

Media in Bhutan: Now and Then

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This group is largely Bhutanese media personnel. But we understand, in the context of this media and culture seminar, that we are also the custodians of Bhutanese culture. We have a tendency to place ourselves into categories, giving ourselves narrower roles in life. But it is time to climb out of this box and take on the broader responsibilities that our changing society demands of us.

Such a seminar gives us a new perspective of the Bhutanese media. The media was previously understood as newspapers, radio, and television. Then came the broader purview of film, music, and the new electronic media like internet. Our scholars now remind us of the centuries-old media that we had in Bhutan- the mani walls, prayer flags, the festivals and dances. This concept gives us a new depth of values to draw on as we develop the Bhutanese media today.

Media is not a distant, neutral phenomenon. It is not just technology. When we talk about Bhutanese media, we talk about ourselves. And we are expressing values all the time. We are cultivating the public mind. We are performing a public function.

When we talk about the role of the media, particularly in our vulnerable society, we have to be conscious of our blatant and inherent biases, be it religious, political, eliticism, gender, age, and numerous other faults.

Role

Media must help society to understand change and, in the process, define and promote the right values, including public values. As this seminar reminds us we are responsible for

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culture, happiness, liberty, spirituality, even survival of society.

Thus the concept of public service media. In the past they talked about public service broadcasting, then of the public service media. Public service means balancing state control and the lowest common denominator that we see in the commercial media. In Bhutan public service must be a goal of all media, not just state-owned media. And this means reaching the people on their terms.

We talk of the role of media after 2008. In essence this role is not new. The role of media in democratic governance has always been to provide the public space for the people's views and to initiate public discussion. As a developing country, of course, we keep in mind our own priorities like our relations with other countries.

We look at trends in the media. Media is very much a part of the evolution of public culture. It is a force that helps shape public culture. The small explosion of the Bhutanese media that we see is good but that reminds us immediately of the need for professionalism. Someone asked what freedom of expression meant. In one word, freedom means responsibility.

We have to understand media in the context of GNH. GNH requires that the people make important decisions. The role of the media is to give them the information, to empower them, to make those decisions.

Culture

This seminar also focused on culture. Today we are trying to understand culture, the living traditions that are evolving in Bhutan.

As we recognise the value of variety, our multiple community identities, we see the pluralism that we sometimes deny ourselves. The ways in which diversity is recognised and

valued in civic and political domains raise important questions for contemporary pluralist societies. National culture in Bhutan, as someone said, can be seen as an amalgam of its different community cultures.

When we talk of culture, uncomfortable issues come up. We saw this during the public consultations on the draft Constitution. The most vibrant debate has surrounded the issues of religion, language, dress. One of the scholars was quoted saying, “defining culture is an act of politics”.

Through all this we hear the question, is Bhutanese culture strong enough to withstand the forces of change?

We talk of public culture which has always revolved around community life and religion. It has been pointed out that technology changes the contours of existing public spheres. We see a new significance and visibility in economic, political and civic domains.

In Bhutan public culture is often understood as national culture and has, for more than three centuries, been synonymous with national identity. Public culture is changing every day and change is giving birth to a new cultural identity. Our culture, our identity now includes discotheques, nightclubs, pool rooms, the process of urbanization. But, through all this, we must watch the change in values more than the external changes.

The general consensus is also that public culture is perceived to be under threat from globalisation. And the mass media is a culprit.

Trends

On trends in media and culture I’ll mention just the issues that are addressed by the seminar. Today there is a strong move to promote Dzongkha, more than ever before. The strength of Dzongkha is the realisation that it is important for

survival. Significantly the new Bhutanese politics will be played out largely in Dzongkha.

Some academics are also concerned that Dzongkha is borrowing too much... a suicidal trend because excessive borrowing could mean death. Others worry that Dzongkha is not borrowing enough, that some universal words are acceptable.

There is also the proliferation of the music and film culture. But these are catering to the masses and, therefore, reflecting the lowest common denominator. And we have plagiarism on a massive scale in our media industries.

