

# Media Matters in Bhutan

By Siok Sian Pek-Dorji



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BHUTAN CENTRE  
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY



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# Introduction

We live in an exciting era of change in Bhutan in the world's youngest democracy. Exciting times mean great opportunities, but it also means great challenges.

The process of democratisation is marked by a rapidly growing media industry. Some believe that global media are invading Bhutan and that our small society is unable to respond adequately with our own stories, our own content, and our own voices. There is a degree of truth to this claim, so we need to learn to sift, to analyse, to understand, and to select the media content we want; we need to develop the media that will help to define us as Bhutanese. In other words we need to be media literate and media savvy.

As newspapers, radio and television stations, the Internet and other digital media replace Bhutan's strong oral traditions, as inevitably they will to some extent, we may welcome the choices that they bring. But at the same time we also need to understand the trends in our society and the culture that media create. For example, global media content today tends to emphasise entertainment and consumer culture while cutting back on news and current affairs. Media sometimes forget that, as citizens, we need information that is relevant to a changing society, particularly as Bhutan's democracy evolves.

Media reflect society and influence culture. In a new democracy like Bhutan, news media need to educate the people on democracy. Bhutan today also needs quality journalism more than ever. When we talk of media, we must be able to differentiate between journalism and entertainment, news and opinions, in a world of almost infinite information.

Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy believes that an informed society is the foundation of a vibrant democracy. We hope this publication will provide a useful perspective on the world of media and will enable us to re-consider the importance of independent journalism in the new and evolving democracy of Bhutan.

# 1 • Welcome to the World of Media

The world today is becoming more interdependent and connected. No matter where we live on earth, we are all connected by media. Media have a pervasive effect on the lives of almost every person on earth.

## What are media?

“Media” refers to the message and images that we create, using various technologies, and consume. In Bhutan media include the traditional oral media (word of mouth), the conventional media like newspapers, radio and television, and what was known as new media like the Internet and computer and video games. Now with the proliferation of mobile phones, the mobile has also become a medium for information and communication as all media converge.

Traditional media refers to the broadcast media, like television and radio, and print media like newspapers and magazines. Today, the Internet provides many channels of information, from blog sites to social networking sites like facebook, hi5, and twitter.

## What are media for? The responsibilities of media

Media professionals defined the role of media as being “to inform, to educate and to entertain”. Today media also have a role to provide opportunities for networking and for creating content. But it is important to understand that media shape our perceptions and ideas. Media reflect society and culture and are also tools with which we learn about the world and our community. Educationists describe media as the “consciousness industries” which not only provide information about the world, but are also ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Media have become a necessary part of our daily lives. We turn to media for news, information, and entertainment. We need the media for all types of professional work and business, as well as health and education, and leisure.

Children are spending more time watching television or playing video and computer games. Research shows that youth in Bhutan who have access to the Internet are beginning to spend more time on-line watching videos, chatting with friends, and visiting social net-working sites. It is a concern that children are being brought up by the media because their parents are too busy or do not realise the impact that media are having on young minds.

## Media Literacy

We learn to read and write and count in school. But education and literacy have taken on new meaning and demand new interpretation to build life skills and to keep up with a changing world.

Today, we need to learn how to read, view, listen to, and analyse the media. Known as media literacy, this critical thinking skill, is an essential skill in the 21st century because we face a deluge of information coming to us through radio, television, the Internet, films, newspapers, magazines and other forms of media. People today have more choices of content and more ways of accessing content than ever before. We live in a world where 10,000 new websites are created every hour and we exchange about 210 billion emails in a day. It is estimated that in 2006 alone the world produced the equivalent of three million times the information contained in all the books ever written<sup>1</sup>.

In Bhutan we have 24-hour radio channels providing non-stop music and chat shows, a growing number of global television channels, and increasingly better Internet connection. Media have become pervasive in our daily lives even in Bhutan.

Technology has made it possible for all of us to create a wide range of media content and to distribute them to large audiences around the world. Anyone today can become a writer, publisher, and can create ideas and post them online.

Media literacy means being able to understand the benefits of the media and their potentially positive and negative impact on individuals and society. It means learning how to consume media and not be consumed by media. Just as we strive for higher levels of education, we can improve our media literacy. Media literacy, however, is not an academic skill learnt by studying a book. Media literacy is a process in which users of media learn to think about and ask questions about the media to come to a deeper understanding of media. We need a well-informed, knowledgeable and critical audience as much as the audience needs responsible media professionals.



© Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

*Covering the 2008 elections*

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1 Columbia Journalism Review, 2006

## 2. The Nature of Media - How is the goal “to inform, to entertain, to educate” fulfilled?

Why is there a need to receive and disseminate information? Is all information of the same value? What makes news, or journalism, for example, different from publicity and all the other kinds of information? Why is it important for a country like Bhutan to have news even while we enjoy entertainment media? Why do some governments try to control the flow of information? These are some of the questions we need to raise in order to understand media’s influence on society.

In the past media referred mostly to the news media. But today’s media blurs the lines between entertainment, raw information and news. People, including people in Bhutan, are increasingly beginning to turn to media for entertainment rather than the news. As new technology enables media to become more interactive, immediate and pervasive many people can share information directly through their phones and on the internet and that places added challenges to existing media.

A question that the media is confronted with all the time is whether they should provide people with information that they need or information that people want. The policy that a media company adopts decides the identity of that media. We see that most media opt for the approach to entertain rather than to educate and to inform. The visual media like television are largely entertainment media, their content being films, TV serials, game shows, and reality TV programmes.

We as the audience need to understand is that media content are created with specific intentions. Apart from good news organisations that specialise in news and informative programmes the purpose could be to sell us something or to tell us something. Even when it is the latter the media could be telling us something because it wants to persuade you to ‘buy’ into a certain idea which could be a political, social, or commercial viewpoint.

An important element of media content is advertising, the main source of revenue for all media. Advertising is a sophisticated multi-billion dollar global industry that aims to sell ideas, information, and material products. It is much more blatant than other content but well packaged to “seduce” the consumers. At a time when consumerism is stronger than ever before a competitive advertising market produces content is a powerful influence on people’s habits and lives.

Media’s education role has diminished in recent times and is largely relegated to public service media today. A very important factor influencing the nature and identity of media organisations and their content is ownership. Because of the powerful influence of the media on people, governments, corporations, business houses, political



parties, and individuals own and use media to get their messages across. Governments have used media for propaganda, political parties to gain votes or to sell their ideologies, and corporations to sell their products. Governments and media corporations are sometimes accused of muzzling the media with their own motives.

This is why it is vital that media is independent and professional. Governments make policies, laws, and regulations to ensure the freedom of media. Article 7 of the Constitution of Bhutan guarantees media freedom, and freedom of speech and expression. The Ministry of Information and Communications frames policies and regulations, and the Bhutan Information, Communications, and Media Authority (BICMA) enforces the regulations.

