/afraid due to restrictions

Why: 1. Affordability

2. Platform not fully used
3. Participation low
4. Not enough attention to Dzongkha
5. Distrust of media

How and what should be done?

1. Be innovative, use advanced technology, community as stringers/contact points to reach out
2. People from all sections, civil servants, to use the platform to express freely, media literacy to be stepped up
3. Reaching out to the grassroots to build confidence and encourage participation
4. Govt., media and society must find ways to subsidise the use of Dzongkha in the media
5. A journalist should build credibility, trust, confidence by being accurate, covering people's issues in news, and by bringing news from the grassroots community.

Group 4: What would a GNH media be like?

1. Be guided by the highest of ethics and principles
2. Be participatory/inclusive and accessible to the people
3. Be responsive to the call of democracy by promoting equity, justice, and transparency.
4. Must play a bigger educational role, focusing on social sectors
5. GNH media needs RTI
6. GNH media must explore technologies; eg. ham radio, for self-expression and community building
7. Must create a local social forum to exchange ideas and public debate

List of Participants

Media

1. Pema Choden	BBS
2. Gopilal Acharya	RAH
3. Jigme Thinley	BBS
4. Kaka Tshering	BBS
5. Kaka Tshering	Bhutan Times
6. Karma Nima	Kuensel
7. Kesang Dema	Kuensel
8. Kinchho Tshering	Kuzoo FM
9. Kinley Tshering	Wedia
10. Kunga T. Dorji	Radio Valley/ Drukpa
11. Mindu Dorji	Bhutan Observer
12. Namgay Zam	BBSC
13. Namkhair Norbu	Bhutan Times
14. Needrup Zangpo	Bhutan Observer
15. Phuntsho	Kuensel
16. Sherpem Sherpa	BBS
17. Sonam Pelden	Bhutan Observer
18. Tashi Dorji	Business Bhutan
19. Tenzing Lamsang	Business Bhutan
20. Thinley Dorji	Kuensel
21. Thinley Namgyel	Kuensel
22. Ugyen Dorji	Bhutan Today
23. Ugyen Tenzin	Bhutan Today
24. Yeshey Nidup	BBS

Autonomous agencies

25. Anju Chhetri	Sherubtse College
26. Dasho Pema Thinley	RUB
27. Dema Lhamo	ACC
28. Kesang Jamtsho	ACC

29. Major Tshewang Rinzin	RBP
30. Mark Mancall	REC
31. Neten Chhetri	RIM
32. Pelden Choeda	RCSC
33. Phuntsho Choden	PMO
34. Phuntsho Namgyel	Cabinet Secretariat
35. Nim Dorji	ECB
36. Sammdu Chetri	PMO
37. Sonam Tashi	OAG
38. Tashi Choden	CBS

Government

39. Dasho Kinley Dorji	MoIC
40. Kaysang W. Samdup	DoRC
41. Pelden Wangmo	Judiciary
42. Sonam Tshewang	LMSS
43. Tshering Wangmo	DoIM

Others

44. Karma Lhamo	NA
45. Lekey Dorji	LD & Associates

Civil Society Organisations

46. Chewang Tobgay	BCMD
47. Jigme Choden	BCMD
48. Karma Wangchuk	Tarayana
49. Pem Lama	Bhutan Foundation
50. Siok Sian Pek-Dorji	BCMD
51. Sonam Zangmo	BCMD
52. Tshering Denka	Bhutan Foundation