Watching the Words: A Situational Analysis of Self-censorship in Bhutanese Media

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Abstract

Self-censorship in journalism is a global phenomenon. Against the rapidly changing media landscape, experts have posed self-censorship as a severe threat to the future of journalism. Bhutan is no exception. There are no empirical studies conducted in the country on self-censorship in Bhutanese media. Therefore, the paper attempts to examine the perceptions and practices of self-censorship and its characteristics in the media society, especially after the country transitioned to a constitutional democratic monarchy. It also tries to understand the situation for policy interventions to empower the media in fostering a healthy democratic society. For the study, the paper views *self-censorship* as the act of journalists limiting or ignoring a story or parts of a story for various reasons and not limited to external threats or the fear of negative repercussions. Sixty-one journalists, including freelancers, were interviewed online during the study. Based on their accounts, there is a common consensus that self-censorship is an issue in Bhutan. But it is not a result of an oppressive media environment as journalists generally enjoy professional freedom in covering various topics. Instead, it is exercised more like a coping mechanism to professional demands and consequences such as protecting sources and avoiding prosecutions. Moreover, journalists also self-censor as an ethically guided judgement. At the same time, the results suggest that agencies concerned could reduce the instances of self-censorship in the Bhutanese media fraternity through specific interventions.

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Introduction

Censorship is inherent in the world of journalism. Every step of producing news content - from deciding on headlines to choosing visuals/pictures and audio clips - requires conscious choices and decisions. The practice is as old as journalism as Jürgen Wilke, in his book 'Censorship and Freedom of the Press', writes that censorship as a means of controlling communication has existed since classical antiquity (Wilke, 2013).

Commonly, people interpret censorship in journalism as withholding information or expressions by journalists/newsrooms for various reasons, including editorial policies.

Self-censorship can be defined as further condensed censorship by journalists based on individual rulings. Tony Harcup's 'A Dictionary of Journalism' defines self-censorship as a process whereby journalists avoid reporting specific stories, sources, allegations, arguments, or opinions for fear that doing so might land them in some kind of trouble or difficulty (Harcup, 2014).

For Bhutan, the issue of self-censorship becomes more relevant as a democratic society. Since the country transitioned to a constitutional democratic monarchy in 2008, the role of media has evolved as the fourth pillar of democracy. It has become the chief purveyor of information and viewpoints on public affairs (Journalists' Association of Bhutan, 2014). Media is society's watchdog that people look upon for reliable news and hold their elected leaders accountable. Moreover, Article 7(5) of the Constitution articulates the importance of media for a democratic Bhutan through the freedom it guarantees. But if journalists find themselves in an ethical dilemma of using the information in hand, it could translate to an ill-informed citizenry. In an article for Civil Liberties Union for Europe,

Jonathan Day (2021) states that in a democracy, self-censorship becomes a significant threat and stifles the free flow of information and restricts knowledge and understanding (Day, 2021).

According to Reporters Without Borders, an international non-profit and non-governmental organisation, the level of self-censorship continues to be high in the land of "gross national happiness" because many journalists avoid covering sensitive issues for fear of appearing to challenge the social order (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). In the World Press Freedom Index, although Bhutan moved two places up to 65 in 2021 from the previous year, it is still categorised as 'orange' (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). It means media in the country operate in a problematic environment. Moreover, the earlier reports by Reporters Without Borders have repeatedly highlighted self-censorship as a common issue among Bhutanese journalists and described the situation as stifling.

Similarly, a situational assessment by the Journalists' Association of Bhutan in 2014 found that 58 percent of working journalists felt "unsafe" covering critical stories, fearing reprisal (Journalists'Association of Bhutan, 2014, p. 7).

Against the backdrop of these situations, it is imperative to explore further the areas of journalists' self-censorship and possible interventions to address the issue. Moreover, an in-depth understanding of the issue will be equally significant to chart interventions as press freedom groups habitually refer to self-censorship as one of the key indicators in their yearly country reports (Skjerdal, 2010, p. 100).

This paper is an effort to understand the pulse of self-censorship, its perceptions, practices, and characteristics in the Bhutanese media. It also provides specific interventions required from the viewpoint of Bhutanese journalists to resolve the issue.

Literature Review

Censorship – A Historical Perspective

The modern meaning of the word 'censor' is often drawn from the censor office established in ancient Rome, around 443 BC. One of the tasks of the office was to supervise public morality. The Romans believed that the ideal of good governance included moulding people's character. Thus, in his article 'A Short History of Censorship', Leighton Grey writes that censorship was considered an honourable task (Grey, 2021).

Many authors cite the case of Socrates concerning the ancient view of censorship. The Athenian Court sentenced him to drink poison (hemlock) for the crime of worshipping strange gods and the corruption of youth (Shalako, n.d.). However, Socrates chose to die. He did not want to live in a world where his teachings and beliefs were censored and punished.