All this is aimed at making sure that people receive accurate, objective, and useful information. Media are responsible for meaningful communication among all sections of society like the government, civil society, private sector, youth, clergy, and, in fact, all citizens. It is the media that helps society to function.

Bhutan needs news and information more than ever in the changing political and socio-economic scenario. In a society that pursues the vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the media must work for public good and serve the public.



© Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

*A BCMD media club member learns to use a flip camera*

# 3. Media in Bhutan

As a predominantly oral society Bhutanese people shared news and information by word of mouth in the past. Even today the oral tradition, including rumour and gossip, is a powerful media.

With the introduction of a modern government there were some official publications in the 1960s and '70s, including Kuensel, which was a government bulletin for official announcements.

The modern media began when the National Youth Association of Bhutan started a weekly news and entertainment broadcast called radio NYAB in 1973 and this was taken over by the government which expanded it into a regular broadcast station called the Bhutan Broadcasting Corporation in 1986.

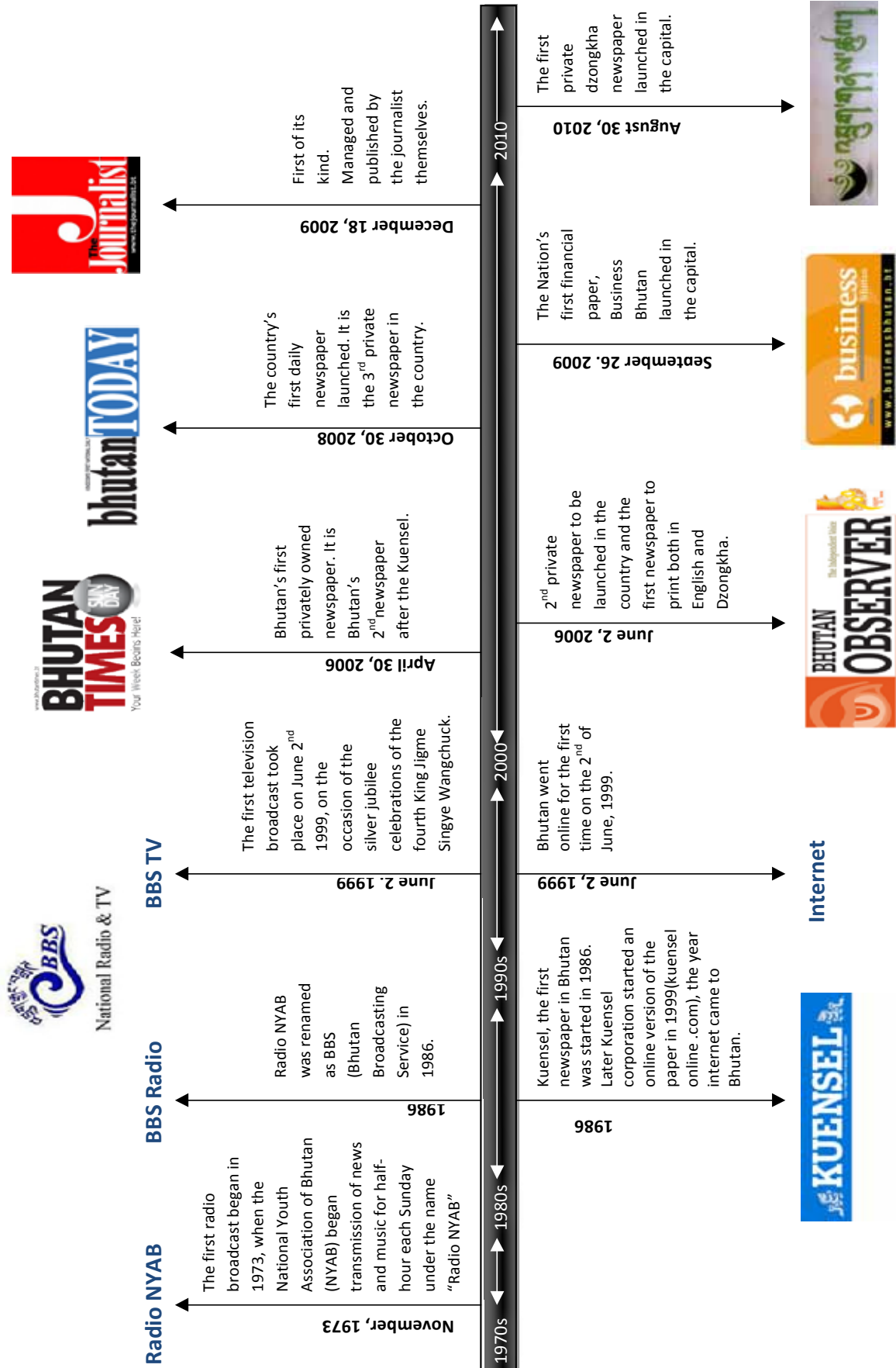
In the print media the first newspaper, the Kuensel, was started in August 1986 as a weekly paper. Kuensel started publishing twice a week in 2005 and became a daily newspaper in 2009.

The introduction of television and the Internet in June, 1999, was a significant development in the growth of the Bhutanese media. Although radio still has the widest reach, television very quickly became the most popular media in the urban areas. The starting of Bhutanese television was followed by the legalisation of 30 international television channels.

With the announcement of political transition by the fourth King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Bhutan saw a small proliferation of the media. Bhutan Times and the Bhutan Observer were both started as weekly newspapers in 2006. The first daily newspaper, Bhutan Today, launched in October 2008. In 2010 two more weekly newspapers, Business Bhutan and The Journalist, began publication. Drukpa is a monthly magazine started in December 17, 2009 and Trowa and Yeewong are entertainment magazines started in 2009. A dzongkha newspaper, the Druk Nyetshul, began publication in 2010.

New radio stations started emerging from 2006. Kuzoo FM began in September 26, 2006 and carries some news and announcements but is largely an entertainment station for youth. Radio Valley and Centennial Radio are entertainment channels, carrying mostly music and informal chat programmes. Today the Bhutanese population has access to seven newspapers, one news magazine, two entertainment magazines, five FM stations as well as BBS radio and television.

# MEDIA TIMELINE OF BHUTAN



# TIMELINE FOR RADIO STATIONS IN BHUTAN

## Radio NYAB (National Youth Association of Bhutan)

The first radio broadcast began in 1973, when the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB) began radio transmission of news and music for half-hour each Sunday under the name "Radio NYAB"

1973



## Centennial radio

Kuzoo FM started on the 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2006. It is the second radio station in Bhutan after the BSS radio.

