

Use of Social Media and Digital Technology from the Perspective of Citizen Engagement and Democratic Participation in the Works of Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Studies: A Positioning Paper

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Background

Promotion of socio-economic and political dialogue, and engagement of citizens in the process of governance are essential features of a democracy. Public think tank organizations have a key role to play in this regard and thus, as the only state research organization, the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research (CBS) should be at the forefront of innovations in engaging with the public through policy dialogue by exploring various communication forums like social media. According to the Act for the Centre for Bhutan Studies (2001) by which it was established, the CBS is an autonomous government organization charged with conducting multi-disciplinary research into the history, culture, economy and policy of the country among others. It is mandated with promoting the culture of scholarship and public education through dissemination of timely and quality scholarly research findings. It is also aimed at influencing public policy by providing state institutions with informed and researched inputs. For these purposes, the CBS not only conducts independent research works, the results of which are published as scholarly books, but also organizes national and international conferences, public talks, promote collaboration with global research institutions and represents

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the country in various scholarly international forums to present the country's policy positioning. For example, in just the area of media and governance, the CBS has organized various conferences like the major international conference on "Media and Public Culture in Bhutan" (June 2006) and "Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia" (October 2009).

Definition and Rationale for Adopting Social Media

As a public institution in a privileged position to not only promote public awareness on democracy, but also influence state policy as the country's foremost academic and lobbying agency, the Centre for Bhutan Studies must explore multiple channels of communication for its institutional positioning. As the driver of not only social and political change, but also of institutional innovation, the CBS must adopt communication strategies as it becomes "essential as organizations evolve from rigid structures to adaptive, internally and externally connected and even predictive business models" (Linke and Zerfass 2013, p. 272). According to researchers, spending on technologies has increased over recent years and will reach 4.6 billion US\$ globally by 2013 (Young et al. 2008). In 2009, 43 percent of the fastest growing private companies in the USA (Inc 500) judged social media to be "very important" for their business, while 91 percent used at least one social media tool, most commonly social networking platforms (Barnes and Mattson 2009, as cited in Linke and Zerfass 2013, p. 271). But proliferation of social media usage is not limited to just big corporations. In fact, organizations from government departments to small businesses are increasingly adopting social media for strategic communications and public relations. According to Macnamara and Zerfass (2012), this is seen by many as a positive development because the openness of the social media environment "potentially democratizes voice and affords participation, dialogue, and community-building" (p. 287). Their study found out that social media are being widely cited as enabling of, if not transformative for, democratic societies and cite the example of the 2008 U.S. presidential election which showed that social media are

increasingly used to engage youth and marginalized groups.

Before further exploring why the CBS must adopt social media, it would be opportune to understand what social media and information technology is, and how it affects democracy and civic engagement. The Department of Information and Media ([DIM] 2015) defines social media as “Internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information” and differentiates it from traditional media, such as newspaper, TV and radio, by stating that unlike the latter, social media is not a broadcast medium. Social media is a Web 2.0 platform for collaboration and co-creation. Social media has also become a tool for good governance. Governments around the world are using social media to reach out to their citizens to get feedback on service delivery, seek inputs into policy making, and create community based programmes. Social media enables policy processes and issues to be debated by the public that has primarily focussed on social dynamics (Bjuremalm, Gibaja and Molleda 2014).

On occasion of the launch of the social media guidance for civil servants in UK, the Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude noted (as cited in Coleman 2012) that “when civil servants, policy makers and service delivery units alike, open themselves to dialogue with the public, they can glean a much better understanding of the real needs and concerns of citizens.” Social media is already being used in communicating the policies of the elected democratic government of Bhutan with smart phones and 3G networks reaching out to even remote areas. For example, the Prime Minister of Bhutan has over 46,000 followers in Facebook, and nearly 27,000 followers in Twitter – not an insignificant number in a country with a population of just over seven hundred thousand (UNDP 2015).