As free speech became a challenge for the custodians of Christian orthodoxy, the history of censorship can also be viewed through the Church. Leighton Grey writes that to protect the Christian doctrine from dissenting threats, the Church introduced measures such as the Nicene Creed - the defining statement of belief of mainstream Christianity - promulgated in 325 AD (Grey, 2021).

The need for censorship heightened in the mid-15th century with the invention of the printing press. Although printing aided the Catholic Church and its mission (Newth, 2010), various authors printed many books that challenged the Church and its beliefs. Countering such, the Roman Catholic Church started issuing an Index of Prohibited Books, a practice that was abolished in 1966. The Church banned the books for their heretical or ideologically dangerous content (Newth, 2010). Earlier studies often portray Galileo as one of the most famous authors the Church banned. The Catholic Church put the physicist/astronomer on trial for believing that the Earth revolves around the sun. On the contrary, the Church

orthodoxy stated that the Earth was the centre of the universe and immovable.

After printing, countries started establishing a regular postal service that fostered communication. It immediately became a universally used system to communicate between people and countries. Consequently, the postal service also played a crucial role as an instrument of censorship in many countries, particularly in times of war (Newth, 2010). Governments inspected the mails coming in and leaving the country to stop an enemy from corresponding with the allies. Gradually, governments introduced postal control in the military regimes of many countries mainly to expose military secrets and find out soldiers' confidence.

The advent of the printing machine gave way to more publications of newsletters and newspapers. It further empowered the literate people regarding access to information and its demand. But it also increased the state's concern that unlimited access to information would harm society and public morals, especially during war or other crises (Grey, 2021). Thus, governments continued to inspect the contents and either blocked or changed them and ensured that only the information they deemed befitting to the public was published. In many countries, censorship meant that authorities could shut down uncooperative media outlets, or they could send unruly editors and journalists in exile or even jail or murder them (Bennet & Naim, 2015).

When the internet was born, many people thought and argued that it would ultimately lead to the death of censorship. Supposedly, they believed that technologies would make it difficult for governments to regulate the flow of information. Today, many governments are routing around the liberating effects of the internet. They are redacting critical news and building state media brands. They are also creating more subtle tools to complement the blunt instruments of attacking journalists (Bennet & Naim, 2015).

In a nutshell, censorship has followed the free expression of men and women like a shadow throughout history (Grey, 2021).

Understanding Self-censorship in Journalism

Ramadan Çipuri, in 'Reasons of Self-censorship Landscape for Journalists', writes that censorship and self-censorship are parts of the same vicious circle (Çipuri, 2015, p. 75). It means that self-censorship is a result of censorship, and the fact there is self-censorship proves that there is an existing outer pressure for censorship. While the word 'self' emphasises individual agency, 'censorship' indicates the presence of an external force that imposes itself on an individual or a collective (Schimpfössl et al., 2020, p. 1-2).

In journalism, self-censorship is an inescapable fact and a widely studied subject. All journalism contains elements of self-censorship of varying degrees brought about through reporting, editing and selecting information and details to include or omit in the final published product (Morris, 2016, p. 8).

Many authors have defined self-censorship based on the social, political, and cultural aspects of a society where individuals practice journalism.

Ricardo Morris defines self-censorship as suppressing or restricting words by an individual rather than an authority to avoid adverse reactions. He states that it is a free-speech restriction that official actors do not carry out. Instead, a person or entity responsible for producing a piece of creative expression applies it to prevent any perceived adverse reaction to that expression (Morris, 2016, p. 8).

Similarly, Jonathan Day defines self-censorship as choosing not to say something that could be important for the public because of the facts or because it could spark a public debate. Although he considers self-censorship a voluntary act, he says journalists often do it out of fear or pressure (Grey, 2021).

Self-censorship is a compromise act of a creative personality's internal will to suit the theoretical context of power so that it can always be “correct” with daily politics (Çipuri, 2015, p. 77).

But defining self-censorship may not be essentially forthright. For example, Terje S. Skjerdal, in his article ‘Justifying Self-censorship: A Perspective from Ethiopia’ writes that it stretches from a broad understanding, seeing self-censorship as an everyday practice for any journalist anywhere in the world, caused by the inevitable selection and de-selection processes while reporting and editing; to a narrow definition, entailing only those practices journalists perform for the sake of excluding information from publicity due to felt threats by public authorities (Skjerdal, 2010, p. 99).