September 26, 2006, 104 FM

Another private radio station started in the country. Based in Thimphu and it is dedicated to music and culture in Bhutan.

March 2008, 101 FM



Radio High was launched on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2010. The radio station focuses on youth related issues.

August 5th, 2010, 92.7 FM

1970s

1980s

2000

2010

Radio NYAB was later renamed as BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service) in 1986. The radio station has services in English, Dzongkha, sharchhop and lhotsam.

1986, 96 FM



National Radio & TV

Radio valley was started on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2008. Radio valley only operates in the capital, Thimphu but has served listeners all over the country through its web based programme.

21<sup>st</sup> January 2008, 99.9 FM



Founded by a former Sherubtse student. Only reach on-campus. Managed and produced by the students themselves. The radio station focuses on educational and entertainment.

April 2009, 94.7 FM

Sherubtse FM

Radio waves, the country's 5th entertainment radio station launched in the capital. It is an entirely entertainment oriented radio station. The radio station hopes to reach Paro and phuentsholing by next year.

October 12th, 2010, 88.8 FM



## TIMELINE FOR ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINES IN BHUTAN



**2005**  
 Bhutan magazine is a special annual publication of TCB focusing on people (life style), government, unique culture and tradition and natural environment which serves as a promotional tool.



**September, 2009**

Bhutan Window, Bhutan today's first quarterly magazine hits the market.



**November 30, 2009**

Yeewong, the first magazine on women launched in the country.



**July, 2010**

"The Pilgrim: For the Spirited Traveler" is ABTO's first travelogue magazine. The first issue was launched in July, 2010.



**2008**

The first issue of faces of Bhutan (Bhutan Observer's magazine) hits the market in 2008.



**November 9, 2009**

The first film and entertainment magazine launched in the country.



**December 17, 2009**

"Drukpa", a monthly magazine launched in the country.



**2010**



## **The Growth of the Bhutanese Media**

Like all industries the media has to be developed so that they play an important role in the development of the country. Media development is nurtured through national policies, laws, and regulations as well as various forms of support. Media must be allowed to grow and function with independence and professionalism. The most common concepts that are used to assess media are freedom and responsibility.

### **Freedom**

Independence is critical for the media to be able to report accurately and fairly. The Constitution of Bhutan, the highest law of the land, grants the basic freedoms to enable the media to report news and current affairs so that they are able to inform the people.

Article 7 of the Constitution has three clauses relevant to the media:

- Section 2: A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression.
- Section 3: A citizen shall have right to information
- Section 5: Freedom of press for radio, TV & other forms of dissemination of information including electronic press.
- Section 318 of the Penal Code section states that a person may exercise his/her freedom of speech and express their views either verbally or in writing if that is being done in the interest of the public.

The same guidelines apply to the media. The media, particularly, are mandated to convey information and express people's views in the interest of the public.

### **Royal support for media**

Bhutan's leadership, including His Majesty the King, has expressed support for the media. Long before the Constitution, in 1992, His Majesty the fourth Druk Gyalpo had issued a royal kasho to ensure the independence of the media at a time when both BBS and Kuensel were fully government-run. His Majesty delinked the media from the civil service.

At the closing of the third session of Parliament in 2009, His Majesty the King made a statement in support of independence of the media so that they may report "without fear or favour, in the interest of democracy". His Majesty stated that the rights to freedom of information and expression of the media – enshrined in the Constitution – are "fundamental to democracy". Later in February 2010, His Majesty issued a royal kasho (decree) for the establishment of the Bhutan Media Foundation to support the development and growth of media.

## Responsibility

While the Constitution grants us all the fundamental freedom, this freedom comes with responsibility. Because the media have the right to disseminate information without fear, they have the responsibility to make sure that the information is objective and accurate and in the interest of the people. The fact that a large number of people watch television or listen to the radio or read newspapers makes the media very influential. Therefore the need for media to be fair and accurate.

When media report to intentionally harm the images of people or organisations they can be convicted through the law of defamation. Defamation protects people from bad journalism.

News organisations are guided by a code of ethics or other regulations to ensure that journalists maintain a high sense of integrity. This is to ensure that the media are serving society responsibly.

Just as the media have a social responsibility to the people they serve, the people also have the responsibility to enable media to be responsible. People who use media through call-in radio or TV shows, online forum discussions, and letters to the editors of newspapers are also responsible for what they say.

Laws and rules are not enough. It is more important to educate media professionals and the users of media, and to support the media to develop good Bhutanese content. Sherubtse College will soon introduce a degree level media studies course. Along with the efforts of the government, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy has organised short term courses for journalists and media literacy courses for youth, teachers, communication officers in government and constitutional agencies as well as members of civil society.

# 4. Youth and Media

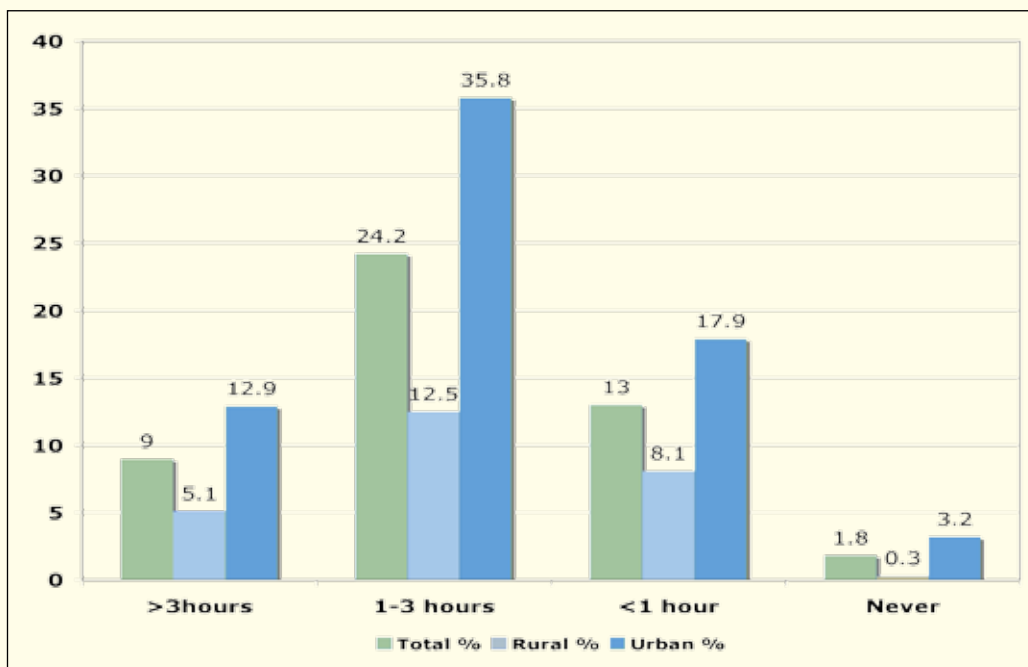
The impact of media on youth is a world-wide concern. In recent decades the concern has deepened because the media has shown a strong tendency to portray materialistic values and will often sensationalise content with sex and violence to capture the mass audience.