But while the argument for adopting social media in CBS’s functioning is undeniable, care must be taken that possible pitfalls must be avoided. As was the case with UK’s adoption of the of social media, their will be technical barriers in use of

the new technologies available at both the user and creator's end. Threats and vulnerabilities of indiscriminate usage of social media includes introduction of viruses and malware to the organizational network, exposure to customers and the enterprise through a fraudulent or hijacked corporate presence, unclear or undefined content rights to information posted to social media sites, among others (Linke and Zerfass 2013, p. 273). But as an organization that seeks to set the standard for scholarship and civic engagement through enlightened public debate, the CBS must realize that the greatest threat to use of social media would not be technical, but in the appropriation of the platform by the overwhelming threat of the lowest common denominator. The UNDP (2015) which is supporting use of social media as a tool of good governance in Bhutan acknowledges that high media illiteracy among the Bhutanese means that some elements of the social media users can hijack constructive public debate and bring in vicious and partisan agenda into public discourse, thus misleading the general public. To counter this, through research data and well-informed opinions, the CBS must foster civic responsibility and engender a knowledge-based society using social media forums. In this regard, a quick analysis of social media as a transformative agency as propounded by Kent (2013) will be useful. He explores how technology and our recent access to, and abundance of information, are affecting democracy, and the role of public relations professionals in a post mass media society. Kent warns against pandering to the lowest common denominator in the social media platforms. According to him, communication professionals (like CBS researchers are on behalf of the elected government) need to stop seeing new technology as simply a sales tool and consider how it can be used in more robust activities: relationship building, problem solving, crowd sourcing, design improvement, etc. He argues that "going back thousands of years to the ancient Greeks, dialectic and dialogue were considered important tools of democracy" (p. 341). Thus, according to him, scholars must not pander to the lowest common denominator, but uplift the standard of discourse in the public forum by making

scholarship more attractive and safeguard democracy against demagoguery and irrational impulses. Promoting a knowledge society must involve a dialogue between creators and users of knowledge, but that dialogue should represent a “relational give and take that occurs between two people, or in small groups, that observe strict rules of decorum to maintain fairness, trust, and the opportunity for all involved to express their opinion” p. 341). Kent introduces us to the principles of “Long Now” among which are: serving the long view, fostering responsibility, rewarding patience, minding mythic depth and living up to heroic standards, allaying with competition, and taking no sides. Use of social media to produce public engagement must focus on these broad principles and CBS must not stoop to the level of corporate tweets.

Case Studies of Social Media Usage

Two case studies will be briefly discussed here as CBS adopts social media for its official communication purpose and they will try to answer how beneficial or otherwise social media is, and how should organizations adopt it. The first case of a study was done by Linke and Zerfass (2013) which attempted to depict the status quo of strategic social media communications in German corporations and political and non-governmental organizations with the underlying research question, “how is social media communications strategically applied in German organizations?” (p.276). In order to answer the research questions, the concept of “Social Media Governance” was used as an umbrella term. The focal areas of this research were therefore: strategies for the launch of social media communications; skills and responsibilities within the organization; tools and applications in corporate communications; the relevance, opportunities and risks of communications in the social web; and the existing regulatory frameworks for interactive communications. An online survey was conducted across Germany, in June 2010. The response was 1,007 fully completed questionnaires and consisted of communications professionals in joint-stock companies (17.8 percent) and private companies (44.7 percent), public sector organizations and associations (23 percent), as well as non-

profit-organizations (14.5 percent). The results indicate that although many organizations claim to have strategies for social media communications, nine out of ten had no explicit regulatory frameworks. Strategic pillars, such as managerial commitment and a participative corporate culture, were reported by one third of the organizations. This research indicates that public relations (PR) practices should focus on developing basic structures for social media communications and should not be limited to communications activities. Communication departments were most commonly in the lead with regard to using social media, followed by the advertising/marketing communications, sales and human resources departments. The most frequently applied tools were video sharing and micro blogging (Twitter), and the most popular communities were Facebook and Xing.

The second case relates to how an anonymous website, Bhutanomics.com, changed the nature of public discourse in Bhutan, and how it complemented and replaced the lackadaisical conventional media because the latter was struggling to sustain itself as viable business models. Kent (2013) argues that for more than a century in the United States, “citizens obtained the information that was needed for the maintenance of democracy, the pursuit of commerce, the protection of the nation, our cultural beliefs, and our personal values from the mass media” (p. 337). This was the case in Bhutan too. In the lead up to Bhutan’s democratization in 2008 when multiparty elections were held for the first general elections in the country, there were numerous newspapers and community radio services. These were propped up by increased advertising from the government and other subsidies that the media industry got. But by 2013, at the end of the first government’s tenure, these media houses closed down as suddenly as they appeared, thus failing to live up to the standards of a watchdog. However, through its undercover network of social media journalists and activists, bhutanomics.com exposed a number of high profile corruption cases by way of critical political satires and anonymous investigative journalism that received

unprecedented prominence in the public through word-of-the-mouth communication in the highly oral society that Bhutan is. The first elected government lost two cabinet rank members to such cases, and thus, social media buoyed by the support of conventional media could effect changes that conventional media alone with its many limitations could not. The rise of bhutanomics.com, which was picked up even by the conventional media and law enforcing agencies of the government, not only helped to keep the democratic government honest, but it also made them more mindful of being accountable to the people with whom they have tried to communicate using the same social media forums.