This brings us to view self-censorship as an ethical facet of the profession; its application as a sound editorial judgement. Today, all journalism articles go through editing or other practical changes and decisions to conform with the newsroom code of ethics drafted with internationally accepted practices. According to Aidan White, this is not self-censorship. When well-trained, free-thinking professionals decide to exercise self-censorship, it becomes the bedrock of journalism at its best (White, 2014).

The act of self-censorship portrays failure or weakness and willpower, and courage. For people to successfully negotiate their social world, they must have the ability to suppress their private feelings and thoughts (Miller, 2006).

Self-censorship, Journalism, and Democracy

All democratic societies are built on a foundation of freedom, individual rights, and responsibilities. A free, independent, and vibrant media is essential to all democracies as a mechanism to ascertain that these rights are protected and respected in practice (Journalists’Association of Bhutan, 2014, p. 27). So, when journalists compromise the freedom and vitality by the act of self-censorship by journalists, it puts the institution of democracy at stake.

The impact of self-censorship in a democracy can be looked at through the lens of the media's roles. The media are essential in informing and mobilising voters and facilitating two-way communication between citizens and those vying for electoral offices during elections. It allows citizens to get information on various issues from the contenders, which informs their electoral decisions (Walulya & Nassanga, 2020).

In the journal article ‘Media in Democratic Bhutan’, Tuhina Sarkar writes that unbiased and independent reporting by the media help the public to make well-informed decisions and avoid inconsistency in governance (Sarkar, 2013). But when journalists choose not to share the information deemed necessary for people, they deprive the electorate of an opportunity to make sound judgments.

Free and independent media - a license to express opinions and understandings - is more than exercising the fundamental rights of journalists. According to Jonathan Day, it also helps others enjoy theirs by sparking public debate, increasing the free and open exchange of ideas, and informing people about important issues so they can make good choices when it's time to vote (Day, 2021).

It must be underscored that ethical censorship over topics related to national interests guides self-censorship in any form of government. For instance, it is not unusual or inappropriate for journalists to censor information at a personal level that would risk national security or sovereignty. However, Aidan White argues that sometimes journalism gets swept into the practice of self-censorship by misplaced notions of national interest and patriotism (White, 2014).

Why self-censorship?

Many people view self-censorship as both good and bad. As much as it is a deterrent to the free flow of information, it is also a check and balance system that confines a journalist within morality. Balancing the right to speech against other

legitimate concerns is a perennial issue (Baltussen & Davis, 2015).

In the same vein, Ramadan Çipuri states that self-censorship appears as something “good” and “bad” according to its effects. For example, it is seen as ‘good’ when it influences restricting the passions of individuals who are against moral and social norms of society. Still, it is pretty different when it turns into a cloned individual who follows him and warns him that he should not make any ideological mistake (Çipuri, 2015, p. 75).

So, why do journalists choose to restrict expressions or information?

There are different factors as Ramadan Çipuri refers to Professor Randal Marlin’s explanations, who classifies self-censorship into four areas.

First, self-censorship is a survival strategy and a coping mechanism. One common motive is economic, which could vary from the survival of a newspaper or magazine to simply fattening an already healthy revenue. Other reasons might be political or involve the desire to preserve one's life, health, or job (Çipuri, 2015, p. 79).

Then it is viewed through the different levels at which self-censorship takes place - individual and institution. The decisions are more inclined towards personal beliefs or self-defence at a personal level. In the latter case, a higher authority within a newspaper rules against publication approved at a lower level (Çipuri, 2015, p. 79).

The reasons for self-censorship can also be concerning the form it takes. For example, to accommodate a publisher's known bias, a reporter might use words such as ‘regime’ instead of ‘government’ against their better journalistic judgement (Çipuri, 2015, p. 79).

Aidan White describes fear as one of the main factors influencing self-censorship. When a journalist or editor makes an editorial decision over a story and its contents motivated by the threat of reprisal – whether from the state, the police, the owner, or the advertiser – it is nothing to do with the principles of good journalism (White, 2014).

In the foreword of his book, 'Animal Farm', George Orwell writes that the most disturbing thing related to censorship is that it is voluntary in many cases (Orwell, 1945).

According to Jack Fuller, some of the reasons and justifications for self-censorship within news organisations include the interests of decency, taste, avoidance of unnecessary harm, to keep from whipping up a violent situation, or even at the behest of the government to protect secret operations (Fuller, 1996).

Terje S. Skjerdal also states that self-censorship is essential and justified as a survival means for journalists and media organisations alike. Self-imposed censorship has made it possible to resume journalistic practices in unstable societies, even to the extent that it is essential for survival (Skjerdal, 2010).

Methodology

As an empirical attempt to determine the perceptions and practice of self-censorship and its characteristics in the Bhutanese media, the paper followed a quantitative approach.