Studies and analysis have shown that Bhutanese youth are strongly influenced by the media. Many children are brought up by the media instead of their parents in the sense that their values are shaped by the media, in particular TV. Young children are generally more vulnerable to the media and Bhutan is worried that its population is particularly susceptible because it has had limited experience in dealing with the media.

Young Bhutanese grow up with television, radio, a growing variety of print media, an increasing number of Bhutanese feature films, and the Internet. The sheer force of the media and technology is having a profound impact on society, especially the youth population whose parents did not have much exposure to media when they were young.

A Media Impact Study in 2008 found that many children watched television between one and three hours a day. Some watched more than three hours. Teachers, parents and the government are worried that television is used as a baby sitter for increasingly busy families.

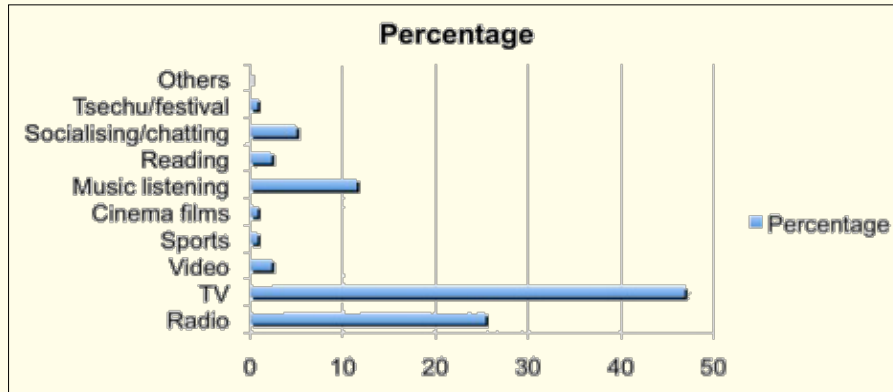
*No. of hours children spend on TV*





*Bhutan Media Impact Study, 2008*

*Sources of entertainment for youth in Bhutan - 16-24 years*



*Bhutan Media Impact Study, 2008*

As a result the media are changing almost every aspect of the lives of young people. The Media Impact Study showed that television has had the strongest influences on Bhutanese children and youth.

Soon after the introduction of television, young Bhutanese of all ages began to dress and speak like television characters. Many children attempt to develop an American accent, Bollywood has taught many Bhutanese to speak Hindi, and radio jockeys have started a new speech pattern, speaking Dzongkha in the tones and inflection used by western radio jockeys.

Some young children talk and behave like cartoon characters. Bhutanese people knew very little about South Korea but Korean film personalities and culture have become popular among Bhutanese youth through the Korean Arirang channel on cable TV. Some Bhutanese youth had even formed gangs named after popular films.

**Content for children**

The rapid expansion in global TV led to the development of channels targeting children. These include Cartoon network, Disney Channel, Discovery, Fox Kids, Pogo, and a number of others including Japanese cartoons. The popularity of international TV channels has resulted in many countries cutting back on the production of their own children’s programmes. This means that many countries rely on global children’s programming and this globalisation of media has influenced a rapid change in national and local cultures.

There is limited content for children, particularly in developing countries, one of the main reasons being that content is expensive. In Bhutan’s case, the more media we have, the more we know about the world, but the less about ourselves as Bhutanese media provide little content for youth and children. Many Bhutanese children watch international children’s programmes and adult programmes although they have not yet developed the ability to make reasoned judgment of media messages.

Children’s lack of knowledge about the real world can make them more willing to believe the information they receive on TV.

## Protection for children

The only answer to media impact, both positive and negative, is media literacy. Media literacy prepares us to exercise our critical thinking skills. It prepares us to become smart users of media. Media literacy teaches us to separate fact from opinion, to analyse media's coverage of people and events, and understand media's role in shaping issues and our understanding of the world. Media literacy helps us to develop the filters with which to use media and is a necessary skill in today's world where media are filled with all kinds of content, many of which are unhealthy for the young.

There are other attempts to protect children against unhealthy exposure to media content. UNESCO's Convention on the Rights of the Child provides guidelines for the protection of children in a globalised media world. Article 13 of the Convention states that children shall have the right to freedom of expression. Article 17 of the Convention persuades countries and societies to ensure that children have access to information and material that are of social and cultural benefit to them, whilst protecting them from media material that harms their well-being.

In summary, children and youth are confronted with a media environment that is becoming more pervasive. The government is putting in place broadband internet services, and direct-to-home TV is reaching all the remote and rural homes in Bhutan. Publishing technology is making it cheaper to publish. The mobile phone is a converged media that is used not just for talking to people but for accessing the internet and listening to radio. There are more than 300,000 Bhutanese people who already use the mobile to listen to radio and to access local news.

It is becoming more difficult to regulate content, especially on the internet which offers unlimited access to all kinds of information to anyone with a computer or a phone. Content providers, under the pressure of market competition are catering to the lowest common denominator with more emphasis on sensationalism.

Meanwhile media education and media literacy is a complex and time-consuming process. Good content is expensive to produce. Advertising is becoming more seductive every day. Today a greater number of Bhutanese children have access to the media every minute of the day, and many of them view TV alone especially during the school holidays. It's crucial for parents to play an active role in deciding their children's media exposure if we want to impart our own values to our children and to help them build the ability to judge what they see, read, hear and create hear on media. It is a race against time.

# 5. What you should know about the Media

## Questions to ask about media

As citizens of a new democracy Bhutanese people have the responsibility of electing the right leaders and then of keeping them accountable as they govern the country. To do this, citizens must be well informed of everything around them, including the activities of the government.

In an environment where there is a deluge of information - in the print, audio visual, broadcast, electronic and digital media - it is important to be able to recognise credible media and reliable information. It is important to be able to detect misinformation but this is not easy because media can carry wrong, unverified information for a number of reasons.

How do we recognise facts and good analyses from 24-hour TV and radio programmes, from the rapidly increasing number of newspapers, from the volumes of raw, unchecked information on the Internet? Remember that there is a purpose behind every message.

Here are some questions that we should always ask when we come across information in the media, whether it is in the form of news, advertising, features, documentaries, or opinions and discussions.

- **Who is giving me this information?**
- **Why are they giving me this information?**
- **What evidence are they providing to make me believe that this information is true?**

When we ask ourselves these questions we begin to assess and analyse the message we receive. With this critical thinking approach, we begin to try to make sense of what we read, hear, and watch on media. It will also help us when we post and share information online and in other media.