Today we are mistaking sensationalism for freedom of speech. That is why I stress the responsibility of the media.

Advertising

We talk about advertising. Our friend from Holland tells us that his company functions from an old Church. It strikes me that our monasteries need to start doing some effective advertising before they lose touch with the people, particularly the youth. I mean, of course, healthy advertising.

It would be a wonderful counter to trained commercial advertisers whose sole aim is to inflame our desires. In the Buddhist context this desire is the cause of suffering. We all agree that it is wrong but we do it anyway.

Advertising in Bhutan faces new challenges every day. We do not advertise alcohol but what do we do when our elite and international representatives take part in the Tiger Beer golf tournament? We criticise the petty gambling during the fetes, but what do we say about the large-scale online gambling approved by the government?

Response

What should our response be to all this? Let us first get a perspective. I believe that we do have a powerful counter if we learn from our own intuitive capabilities. I use the example, somewhat intrepidly, of Gross National Happiness. We have sold it quite well, even before we have refined the product at home. We have given Bhutan a brand name that is even better than Shangri-la and, of course, I am all for it.

One of our scholars gave us the provocative advice to ban advertising on television. It's a great idea but advertising is here. And the only answer is to produce our own advertising, target our own audiences and, most important, do it with professionalism.

The bottom-line is education, not just by the education ministry but by the media. We learnt that the advertising budget worldwide far supersedes the education budget. When we talk about media literacy we must begin with media professionals, in raising standards and professionalism.

And we start with our youth. But, as we have been reminded, someone has to do some real hard work. Who will do this hard work? We, the media.

Government

At the helm of all this is the government. What is the role of the government... especially an all pervasive government like ours? I am a little concerned about the calls for government help and subsidy. Seeking subsidy means trading independence. State support is necessary but in the form of legislation, infrastructure, newsprint, licensing fees, events and functions, advertising, and other accepted forms.

But the government has a critical role. Our government today requires a more comprehensive media vision. We saw, for example, the sudden start of television that caught society by

surprise and are understanding the impact only now.

The studies presented here, on the impact of media and impact of television, are not new. They have been done over and over again in other countries. We claim to learn from the mistakes of others but we do not do the home work and sometimes do not learn from our own mistakes.

The ICT centres around the country sound pragmatic and ideal, particularly in an era of decentralisation. They could foster new community culture and enrich our public culture. But, even as the Bumthang centre changed from NCPC to NTC to CMC, it has not been able develop local content, to provide practical information like the price of potatoes in Phuentsholing. Someone suggested that the centre could deal with basic problems like low computer literacy.

Law

The media law is to be approved by the National Assembly. There is a misconception that the media law will guarantee a free media. It is the Constitution that guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of media, and also gives government the mandate to provide access to information.

The media law will touch on important issues like licensing to ensure that there is no media monopoly, it sets rules for foreign ownership and investment because the media is considered a sensitive industry in every country.

With the media law will come regulations and the regulatory body, BICMA, which actually needs more independence. BICMA will have important functions including the monitoring of print runs, distribution figures, and viewership statistics. It will need to monitor the powerful medium of advertising.

Corruption in media is a major issue everywhere and so is the relationship between media owners, advertisers, editorial

teams, and management.

But the media law will not solve our problems. It is important for the media to set our own standards and codes. Among advisory bodies a media council could play an important role and help diffuse many problems before they go too far. Codes of ethics and practices must be established by media themselves.

A relevant question is, who is the government? A seminar like this must acknowledge that it is us who must take the initiative. We are a highly inter-connected society. Many of us have multiple identities as decisions makers, media professionals, government officials as well as critics both inside and outside the system. It is the media that should take healthy initiatives to the government.

I emphasize the interdependence, in fact the synonymity, between media and culture. Our scholars have described this as the means and end, the medium and the message. Together they represent public culture. And we might ask what kind of a cultural identity – and inevitably – national identity do we present today?

In conclusion, I submit that the media story is Bhutan's story. And, for us, this is just the beginning.