As of 2021, 66 full-time journalists and 16 freelance journalists are registered with the Journalists' Association of Bhutan. The unofficial records, including full-time journalists not registered with the Association, account for a little over 100 journalists. Therefore, the initial target was to cover as many working journalists as possible. However, given the limited time to analyse and produce this paper, the first 61 responses were considered for the study. Keeping the total population of Bhutanese journalists at 100, the sample size of 61

respondents represents a confidence level of 95 percent and an eight percent margin of error.

The survey questionnaire was shared with the respondents online using Google Forms. The questions were broadly classified under the themes of freedom in covering stories, professional priorities, approaches to stories, reasons to avoid stories, and understanding of relevant legal frameworks. Since the study gathered opinions and attitudes, it consisted of 5-point Likert scale questions and closed and open-ended questions.

The survey also included two Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and a Council in the media fraternity through open-ended questions. It was to understand their outlook on the issue and action-plan, if any. However, only the two CSOs responded.

As people outside Bhutan have studied self-censorship in journalism widely, the paper reviewed international literature to contextualise the topic and analyse the responses.

Results

Of the 61 respondents involved, 60.7 percent (n=37) were male and 39.3 percent (n=34) female. The majority were reporters from the corporate sector (BBS & Kuensel), as the figure below represents.

Figure 1. Organization-wise distribution of respondents

A Consensus of Self-censorship

A whopping 86.9 percent (n=53) of the respondents said self-censorship is an issue in Bhutan, but it was not an issue for the rest (13.1%). Most of them were in the corporate sector, which could be due to the country's nominal size of the private media.

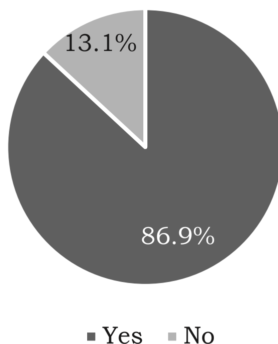


Figure 2. Percentage of self-censorship perception

Female journalists viewed self-censorship as a concern slightly more than their counterparts. Despite the fewer female respondents, 91.7 percent (n=22) of them said 'Yes'. On the other hand, 84 percent (n=31) of the total male respondents said self-censorship is a concern, as depicted below.

Table 1. *Gender-wise response to self-censorship as an issue*

Gender	**Total Respondents**	**Yes**	**Percentage (%)**
Female	24	22	91.7%
Male	37	31	84%

Knowing Why

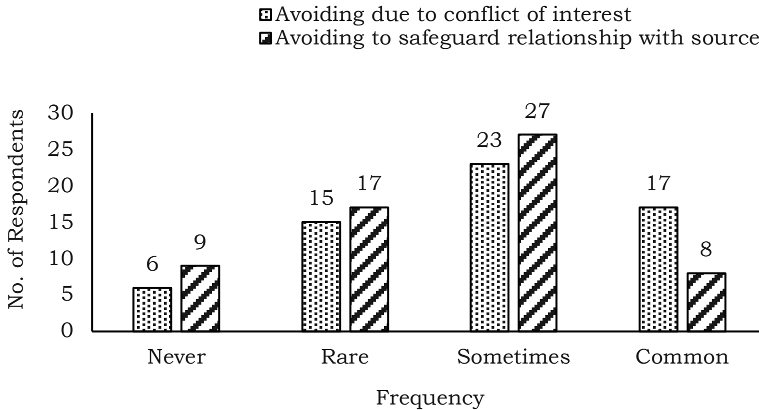


Figure 3. Reasons to avoid stories

As shown in Figure 3, the risk of hurting their relationship with the source was a familiar reason for journalists to evade a story. 44.3 percent (n=27) of the respondents 'sometimes' avoided stories for this reason, while it was 'common' for 13.1 percent (n=8). On the other hand, 14.8 percent (n=9) of the journalists never avoided a story because it could hurt the relationship with the source. 27.9 percent (n=17) said it was 'rare'.

Likewise, if stories conflict with interest, 27.9 percent of the respondents (n=17) said it was common for them not to do such stories. In the same vein, 37.7 percent (n=23) said 'sometimes' they do so, and for 24.6 percent (n=15), it was 'rare'. 9.8 percent (n=6) never avoided stories because of conflicting interests (Figure 3).

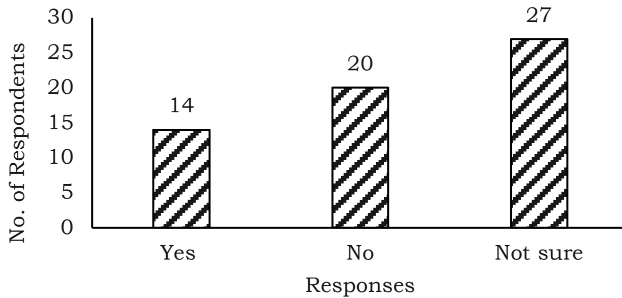


Figure 4. Understanding of legal provisions to protect sources

The majority (44.3%) of the journalists surveyed were unsure of a legal mechanism to safeguard their sources. Likewise, 32.8 percent (n=20) said no laws protect the sources, while 23 percent (n=14) reported laws concerning the matter (Figure 4).