Critical thinking is not a new concept. The Buddha himself said that we should constantly be questioning what we read, hear, see, and even what we think.

## What you should know about media

There are many kinds of information that can be categorised according to an information grid developed by the State University of New York at Stonybrook in the United States. These are called information “neighbourhoods” that can be categorised as **news, propaganda, advertising, publicity, entertainment, even raw information.**

News has three key values: news is information that has been verified by someone, usually a journalist; that particular media is accountable; and it is independent. These are rules in journalism.

This is why it is now widely recognised that much of the information on the Internet in particular social media sites is not verified but are largely people's opinions or information that has not been checked. There are exceptions in terms of academic sites and specialist blogs. Responsible members of society are concerned that people who believe everything they read are misinformed because their beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviour are affected by these unverified media messages and information.

## **Definitions**

Understanding the differences in the various information neighbourhoods will enable us to understand the various kinds of information we receive.

### **What is news?**

Information that tells people about events, issues, and people of significance or of interest to them. News can be local, national, or international. News are reports of recent events that have been gathered by a reporter through a process of news-gathering. The purpose of news is to inform. And the information should have been checked by a journalist.

Newspapers, for example, carry two kinds of information – news reports and opinions expressed in the editorials and the opinion pages in newspapers.

### **What is publicity?**

Advertising or other activity intended to prompt public interest in a person, product, service, activity, or idea is termed as publicity. It is information that is designed to disseminate specific messages, often to enhance an image.

### **What is propaganda?**

This can include information, ideas or rumours spread deliberately to promote a cause and influence opinions. The information may be true or false, but is carefully selected for its effect, which is often emotional rather than rational. The purpose of propaganda is to convince the audience that something positive is being done and is used widely to help or harm a person, a group, movement, institution or a nation.

### **What is advertising?**

Selling space or time to a business organisation or individual for the purpose of promoting a product, service, or point of view. Advertising is the act of getting people's attention to a product, service or need by paid announcements in newspapers, magazines, over radio or TV, or on billboards. The information is usually designed to sell something.

## What is entertainment?

**Entertainment** is something that gives pleasure, thrill, or amusement. For example, a performance of some kind. The purpose of entertainment is to please, relax or distract the audience.

## What is raw information?

Raw information refers to information that is unexamined or unverified. For example, a picture or a video without explanation or context.

## Remember

It is important for us to know what kind of information is before us.

Remember the goals for each type of information described in the following:

**Propaganda:** to persuade

**Advertising:** to sell

**Publicity:** To enhance an image

**Entertainment:** To divert, amuse

**News:** To inform

**Raw Information:** Usually refers to information on internet that has not been checked

The ability to tell the difference between the types of information is an important skill to have as the world is inundated with media messages today. There is often a blurring of the lines between news and entertainment and all the other kinds of information. A media literate person today knows how to tell the difference.

# 6. What is Journalism: Why News Matters

In the 1980s, when the Bhutanese population became involved in development activities around the country and grew interested in global issues, people began to follow the news on BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service) and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). The weekly newspaper Kuensel started in 1986, was read by an increasing number of people as the literacy rate grew with the development of the education system. By the 1990s news and information became a necessity, both for work and everyday life.

Media courses teach professionals that the role of the media is to inform, educate, and entertain. In a democracy the media or more accurately, journalism is often called the “fourth estate”, meaning that it is important for governance. The other “estates” are the judiciary, legislature or parliament, and the executive or the government. Journalism, also known as news media, has what is described as a “watchdog” role, guarding against corruption and other forms of wrong-doing. Journalism, therefore, works to ensure that the government functions transparently and in the interest of the people.

In a evolving democracy like Bhutan it is important that the media also educate the people on the concepts and culture of democracy. Journalism is important to understand how our government functions, to know what is happening in the country and around the world and, eventually, how to improve our lives. Journalism’s primary purpose is to inform the public.

Journalism has helped enhance development activities, promote the community spirit, and also to strengthen citizenship. This means journalism helps us understand the responsibilities of being a citizen, for example, voting for the right leaders, understanding our responsibilities in a society, and how we can contribute to the country.

Journalism or news media also reflect the values of the society that they function in and, in many ways, the identity of that society. They are a part of the society. Journalism is also meant to provide a voice for the weaker sections of society.

## Why news matters

- News media provide us an insight into the world and the society we live in
- News media provide the essential information we need to become responsible citizens
- News media provide the “space” for discussion and feedback so all citizens can take part in nation-building
- News media provide the information which can lead to knowledge and to wisdom

- Citizens need current, relevant, and useful information so they can to exercise their power to make better decisions and build stronger communities and societies.
- The **primary purpose of journalism** is to **provide citizens with the information** they need to make informed decisions. In Bhutan, the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) requires that individuals and families make informed decisions that lead to their happiness, interpreted as contentment.

It is through the news media that citizens get information on

- |                  |                                    |
|------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Jobs           | • Entertainment                    |
| • Housing        | • Food and shopping                |
| • Taxes          | • Utilities                        |
| • Security       | • Child care                       |
| • Education      | • Healthcare                       |
| • Transportation | • Religious resources              |
| • Recreation     | • Local news and other information |

## How do we judge information?

Some information are more valuable or reliable than others. In the age of information we have access to almost unlimited volumes of information every day. If we know how to determine what is reliable information, we can then make judgments, take action or reach conclusions.

The advantage of journalistic writing over the millions of comments on social media is that information in the news media are verified by a reporter or an editor, meaning that the information has been cross-checked and is generally more reliable. The more sources (people quoted or talked to) there are, the more reliable the information.

The Stonybrook University’s News literacy programme includes a useful check list on judging reliable information:

- Named sources are better than unnamed sources, e.g., when a newspapers quotes a person in name rather than quoting unidentified people
- Independent sources are more credible than self-interested sources. For example, if a newspaper reported a story on a school and talked only to teachers who expressed positive remarks about the school, we need to understand that this could be due to the teachers’ own self-interests since they work for that particular school.
- Sources who verify are better than those who assert. A verified statement is one that is based on fact, proof, and evidence. It could be an eye-witness report or information based on finding some evidence. Assertions refer to people’s opinions and views or to information that is not based on evidence. Hence sources who say “I believe”, “I feel”, or “I think” are asserting their views.
- Multiple sources better than single sources.

- Named sources are better than anonymous sources.
- Authoritative and independent sources are better than uninformed or self-interested sources. For example talking to patients of the hospital about the quality of health care rather than the staff of the hospital to get more objective answers.

## Role and responsibilities of journalism

Journalists face many challenges in the course of their work. Some of the hardest decisions editors have to make involve what not to print or broadcast. They often have to differentiate between what people need to hear and what people want to hear.

