

Wikipedia as a Tool for GNH

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Introduction

Wikipedia is a free platform for sharing knowledge that fits comfortably within Bhutan's development framework of Gross National Happiness. The online encyclopaedia is a global project run by volunteers that aims to provide *all* the world's knowledge, free to everyone. Its grand vision is to dissolve knowledge hierarchies previously determined by education, economics, culture and geography. While Bhutanese citizens are among the millions worldwide who use English Wikipedia every day as a general reference, Bhutanese attempts to publish about Bhutan have been less successful and pages about Bhutan are mostly written by foreigners. There is also a Dzongkha edition, which has limited pages that remain largely unvisited. The low level of contributions by Bhutanese is partly due to Wikipedia's publishing protocols, which are confusing and can require training, but also the editing culture of the site often is discouraging for newcomers. This paper aims to suggest how Bhutan could benefit from Wikipedia and equally, how Wikipedia could benefit from Bhutan. Wikipedia offers a range of opportunities for education, tourism, language and culture. At the same time, being a digitally-advanced, strongly oral culture, Bhutan could help Wikipedia realise its ambitious aims. First, its citizens would bring a broader perspective,

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grounded in the kingdom's unique worldview that is influenced by its orality, Mahayana Buddhism and Gross National Happiness. Second, both Wikipedia sites – English and Dzongkha - have audio capacities, which are underutilized. This is a wasted opportunity. The Bhutanese have well embraced modern digital technologies, such as WeChat and Facebook, adopting them for culturally specific purposes, and I propose that if key groups within the Bhutanese community were trained in the publishing protocols of Wikipedia, over time they would extend Wikipedia's use of the audio capabilities which would benefit the international community, as well as other oral cultures and differently abled peoples, including dyslexic and blind.

Background

Wikipedia launched in 2001 as an online platform seeking to amass all human knowledge in one place for public benefit. The intellectual wealth of the world was to be collated and freely shared. Using the Internet and new digital technologies for collaboration, Wikipedia was intended to bring a new era of global knowledge equity. In many significant ways it has been outstandingly successful, used by millions daily. It has developed into a site for robust knowledge construction and low-cost dissemination. English Wikipedia is the world's fifth most popular website and there are 301 different language Wikipedias, including Dzongkha (WM, a, nd). By September 2018, 5.7 million articles had been created on the English site by volunteers freely contributing their intellectual labour. Other Internet giants are further embedding Wikipedia as the world's most popular information source. Since 2012 Google have included Fact Boxes in their search results, populated from English Wikipedia pages; and in 2018 YouTube announced it would counter fake news videos with links to Wikipedia (Maher, 2018). This success brings with it power and

ethical responsibilities to ensure accuracy, and that existing global inequalities are not exacerbated or further entrenched on the site.

To this end, Wikipedia faces many challenges. While the site started as ‘anyone can edit’, the power structure that has evolved in Wikipedia reflects its origins in the US technology capital of Silicon Valley. Early contributors accrued administrative privileges and created editing protocols according to *their* needs. Two decades later Wikipedia’s editing community has come to be dominated by white, western men in the Global North, who are likely to be technically skilled, white collar and Christian (Gallert & van der Velden, 2013). As the site operates according to consensus, this skews content towards their world view as well as to first-world topics. Less represented are women, minority groups and countries in the developing world (Ford et al., 2018). Two rules in particular disadvantage these groups - ‘notability’ and ‘verifiability’.

Wikipedia’s rule of ‘notability’ requires that the topic has received significant coverage in reliable sources that are independent of the subject. This policy was intended to avoid ‘indiscriminate inclusion of topics’ and ensure the site is not mis-used for marketing and promotion (W.P. a, nd). But in practice it has created barriers for articles that don't reflect the interests of the editors. Examples of this bias include the last descendant of the Indian Cherokee’s Blue People Clan, Gi-Dee-Thlo-Ah-Ee, who was considered important enough by the Cherokee Nation that it published a book about her, but who was deemed to lack notability by US Wikipedians who deleted her page. In Kenya, Makmende is a cultural figure, similar to Ap Tsara the fictitious wise man who featured as a cartoon in weekly newspaper *Bhutan Observer*. Kenyans tried repeatedly to publish a page about Makmende but because people outside Kenya had not heard of him, an editing war erupted (Bidwell et