Social Media Strategy of the Centre for Bhutan Studies: Fostering Meaningful Democratic Dialogue so that Public Policy becomes Responsive towards the Real Needs of the Citizens

CBS is a government budgetary office that is staffed by civil servants. Therefore, instituting a social media strategy, in view of the above evidence for the need of social media, must take into account relevant government policies in this matter. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) has, with the support of UNDP Country office, already come up with its draft social media policy for civil servants (DIM 2015). Thus, the Centre's social media policy must be formulated within the RGoB guidelines, while being mindful that the Centre's function as a research organization makes it different from routine civil service works. The Centre, as its motto suggests, works "under the patronage of His Majesty the King" and therefore in formulating its social media policy, it must remember His Majesty the Fourth King's message which he delivered when mass Internet was first introduced in the country on June 2, 1999:

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

In line with the RGoB policy, the CBS social media policy should be the following:

1. Goals and objectives: The goal and objectives, as discussed above and in line with the Centre's own mandate, should be to create a knowledge based society through timely, effective and rigorous public debate by disseminating and making researched data and informed opinion available to the public that is aimed at heightening their awareness on the issues of state policy on the one hand and on the other, to make the government amendable to enlightened public interests as expressed in their engagement through social media platforms regulated with wisdom and in good faith.

2. Target audience(s): The use of social media should use the public as both the source of information and target of the processed information that the Centre generates. The aim of the Centre's social media usage must also be to inform public policy decision of the government. It should also include communicating and collaborating with both the national and international scholarly communities, besides working with other interest groups in the society.

3. Risks: There are various risks associated with the use of social media. Technical limitations include the unskilled CBS staffs who will need training in the use of social media tools, the risk of compromising sensitive data system of the Centre through hacking or data corruption, etc. Management risks include the unavoidable leakage of office time and resources through unscrupulous and injudicious usage and addiction of staffs to social networking sites in name of communication. But one of the real risks as users of social media for the Centre is the exposure of communication officers to scrutiny from disgruntled enforcement agencies which are affected by the Centre's critical works. For example, Section 3.2.18 of the Royal Civil Service Commission of Bhutan Act

states that “[A] civil servant shall refrain from making any statement of fact or opinion in the media or in any document which may have adverse effects against policies or actions of the Royal Government.” Social media content can be very critical and once in public domain, the Centre will have little control over the course of the ensuing public discourse. Therefore, highly critical public debate may lead to staffs being opened up to scrutiny in line with a narrow interpretation of the civil service act. One final risk is that because social media is inhabited by enlightened and frivolous people in equal measures, the high standard public debate that CBS wants to create may not be always possible.

4. Resources required: Apart from upgrading its current website which needs to incorporate features for more two-way communications, the Centre can use any of the existing commercial/third party platforms, or create its own social media platforms. In both cases, the Centre should consider the scalability of the system and make sure that its choice of platform has the ability to meet growing demand and spikes in demand.

5. Information quality standards and content creation: The Centre should ensure the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information and services provided to the public.

6. Responsiveness: The Centre should be responsive to the feedback of the public while at the same time, retain some control over the course and quality of the nature of public engagement.

7. Measure for success: The Centre should define objective and verifiable measurements of success. One of the common approaches in this regard is tracking user traffic through features like ‘hits,’ ‘likes,’ ‘shares’ and ‘comments.’

8. Governance structure/mechanism: In line with the RGoB policy, the Centre should appoint a senior official to serve as Social Media Lead who is supported by an appropriate unit or individuals (e.g. ICT Officer and/or IMO) in the organization.

Conclusion

As an agent of positive and transformational change, the CBS must not be afraid of assuming a high moral ground, and setting the standard and defining the nature of public discourse on governance and democratization through mediums to which the public have access and are keen participants of. Thus, the Centre must adopt a social media strategy, which will act as a platform for highly informed, constructive and meaningful dialogues with all stakeholders in the nascent Bhutanese democracy. This will not only be in line with the Centre's own mandate, but also help bridge the gap between the government and the people. CBS can thus act as an enlightened medium which enable meaningful dialogue.

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