Journalists must understand the society they live in and understand the impact that their stories will have on people and society. They are often called upon to weigh the common good against the sensational, and to contribute to a sense of identity, cultural diversity and social cohesion.

What distinguishes a journalist from other people who engage in the production of media messages – e.g. people who post clips on youtube, bloggers, people who post comments online?

- A journalist is trained to be objective
- A journalist's main focus is to inform the public
- A journalist does not intentionally use deception or manipulation
- A journalist does not compromise on his/her independence and does not allow other interests to influence their work
- A journalist seeks to verify (check) all their facts and is transparent about his/her work
- A journalist is accountable for his/her writing and stands behind the news they write/produce

Three key words characterise news media<sup>1</sup>.

- **Verification:** evidence or facts that establish or confirms the accuracy or truth of something
- **Independence:** freedom from control, influence, support, aid or the like of others
- **Accountability:** subject to the obligation to report, explain, or justify something; is responsible, and answerable for the news that is published.

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1 Stonybrook University



© Sonam, BBS



*Participants of the Public Service Broadcasting Seminar*

© Chewang Tobgay, BCMMD



*Students de-constructing an advertisement*

© Jody McPhillips



*Reporters attending an online journalism workshop*

# 7

## • Advertising- The World of Commercials

We use the term “24/7” to refer to the non-stop broadcasting of news, other forms of information, and entertainment. With the introduction of electronic and digital media, television in particular, the information being provided to the Bhutanese population is even described as an aerial invasion to emphasise its impact. A major concern with this volume of messages is that the tone is strongly commercial, encouraging a habit of non-stop consumption.

Advertising is a major component of media content today. All media are heavily dependent on advertising which is a major source of their revenue. Today with advertising revenue, newspapers are either very cheap or even distributed free of cost. Radio and television are dramatically cheaper with advertising paying for most of the programme content.

Internet services like google and gmail are supposedly “free” but our usage of gmail and google search builds up a mass of users and this enables the company to sell the information to advertisers. We, therefore, see a wide range of advertisements popping up on our email or search sites. The more we use the Internet the more of a market we are creating for large companies like Google and Facebook.

The advertising culture has become extremely professional and the industry spends billions of dollars on advertisements which are becoming more sophisticated every day. The industry uses enticing scripts, creative modern technology, and psychologically refined messages to seduce readers, viewers, and listeners. The influence of advertising on society, especially the young, is a serious concern today because of the power of the consumer culture and influence on everyone’s lives. Advertisers often cater to people’s desires, and play on sexuality and violence to sell products.

### **Global markets**

Today’s factories churn out consumer goods from food to clothing to fashionable status symbols like cars. National and global sales people have developed sophisticated strategies to attract consumers. Print and broadcast advertising target children with an array of fast foods, toys, and clothing. Web sites for children feature all types of advertising and Internet games, including games where children can learn to “shop”, participate in cosmetic games, design and purchase clothing and all kinds of consumer attractions, priming children for the real market.

Research shows that young children below the age of eight find it difficult to tell the difference between information, entertainment, and advertising. Children, especially those in the younger age group, cannot tell the motive behind

an advertisement (which is to sell us products and services), nor are they able to distinguish between what is general content and advertising.

Research shows that advertisements can have a powerful effect on children's perception of their needs and, therefore, their values. Some of the concerns today include the increasing advertising for fast foods, snacks, soft drinks and toys targeting children. Advertisements often make children prefer fast and packaged foods to the more nutritious home cooked meals. Commercials tend to play on their sense of wanting to look and feel good by perpetuating stereotypes such as strong and macho men, women as being weak, passive, and dependent on strong men for example.

Cartoons, programmes, and computer games are a form of advertising because they are a part of the of merchandising of children's toys and goods. Many children's programmes today are being promoted to generate sales in clothing, games, and music to youthful consumers.

Because children cannot discern between what is real or contrived in media (such as advertising) more media literate societies have clear policies and regulations on advertising and children. They also have more effective media literacy programmes that counter the impact of unhealthy media content.

Some countries have enacted pro-active rules to protect the young from the onslaught of advertising. For example, Sweden and Norway have adopted regulations that prohibit TV advertising directed at children under 12 years of age<sup>1</sup>. Many communities restrict commercials minutes before and after a children's TV programme. Some even prohibit sponsorship of children's programming. Bhutan currently does not permit advertising of alcohol, tobacco, and medicines and pharmaceuticals. But there is no clear policy concerning advertisements and children.

### **Beware of disguised advertising**

There are many forms of advertising, some of them so subtle that even discerning people are fooled.

Apart from outright advertising, commercialism of all media content is a known trend. In South Asian countries, where the literacy level is relatively low, media often resort to unethical practices to lure consumers. For example there are increasing incidences of paid news. This refers to situations where individuals and companies pay the media to do a story for personal, political, or business interests. The information is disguised as news stories, documentaries, and features.

Then there are legitimate "advertorials" or advertisements written as editorials, distinguished from the news information. These glossy pages or supplements, with attractive pictures, must be identified as advertising and not be mistaken for news.

News that is paid for is unethical, particularly because news media organisations are meant to be balanced and independent in their reporting. News media are accountable to the audience and readers they serve. Paid news deceives people into thinking that the subject discussed is an objective article while it is, in reality, an advertisement.

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1 The law was adopted in 1991

The media regulations in Bhutan state that all paid advertisements must be distinguished from the real news reported in Bhutanese newspapers, TV and radio programmes. While there are policies, laws, and regulations to prevent unethical practices it is equally important for us to learn how to differentiate between news and paid news, advertisements masquerading as news, advertisements that are not true, and the motives behind advertising.

Advertising is not all bad, and some advertising are cleverly produced with humour and broad appeal. We can appreciate and even enjoy the cleverly crafted advertisements but we must first be able to deconstruct them. Be media literate and beware of the impact of the seductive world of advertising.

Book any Commercial Vehicle (Taxi) from June 1 to June 30, 2010, and get the benefit of FREE COMPREHENSIVE VEHICLE INSURANCE (1 YEAR)

MARUTI ZEN ESTILO

MARUTI OMNI VAN

MARUTI ALTO

**ZIMDRA AUTOMOBILES** (A Unit of Zimdra Industries Pvt.Ltd.)

MARUTI SUZUKI

HEAD OFFICE: Post Box No. 336, Phuentsholing, Bhutan, Tel. No. +975-5-251322/251245 Fax No. +975-5-253002, E-mail: maruti@druknet.bt, zimdra.coles@druknet.bt

SHOWROOM: Thimphu, Post Box No. 289, Tel. No. +975-2-326298/334969 Fax No. +975-2-328956, E-mail: zimdra@thimphu@druknet.bt

This version of the advertisement and that of the advertisement in English is to serve as the version of Bhutan's national flag, which represents Bhutan's national identity. The message content is identical to that of a paid news advertisement. It is not a paid news advertisement.