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al., 2015, p. 125). Internet researcher Ethan Zuckerman identified this as a serious issue for Wikipedia in an article where he posed the question: ‘What happens when we share a language but not a culture?’⁽²⁰¹⁰⁾

This is similar to the Bhutanese experience where a few contributors identifying as Bhutanese have sought to publish on the site, but for various reasons, have stopped. The most controversial of these was a contributor who created an online identity as Thimphu electrician ‘Kuchen Zimjah’ in 2013 and uploaded audio of himself reading aloud the first page of the Bhutanese passport. In 2015 the page suddenly became popular and received more than 1.7 million hits in one week and triggered an editing war that spilled onto YouTube, where he was accused of being racist and a hoaxer. The episode has become legendary in the world of Wikipedia (DiPalma, 2015; Wens, 2015). Ultimately Zimjah’s audio was removed and replaced by a man with a European accent reading aloud the words on the front page of the Bhutanese passport. Whether ‘Zimjah’ was actually a Bhutanese citizen and whatever his personal motivation for creating the page, the episode is emblematic of both Bhutan’s difficulties trying to publish on the site, as well as Wikipedia’s unrealized audio potential. As ‘Zimjah’ demonstrated, the site has the capacity to include audio on each page, even though it is not a common practice.

Wikipedia’s rule of ‘verifiability’ is equally problematic, requiring that no original material can be included. All the information must first have been published elsewhere. But not all human knowledge has been published or written down in any form. Human knowledge is greater than just printed knowledge and to recognise only what has been printed is to exclude entire cultures, those millions of people for whom knowledge is a living, oral tradition. Oral cultures continue to

thrive using their traditional oral practices in places such as Australia, Africa, India and, of course, Bhutan.

These protocols of notability and verifiability create hurdles for the large percentage of the world who aren't male, white, Christian and born into the print culture of the Global North, and the combative editing culture has created problems with editor renewal and retention (Gallus, 2016). However, these problems are well recognised by the Wikimedia Foundation.

The Wikimedia Foundation

Wikipedia's development is governed by the well-resourced Wikimedia Foundation, which funds the costs of hosting the site online and tries to steer it towards the founders' original noble vision of equality and inclusion. It works in a number of ways to counter the biases of the editing community and address the lack of diversity. The foundation cannot interfere directly with editing decisions on the site, but it wields its influence in other ways. In 2010, the foundation funded a range of projects to improve diversity of gender, ethnicity and geography. (Out of this emerged WikiProject Bhutan which attracted about a dozen, mostly non-Bhutanese contributors, but none appear to be active in 2018 (W.P., c, nd).

In July 2018, for the first time the Wikimedia Foundation held its annual conference on the continent of Africa, as part of its vision for diversity and global inclusion and to push back against the mono-culture of English Wikipedia. There was much discussion around how to include different knowledge systems, how to reduce existing biases and how to design new methods that recognize oral sources. Indian engineer, Siddarth Tripath, is working on a project with illiterate rural communities, recording their elders as oral citations (W.M. b),

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nd). In rural Namibia, researchers worked with the indigenous OvaHerero community of 250,000 people in an experiment to convert local knowledge that had never been written down into oral citations (Gallert et al., 2016). Researchers from the University of Leeds in the UK undertook a project with primary schools in South Africa to bring the knowledge held by local elders onto Wikipedia. Under the oversight of a scientific review committee of South African scholars, the research team interviewed respected elders and published Wikipedia pages about the community that were relevant to the primary school syllabus (Ford et al., 2018). These projects offer models for Bhutan, where local knowledge is extensive, but may not have been written down. A committee of Bhutanese scholars, historians and teachers could be established to confirm locally held knowledge and thereby meet Wikipedia's protocols of verifiability.

The foundation also provides training support and experienced editors to work with cultural institutions. The Wikipedian-in-residence project places editors in museums, galleries and libraries to digitize collections and upload them to the site. Bhutan's museums contain a wealth of historical artefacts that could be photographed and uploaded to the site, accessible to schools wherever there is Internet.