As represented in Figure 4, 60.7 percent of the journalists said they sometimes dropped story ideas because the audience/readers might find it too difficult to understand. It happened pretty often among 9.8 percent of the respondents.

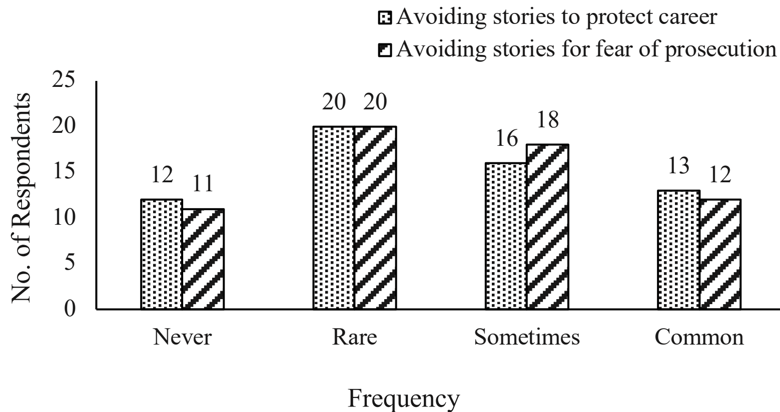


Figure 5. Reasons to avoid stories

Figure 5 shows that 19.4 percent (n=12) of the respondents said it was common to avoid stories for fear of civil lawsuits or criminal prosecution. On the other hand, 29 percent (n=18) reported ‘sometimes’, 33.9 percent (n=20) said ‘rare’, and 17.7 percent (n=11) said ‘never’.

Similarly, it was common for 21.3 percent (n=13) of the respondents to avoid stories that could hurt their career, while 26.2 percent (n=16) did it ‘sometimes’. Meanwhile, evading stories for fear of risking one's career was 'rare' for 32.8 percent (n=20) of the respondents, and 19.7 (n=12) said ‘never’.

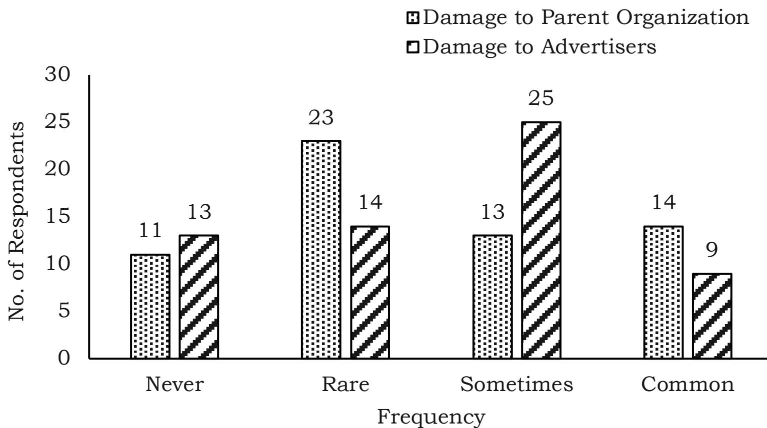


Figure 6. Reasons to avoid stories

23 percent (n=14) of the journalists interviewed said it was common for them not to pursue news stories because of their danger of causing damage to one's parent organisation. Likewise, 21.3 percent (n=13) considered the option sometimes. Nevertheless, it was a rare phenomenon for 37.7 percent (23), and 18 percent (n=11) had never done it (Figure 6).

It was also common for 14.3 percent (n=9) of the respondents to avoid doing a story that could adversely affect their

advertisers. 39.7 percent (n=25) reported 'sometimes' while 23.8 percent (n=13) said 'never'. (Figure 6).