© Bhutan Observer

*Some of the prominent ads in Bhutan*

# 8

## • Social Media and Their Challenges

**M**edia, like everything else, continue to evolve and change. In the past communication was largely oral, through word of mouth. People learned to read and write and this was followed by advancements in audio-visual broadcast technology. Then came the telegraph and radio, and TV was introduced at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A generation ago, Bhutanese grew up to oral stories. From 1999 onwards, we see a generation which did not know the world without TV. Today we live in an age of the digital media which is sometimes known as social media.

Social media has been spurred by the dramatic developments in information communication technology (ICT). We saw the Internet bring about the most important changes of this century, allowing people to create their own web sites including commentary sites called blogs. Popular worldwide social networking is now done through Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and others. Mobile technology is enabling all media to converge and we can send messages, read newspapers and books, listen to the radio and watch TV on the mobile telephone. New technologies have changed the traditional media landscape and changed the way we work, learn, and play. Today social media allow us to create, comment, edit, work and play simultaneously.

The characteristic of the new media is that they provide instantaneous transmission and are far-reaching. We can post our pictures and videos on Youtube, discuss issues online on a number of social sites such as Facebook, play games with people all over the world, and SMS ( short message service) our votes for the best singer in the Druk Star contest. Social media make it possible for everyone to communicate and to write and publish their ideas online, creating a “participatory culture” that goes beyond the borders of a country.

The difference from the age of traditional media is that people are now not just receivers of content from media but they can create content using cell phone cameras, computers and the Internet.

Here are some useful terms to know about new media.

### **New media glossary**

**Social media** is a broad term referring to the social interaction that takes place on the Internet. Unlike the conventional media (radio, TV, newspapers), where media professionals create content for its audience, social media generally allow people not just to consume content but to produce content and to share the content they produce. Hence social media are influential because they permit thousands of people to be in touch instantaneously . Social media is very broad and refers to blogging, wikis, video-sharing sites like YouTube, photo-sharing sites like Flickr, and social networking sites like Facebook and hi5. Facebook group is like an online club. Facebook



members are allowed to contact each other and mass message other members as long as the membership is smaller than 5,000 persons. It is often used to promote events, causes, and even political agenda.

**Blogging** – a web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.

**SMS – Short Message Service** is a text communication service that is a part of a telephone or mobile communication system. It is widely used to exchange short text messages between phone devices. Today, phone companies also use SMS technology to enable people to vote and to subscribe to news services on their mobile phones. It is the most widely used service with more than 2.5 billion users world wide.

**Spam** – refers to an electronic messaging system that sends unrequested messages to thousands of people. The most common of this is the email spam where advertising messages find their way to our email services. Instant messaging spam are common on some mobile phone networks.

**Flame/ flaming** – is a term used for people who use rude and insulting language to communicate on the Internet. Flaming is hostile interaction among internet users. This is often done anonymously in online forums, networks, or Internet games.

**Twitter** – is a mini blog and social media service where users can send out messages limited to 140 characters to others. Users can also read other users’ messages which are called “tweets”. Users can follow a list of authors. Twitter can be sent and received through telephones and Internet. Launched in 2007, twitter has become very popular, particularly in the United States, Brazil and the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. In February 2010, the twitter company said the number of tweets had reached 50 million a day.

### **With great power comes great responsibility**

Social media provide new opportunities for communities to keep in contact and, in this manner, help build civic awareness and engagement. Social networking sites, for example, provide the space for people to voice their opinions and for community issues to be widely discussed. They are able to raise day-to-day and neighbourhood issues that newspapers and broadcast stations often ignore.

Social media gives people more access than they have ever had before. In a country like Bhutan, where the terrain makes communication difficult, new media give people in remote places instant access to communication and information. They have access to not just the few mainstream media but innumerable choices of media from the world.

Journalists are able to find many issues worthy of follow-up in the daily news. They have access to views from people from all walks of life and from everywhere. Hence new media can help widen the scope of journalism coverage.

Social media keep people connected and provide them with the ability to change the agenda. Social media permit

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sysomos.com/inside\\_twitter/geography](http://www.sysomos.com/inside_twitter/geography) - a company that provides business intelligence for social media

people to share information, and to share it quickly. It enables people to find communities and to network. Social media are characterised by interaction, participation and collaboration.

But, while social media offer fast and powerful means of sharing information, they are not news media.

People using media also need to be aware of the risks connected to the spread of their personal data. Posting too much information could lead to the possibility of damaging your own reputation. We need, today, technological skills to protect our privacy. Take for example the case of a Bhutanese couple who found their personal and intimate pictures widely distributed through the cell phone. One video clip was distributed from a shop entrusted to repair their computer.

In the early years of the email in Bhutan several people fell victim to fraudulent spam messages that declared them as lottery winners, requesting them to share their bank details. Such cases continue to occur today.

So while new technology has brought many positive changes to the world of communication and media, it is potentially harmful to people who are unable to judge the credibility of media content, and who have not considered the issue of privacy.

Anonymity has allowed people to make personal attacks on others. When they are not held responsible for the words, pictures they post, they become more daring because of the belief that there are no consequences to their actions. Anonymous postings online, or through any form of media, can potentially make people behave more irresponsibly and act even more cruelly or unethically.

Therefore, codes of conduct for online and mobile activity are needed just as we need codes of conduct in the physical world. We need to learn how to be good digital citizens. The information we post about ourselves or about others will last a long time and travel long distances so we all need to think about the consequences about our online activity. The way we behave when we are connected online matters to us, our friends, and our families and to the larger community we connect to through new media. The underlying message is: “With great power, comes great responsibility”.

## **The expert and the amateur**

Technology is blurring the lines between news and advocacy, news and opinion. Many people today find it hard to distinguish between the “journalist” and the “expert” as more “amateurs” and the “audience” are also now able to use new media to create media messages.

Many young people, for example, turn more to social networking sites for news and information, finding information through their peers.

Mainstream media are also recognising the value of using people’s contributions. The global TV news channel, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), uses new media and the general public to provide them with key pictures of major news events. Similarly, many media organisations today ask eye-witnesses to send in pictures and information on key events.

The filtering of the news through an editor has become even more important today. Many citizens today learn

journalism to contribute to the growing number of citizens' media sites and some of them have professional editors to ensure accuracy and balance.

There are many risks in quoting Internet sources without understanding the sources themselves. Are the information provided by news agencies and journalists, or citizen reporters? Are they news or blogs?