Wikipedia and GNH

GNH provides an ethical framework to consider the benefits of Wikipedia to the community. It comprises of nine domains and are measured according based on these nine domains:

- psychological wellbeing
- health
- education

- time use
- cultural diversity and resilience
- good governance
- community vitality
- ecological diversity and resilience
- living standards

Bhutan could use Wikipedia as a cultural repository and tool for education, as well as a site for community building. This fits well with the two pillars of sustainable socio-economic development and preservation and promotion of culture.

Former Education Minister Thakur S. Powdyel defined culture as: ‘... the way we proclaim our identity and our being - individual, social, national. We express it in the way we are, in our thoughts, in our actions, beliefs and superstitions, songs and dances, sports and games, weights, measures and units, art and architecture, faith and worship, rites and rituals, ceremonies and celebrations, language and customs, food and drinks, name and nomenclature, signs and symbols, dream and world-view’ (2007, p. 51).

Most of the articles about Bhutanese culture have been written by people from Russia, Nepal, India and America. Further, many pages about Bhutan exist on non-English editions of Wikipedia, such as Russian, French, German and Japanese, which are inaccessible to Bhutanese. British computer expert Chris Fynn, who created Dzongkha for Linux and worked with the Dzongkha Development Commission, is a Wikipedia enthusiast and was involved in creating the Dzongkha site in 2008. It had an initial burst of 222 articles, but now lies dormant. Other Wikipedians have called for it to be deleted because it is not being used but Fynn has argued for its retention and has prevailed so far. The Dzongkha site offers

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possibilities for Bhutan to use for its own purposes, without interference from the English Wikipedia community. Each language Wikipedia determines its own rules.

Wikipedia also meets the criteria for the domains of education, cultural diversity and resilience, and community vitality.

Wikipedia pages are constructed according to what Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler calls ‘commons-based peer production’ in which large numbers of people cooperate to produce collective, public goods. Bhutan has a strong history of such volunteer labour: from building Thimphu-Phuntsholing highway in the 1960s (Tshering Tashi 2009) to the construction of lhakhangs throughout the nation.

The site works through contributors congregating around topics that interest them, such as history or architecture or farming methods, creating online communities for like-minded people who are geographically separated. Each page has a ‘talk’ tab on the top right-hand side, which is an online space for discussion about the topic. It operates in some ways like a virtual town square. Anyone with access to the Internet can join in the discussion. This could have wide application in Bhutan, for example: retired civil servants who return to their villages but would still like to contribute their accumulated knowledge in meaningful ways. This form of production is not only sustainable but also efficient, not requiring constant economic subsidization (Benkler, 2006, p. 107) and utilizing the intellectual capital of the nation. His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, referred to this aspect of the country’s wealth in his speech at the 10th convocation of the Royal University of Bhutan in 2015.

'Your education will be a great asset to you, and more importantly, it will be of immense benefit to the country,' His Majesty told graduates. 'It will take a lot of effort to preserve our remarkable heritage, but it will be extremely easy to let it erode. Therefore, it is our duty to nurture, reinforce, and pass down our rich heritage to the succeeding generations.'

Increasingly Wikipedia is being used as a teaching tool worldwide, and as the Internet continues to reach further into Bhutan's more remote areas, this offers educational opportunities. Over 400 universities in the US and Canada and universities in 94 countries outside North America have used Wikipedia in the classroom. Over 6,000 students contributed to Wikipedia as part of the 2016 Year in Science program (McKenzie, 2018). At University of Sydney, medical students update pages about diseases; Indigenous studies students create pages about little-known Aboriginal heroes; architecture students are sent into the community to photograph examples of building styles to upload to existing pages; and chemistry students draw compounds according to Wikipedia protocols. Such examples could provide ideas for educational projects about Bhutanese culture, involving students and their communities. For example, students could be tasked with investigating the histories of their local lhakhangs, including audio recordings of interview with elders, in a range of languages, which could be embedded on the page. This would contribute to cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, as well as strengthen intergenerational bonds.

Publishing to Wikipedia encourages students to develop self-learning and encourage them to continue doing so beyond formal schooling.