Freedom Awareness

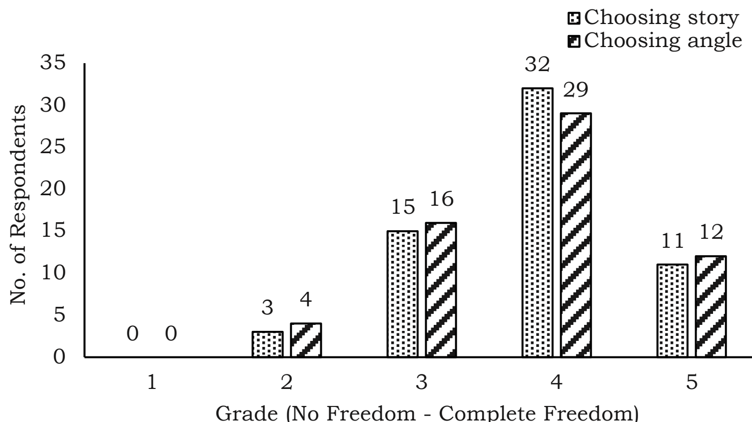


Figure 7. Freedom in choosing story and angle

52.5 percent (n=32) of the respondents said they enjoyed a great deal of freedom, followed by 18 percent (n=11) who enjoyed complete freedom in selecting news stories. Likewise, 47.5 percent (n=29) had a great deal of freedom, and 19.7 percent (had complete freedom in choosing the aspects of a story to focus on, in other words, story angles.

As shown in the following figure, 54.1 percent (n=33) of the interviewees agreed that overall, the media in Bhutan is free to publish revelations concerning political power, while 45.9 (n=28) percent said otherwise. Regarding stories about corruption, 60.7 percent (n=37) reported that the press could cover such stories, while 39.3 percent (n=24) disagreed.

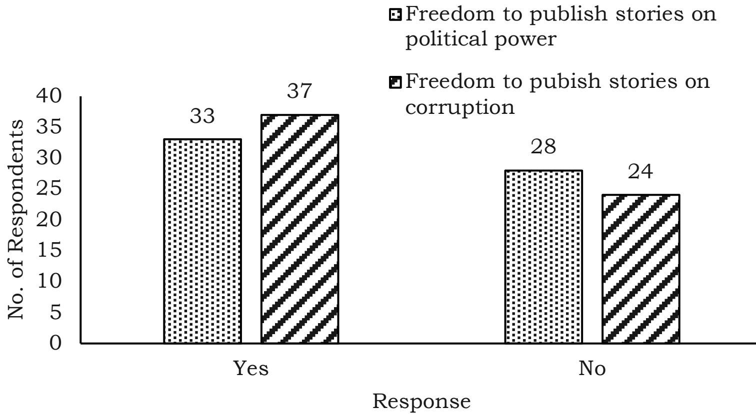


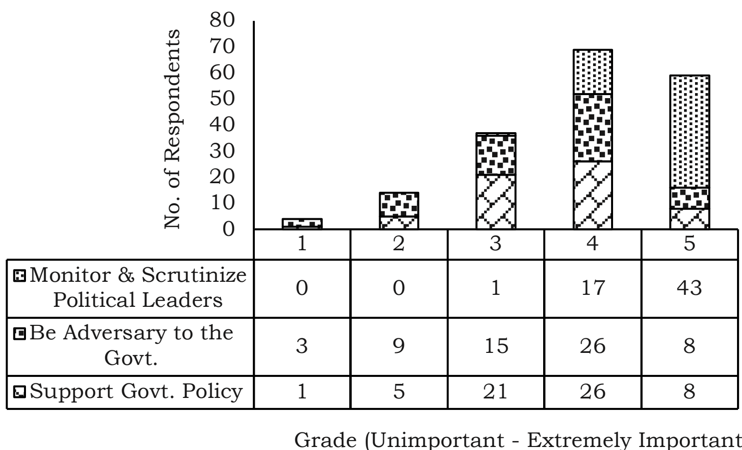
Figure 8. Freedom to publish stories

Journalists are also aware of the legal provisions in the Constitution that protects them. For example, 65.6 percent (n=40) agreed that the Constitution guarantees freedom of information and expression. On the other hand, 23 percent (n=14) were unsure, and 11.5 percent (n=7) said 'No'.

Setting Priorities

In terms of priorities, most of the journalists surveyed felt it is vital to report things as they are – facts, provide an analysis of current affairs and support national development.

The figure below explains that although 42.6 percent (n=26) of the respondents said it is important to support government policy, 70.5 percent (n=43) reported that monitoring and scrutinising political leaders are imperative. By the same token, 42.6 percent (n=26) believe it is crucial to be an adversary to the government. Meanwhile, 19.7 percent (12) either felt 'little important' or 'unimportant' to be an adversary to the government.



	1	2	3	4	5
Monitor & Scrutinize Political Leaders	0	0	1	17	43
Be Adversary to the Govt.	3	9	15	26	8
Support Govt. Policy	1	5	21	26	8

Figure 9. Priorities while covering stories

Likewise, 44.3 percent (n=27) of the respondents said it is crucial to provide news that attracts vast audience/readers, which means news that matters. However, for 8.2 percent (n=5), it was of little importance.

As represented in Figure 10, generally, the respondents (91.8%) agree it is essential that a journalist or a news organisation always adhere to the code of professional ethics regardless of the situation and context.