Wikipedia, a popular online encyclopaedia is today not a permitted source for school research because it relies largely on citizens' postings that have not been verified. Larry Sanger, the inventor of wikipedia, recognising the weaknesses of this largely unedited and, unsourced website, has designed another encyclopaedia where professional editors have been hired to check on the information – [www.Citizendium.org](http://www.Citizendium.org).

All these issues underline the need for today's media user to be media literate.

Citizens need to develop the skills to access and use all the different media available to them. We need to think of how a TV programme is produced, which sources on the Internet are trustworthy, what can we take for granted, and where do we need to go deeper into the issue and ask questions.

Media literacy is a basic skill required by not only the young generation but also adults and elderly people, for parents, teachers and media professionals. The older generation may need to be trained to access different sources, the younger generation might need guidance on which sources to trust. We can all become smart users of new media.

The interactive world of social media requires that we also re-think education. We now need to learn how to sift, choose, analyse, and create media messages and, eventually, knowledge from the infinite information available. Schools need to create learning environments where technology and the social collaboration it permits is used to encourage learning and questioning. Technology is changing the top-down authoritative learning environment into an interactive, collaborative and exploratory classroom.

In some countries (for example Sweden, Ireland, UK) media literacy is a part of the school curriculum. We can begin this in a small way in Bhutan by introducing elements of media literacy in schools and by discussing these issues at home and within broader society. We can begin by examining how we use media every day.



# 9. Citizens, Consumers and Media

We live in an age where advancements in information communication technology provides us with increased opportunities to be connected, to be informed, and to be creative. This is the information age where converged ICT and media culture connects the world.

## Impact of commercialism on media

While acknowledging the benefits of a global information society we are concerned about the changing values that are driving the media and that are influencing the values of society at large. With greater competition, commercialism, and the profit motive, the media are providing content that treats the audience more as consumers than as citizens. That is why entertainment, advertising, and information that focuses on the market dominates media content today.

Like the rest of the world, newspapers in the South Asian region are lamenting the fact that proprietors and management of newspapers and broadcast stations cater primarily to the market, to the extent that owners and advertisers often influence the content, and readers or viewers become less important. There is little educational content and news. It is therefore important for us to understand how this influences us and our families.

In some countries media are subjected to extremely tight government controls. Governments use different forms of censorship like regulations, penalties and financial pressure to promote political objectives. Therefore political and commercial pressures can influence media content.

## Consumers or citizens?

An important question being asked today is whether media view their audience as citizens or as consumers? Studies show that in recent years there have been a general decline in civic awareness and participation, especially among youth. This has been attributed to the influence of media which provides less vital information that serve the needs of citizens, and with commercial messages overtaking pro-social messages.

When media serve us as consumers they are providing the kind of content that their advertisers want to sell – goods and services as well as information and entertainment. These are cleverly packaged, at great expense, to entice the audience. Children’s TV programmes, for example, are no longer aimed at just telling stories on TV, but business ventures that includes the marketing of toys, clothing, fashion and all kinds of goods for children.

While entertainment is popular, media must also provide information that empower people to make decisions on economic, technical, political, cultural and social issues. Responsible media must serve the citizens with vital

information, empowering them to function as voters and as responsible members of society.

For a young democracy like Bhutan, the media have a role to represent the range and nature of public interests at stake and not just focus on market-driven entertainment and commercial promotion of goods and services. As citizens we need to understand what we want and expect from the media. For Bhutan's changing society, we must be able to distinguish between information that empower us and information that makes us consumers ( that is to want more goods and services). These are critical thinking skills necessary for a GNH society.

The question to ask ourselves today is whether we are citizens or consumers. Are Bhutanese media providing us with content that they decide we should consume or do we have a say in the kind of media content that serves our needs as citizens? How can we also express ourselves through media?

## Media in Bhutan

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel in "The Elements of Journalism" said: "Where once the role (of journalism) was simply providing information as a tool of self-governance, it now becomes a role to provide citizens with the tools they need to extract knowledge for themselves from the undifferentiated flood of rumour, propaganda, gossip, allegations the communications system now produces. Thus the journalist must not only make sense of the world but also make sense of the flood of information as it is being delivered to citizens."

What can we, as Bhutanese citizens, expect and ask from media, and especially from news organisations? What can we do if we believe we are not getting it? The values and elements of journalism, as Kovach and Rosentiel describe it, belong to citizens as much as they belong to journalists. Freedom of expression is granted for the benefit of the people, not the media.

### What citizens should expect from the news media<sup>1</sup>:

- 1) Truthfulness
- 2) Proof that the news media's first responsibility is to citizens. This means that news media must always have their readers, viewers or listeners in mind. News media's first loyalty is not to advertisers, or to political leaders, or public officials.
- 3) News media must be transparent. If a newspaper is writing about itself, or if there is a conflict of interests, then it must state so. E.g. if a newspaper is involved in supporting a certain competition ( e.g. Druk Star, or Mr. Thimphu, or any contest) then it should state so when writing about it. Journalists should not support candidates or belong to political parties. This is to ensure that media professionals do not get too involved and are able to maintain their objectivity in reporting issues of public interest.

News media and journalists will continue to monitor people in the authority and give voice to people. News media, for example, should report on the disadvantaged, the poor, those who have no opportunity. One of the basic responsibilities of the media is to enable people who are in disadvantaged positions to speak up. In this way they

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<sup>1</sup> Kovach and Rosentiel, 2007. Summarised from the publication with local examples.

provide the forums for feedback that will help the government or people in positions of authority to understand better the needs of society and to address these needs.

### **Citizens have rights and also responsibilities when it comes to the news.**

As citizens we should view media with an open mind, willing to accept new facts and examine different points of views even if they are different from ours. We have a responsibility to respond to media reports if we believe they are inaccurate and to send letters to the editors and journalists and participate in the forums with responsibility.

Bhutan has lively online forums but they are largely ignored by people in authority and labelled as being anti-establishment because the tone and nature of the discussions tend toward personal, insulting and often times even rude remarks. People who express themselves within the accepted norms of public discourse are more likely to get the attention they want. The danger of online media is that we do not face the people we are talking about, and we often forget that we are talking about real people with feelings. All constructive feedback are best put across if they are kept within the confines of accepted norms of speech. Hence, no flaming (insulting language).

What can we do if we believe that the media are not serving our needs? We can write to media organisations explaining why we believe certain issues have not been reported on, or if corrections are required. Our media depend on us to give the vital feedback. Our democracy requires that we become active citizens, and the media plays an influential part in creating active citizens.

### **Conclusion**

While we use media increasingly for our own entertainment, citizens in a new media cannot afford to neglect the importance of getting the information we need to enable us to understand what is happening in our society, our community and our country. We need to value the importance of the role of the press in society.

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