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Wikipedia is proving a useful pedagogical tool worldwide, providing an environment where students can learn, test their knowledge, contribute to community knowledge, practice research and develop their writing skills. It offers a real-world environment engaging them with real-world issues while making them accountable to a range of stakeholder views. Rather than students working individually on projects, Wikipedia ‘involves collaborative participation rather than isolationist thinking, and research based on production rather than mere critique’ (Purdy, 2009, p. 365).

Bhutan’s Orality

Bhutan, as a digitally advanced, oral culture offers some new perspectives that could benefit the international community, particularly at this point in media evolution where orality is challenging the dominance of print in developed countries. In Bhutan, orality carries particular value. In Mahayana Buddhism esoteric wisdom and knowledge have been passed from student to teacher by oral transmission in an unbroken lineage from the time of Buddha, more than 2500 years ago, to the present day. Laypeople from outside monasteries may listen to teachings, even without understanding the language the lama is speaking, and gain blessings just from being in the presence of those sounds. It is believed they enter the mind stream, coming to fruition in a later life, according to favourable circumstances and merit. Prayer books used by monks are an adjunct to oral transmissions. They are not interchangeable. The power of the spoken *mantra* also transcends the surface meaning and seed syllables on their own carry spiritual significance.

Even after the introduction of writing, the oral tradition continued as a primary medium for the transmission of

Buddhist teachings. Buddhist scriptures are still committed to memory and a large portion of the meditation instructions are transmitted only orally and have never been written down. Today, the class of orally transmitted instructions, known as 'ear transmission' (snyan brgyud) constitute some of the most esoteric and powerful teachings. Similarly, oral methods such as authorization reading (lung) exposition ('chad pa) and debate (rtsod pa) dominate Himalayan Buddhist pedagogy and systems of examination. Thus, the Buddhist tradition is still an oral tradition (Karma Phuntsho, 2007, pp. 23-4).

This recognition of the sacredness of orality influences both the way Bhutanese view the world as well as their individual daily media practices.

'Although numerous media systems are at our disposal today to share and disseminate information, oral transaction is still very popular. It is a major and perhaps the most favoured conveyance for information. Hence, some modern mass media have effectively replicated the audio-visual qualities of oral communication. The television media to which our population is strongly attracted, for instance, is largely a mechanised extension of the oral practice, where speaker has much greater coverage and the audience remains distant and passive' (Karma Phuntsho, 2006, p. 24).

The modern media landscape reflects Bhutan's orality. Folk tales, lama dances and songs - with their inherent oral orientation - date back to the Zhabdrung Rinpoche and beyond but are still living traditions. While *Kuensel* has played a crucial role in the development of Bhutanese civic life, and continues to do so, and more recently independent newspapers have created a space for themselves, their reach is comparatively small, as successive media impact studies have

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consistently shown. Both radio and television are popular, but where connectivity is possible, mobile phones have been almost universally adopted (MIS, 2003, MIS, 2008, BIMIS, 2013, BIMIS, 2017). It is clear from these studies that in the past 15 years, Bhutan has embraced all that the online, digital world has to offer: mobile phones, the Internet and social media platforms. In 2018, 64.8 percent of households have access to the Internet, more than 63 per cent own a smart phone and 4G is available in the larger cities (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2017, p. 77).

According to Tshering Dorji, Bhutan's rich oral traditions are still almost intact, and many villagers are making a direct transition from an oral society to the age of digital communication (2010, p. 93). Citizens who may not be print literate are still well able to use smart phones (Tashi Dema, 2014) and contribute to public discourse via Facebook in their regional languages. In June 2018, while visiting Bhutan, this researcher observed voice-driven phone apps such as WeChat and WhatsApp being widely used in culturally specific ways, such as crowdfunding temple construction in the village of Mongar; distributing oral recordings of village elders; laypeople taking time each day or week to participate in Ngondro teachings with Lamas; political discussion groups; and students abroad staying connected to family groups. Digital media has provided a public space for nation building, public discourse and cultural reinforcement, that allows for a range of literacies. Facebook has become a vital site for social interaction and public discussion and Twitter is a powerful tool for political discourse. Social researcher Gyambo Sithey analysed the use of social media during elections and concluded that it plays a significant role and is now a feature of the Bhutanese political landscape. Of the 2013 election he wrote: 'Thanks to the overarching influence of social media sites, the battle was equally fought at campaign meetings in

remote communities as well as via Facebook and Twitter in urban towns. Every statement made by candidates were scrutinized threadbare on social media; updates on internet containing political accusations were relayed instantly to village meetings. Political parties hurled allegations and counter allegations on a daily basis on Facebook' (p. 230).