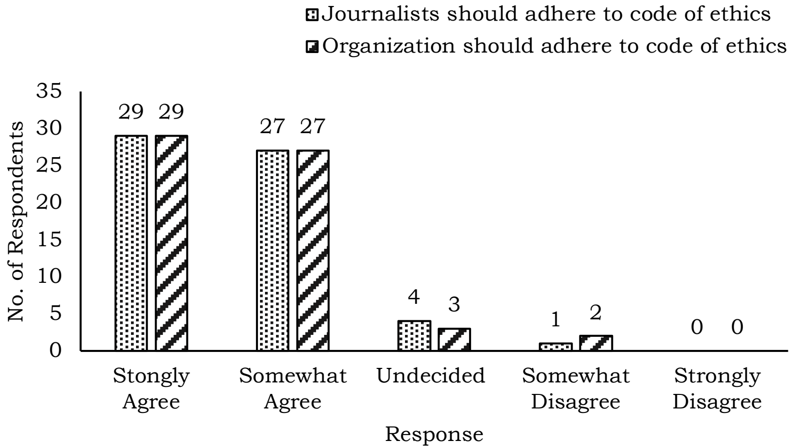


Figure 10. Importance of following code of ethics

Riding on Experience

37.7 percent (n=23) of the respondents believe that experience impacts the practice of self-censorship. And 36 percent (n=22) said it does not, and 21.3 percent (n=13) were unsure.

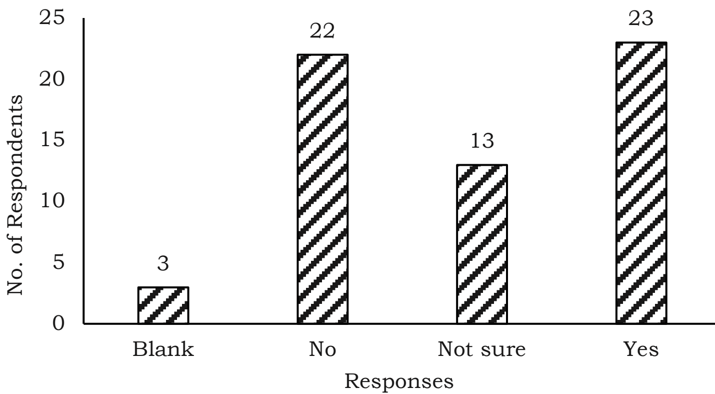


Figure 11. Impact of experience on self-censorship

A common reason among the respondents who said self-censorship decreased with experience was the "relationship that develops with the sources over the years", cemented by "trust". Besides, the "confidence" and the "credibility" to tackle more critical stories also grows.

On the other hand, some respondents said as journalists become more experienced, self-censorship is more common because they are "aware of the consequences in covering certain stories" or "sharing particular information."

From the media CSOs

Both the CSO respondents agreed that there is some form of self-censorship among Bhutanese journalists. One of them said it is not due to the "oppressive media environment" but mainly because Bhutanese media is "highly sensitive to the vulnerabilities of society" that media professionals end up "unnecessarily" self-censoring issues. They said addressing the problem could be "challenging" without "stringent rules" to protect journalists. At the same time, a respondent reported that self-censorship must be "exercised with caution". "Too much self-censorship, and it will impact the freedom of media. Too little self-censorship and the media will push highly sensitive boundaries, such as national security and communal harmony".

Discussions

At the outset, Bhutanese journalists enjoy professional freedom. Most of them agree that they are free to choose the stories to cover and publish news regarding politics and corruption. Nevertheless, self-censorship is an issue among them. Contrary to the situations in some countries, an oppressive environment such as direct political pressures or threats to the lives of journalists does not influence it. Self-censorship in Bhutan fits with Ricardo Morris' definition as suppressing or restricting words by an individual rather than an authority to avoid adverse reactions (Morris, 2016). It is also voluntary (Orwell, 1945).

From the findings, Bhutanese journalists exercising self-censorship may be understood in the following contexts:

Self-censorship to Protect Sources

It can be surmised that self-censorship among journalists exists more as an act of protecting the sources. It is further explained as most respondents feel that a legal mechanism that ensures the safety and confidentiality of the sources does not exist in the country. Today, going by the Law, a Court can ask a journalist to reveal their source(s) or accept the punishment if the journalist decides not to adhere to the Court's order. Therefore, journalists could omit vital information that might put their sources in a tight spot. It aligns with Professor Dale T Miller's view of self-censorship as a portrayal of willpower and courage (Miller, 2006). It could also be a means to avoid unnecessary harm (Fuller, 1996). As senior TV news director Glenn Halbrooks mentions in his article 'How Media Censorship Affects the News You See', journalists protect the identities of their anonymous sources due to the fear of retaliation. This is especially important when informants are placed highly in governments or corporations with direct access to critical information (Halbrooks, 2020).