The Bhutanese experience doesn't conform to Western notions of literacy. Print literacy was measured at 71.4% in 2017 (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2017), but that recognizes only that those citizens can read and write a short text in any language. It doesn't measure the penetration of print or reading and writing *into* the culture. For some Bhutanese, digital literacy is providing a bridge to print literacy, while for others, it is making print literacy irrelevant to participation in civic life.

In ways that are perhaps unique to Bhutan, the oral aspects of its culture continue to be at the forefront of community life and this is particularly significant as we move further into the digital age. Where the Western world has privileged print over orality, digital literacy is challenging that status. Danish scholars Tom Pettitt, Lars Ole Sauerberg and others have suggested that the digital era is bringing with it a return to the ways of thinking and being of oral cultures. 'Looking from the larger historical vantage, it almost appears as if we are returning to the verbal orientation that preceded the triumph of print' (Birkets, 1994). Sauerberg called it the 'Gutenberg parenthesis', named after the inventor of the printing press and defining the Gutenberg era as a period from the 15th to the 20th centuries as effectively bookmarking the textual era. Pettit went so far as to declare that period as merely a blip, an interruption to the usual flow of human communication, arguing that the web is returning us to our ways of thinking and being in the world which reflected our oral traditions:

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flowing and ephemeral (2009). Others have made similar observations.

The Chief Executive Officer of Twitter Dick Costolo said: 'The expanding 'social media' of blogs and even more recently Facebook and Twitter (and others are emerging as this is being written) are restoring the 'unfiltered, multi-directional exchange of information' characteristic of earlier times (2010, as quoted by Viner, 2013).

'If you look at human communication over a longer period than just the past generation or two, it becomes obvious that one-way, broadcast-style 'mass media' isn't the norm at all — instead, the norm is interpersonal or multi-directional communication that shares a lot more with social media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook. Rather than creating a new communication style, we are actually returning to one' (Ingram, 2013).

Bhutan straddles the two worlds - both a digitally advanced society, which is thoroughly modern in its adoption of modern media, as well as an oral culture.

Conclusion

Unlike printed encyclopaedias, Wikipedia pages are never finished. They are continually being updated and added to, giving collective ownership to the contributors. While print logic is fixed, the ontology of Wikipedia is more fluid, ever evolving as a dynamic, amorphous, network of facts and information and collaboration. It is always an incomplete project, ready to be shaped by new information and new contributors. It sits at the intersection of print and non-print logics and as a digitally advanced, highly oral society, so does

Bhutan. Both manage to accommodate these competing ontologies, which come less naturally to Western cultures that are deeply print-based. While Wikipedia's aim is to provide free public infrastructure of information, perhaps equally important is how it manages those tensions – orality versus literacy in the brave new world of the digital that we have entered, which is a topic of current media scholarship.

Wikipedia has a lot to offer Bhutan –

- as a historical and cultural repository, reflecting and reinforcing its own culture
- a low-cost teaching resource, accessible to schools in remote areas
- a way to present to the world accurate information, ie: Bhutan's own perspective on its culture and history
- a platform for the development of Dzongkha
- a site of inclusion for all Bhutanese languages
- participation in a global knowledge project

Equally, Bhutan has a lot to offer Wikipedia. As well as bringing greater ethnic diversity and better representation from Asia, Bhutan's unique worldview reflects its strong orality, which sits comfortably alongside its use of digital media technologies. If Bhutan as a society chose to embrace Wikipedia, using it to serve its own cultural needs, it could also provide new insights into current practices – both on the massive, highly-competitive and robust English site, as well as how it might develop the Dzongkha site. Further, the Bhutanese can demonstrate new ways that Wikipedia can utilize its audio and video capabilities to include oral cultures. This could have wide application for the international community as well as serving the original vision of the Wikimedia founders for global inclusion and the representation of *all* the world's wisdom.

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