In October 2021, in an alleged case of the Indian government using surveillance software to spy on journalists, activists and political opponents, its Supreme Court emphasised the importance of protecting sources. The Court stated that having no protection might deter sources from assisting journalists in informing people on matters of public interest. This would be an "assault" on the role of media as a "vital public watchdog". Protection of sources is an "important and necessary corollary" of freedom of media (Sinha, 2021).

Such interventions and interpretations, whenever necessary, could provide impetus to the survival of a vibrant media and prompt the exercise of journalistic rights, as mentioned in the Journalists' Association of Bhutan's Code of Ethics. As per the Code, a journalist shall have the right to protect their sources'

identities and work documents (notepads and all electronic devices related to newsgathering) (Code of Ethics, 2020).

Self-censorship to Avoid Prosecution

Article 7(5) of the Constitution of Bhutan guarantees the freedom of the press. However, some reporters avoid covering stories for fear of civil lawsuits or criminal prosecution. Furthermore, irrespective of the organisation being corporate or private, it is pretty typical for some journalists to avoid stories that could cause damage to the parent company or its advertisers. So, it may be concluded that the motive for self-censorship among Bhutanese journalists also includes the threat of reprisal (White, 2014) and economic (Çipuri, 2015).

Many respondents maintained that access to information should be improved to address self-censorship. This raises the need for a Right to Information (RTI) Act. The process to formulate the Bill started as early as 2008, but it is yet to see the light of day. It gained momentum in 2014 when the National Assembly passed the RTI Bill 2014. However, the National Council (NC) did not deliberate the Bill as the House did not get its presentation from the information and communications ministry (Subba, 2016).

Self-censorship as Sound Editorial Judgment

Self-censorship in Bhutanese media can also be an act of sound editorial judgement. The majority of the respondents agree that journalists and news organisations must adhere to professional codes of ethics. According to some respondents, for topics such as monarchy, “as a citizen of the country”, it is their “responsibility to protect the privacy or maintain the sanctity of the institution”. Others opined that self-censorship should represent “right thought, opinion, and action” for “the greater and long term good of the society”. Moreover, journalists or editorial teams censoring details of rape victims or convicted minors is ethically justified and an internationally accepted practice. It means that, at times, editorial policy and censorship made freely by well-trained, free-thinking professionals (White, 2014) guide the decisions to exercise self-

censorship. It is an everyday practice (Skjerdal, 2010), a phenomenon caused by inevitable selection and de-selection processes while reporting and editing (Skjerdal, 2010).

Besides, self-censorship in the Bhutanese context may not necessarily be choosing not to say something that could be important for the public because of the facts or because it could spark a public debate (Day, 2021). This is considering that most respondents reported that it is imperative to report things as they are and provide an analysis of current affairs. It is also important for journalists to scrutinise political leaders and be adversaries to the government. For example, in November 2021, Kuensel - the national newspaper - carried a series of stories taking the finance minister to task for utilising the General Reserve Fund (GRF) to meet the normal capital expenditure of gewogs in Paro Dzongkhag (Dema, 2021). But this was not in line with the guidelines for using GRF. Other news organisations, including private papers, also covered the news stirring discussions among different levels of the society to the extent that it was raised and discussed in the Parliament.

Self-censorship at all levels

All journalism contains elements of self-censorship of varying degrees (Morris, 2016) and balancing the right to speech against other legitimate concerns is a perennial issue (Baltussen & Davis, 2015). So, experience may not necessarily determine the level of self-censorship for Bhutanese journalists. According to the respondents, with experience, the “ability” to handle situations and topics and the “confidence” to analyse a subject's sensitivity grow; at the same time, being a “close-knit society” and the ever-present “fear of oppression and criticism” provoke self-censorship even among senior journalists.

Limitation

Self-censorship is a concept that is difficult to measure in absolute terms and harder to detect because it is embedded in

us (Chng et al., 2017). Moreover, unlike censorship at an institutional level, self-censorship at an individual level is not visible because the discretion to do so is internalised. Therefore, the findings of this paper may be used to establish a general understanding of self-censorship and the common factors affecting its exercise among Bhutanese journalists, but not necessarily to measure the level of its existence.

Conclusion

The paper establishes that Bhutanese journalists undergo some form of self-censorship. However, the circumstances under which they apply it are not essentially brought forth by a challenging media environment. There are neither blatant attempts by the government and other agencies to limit media freedom nor covering stories about politics and corruption is life-threatening. With the general freedom to report stories, it could be fair to evaluate journalists practising self-censorship as altruistically motivated – for the benefit of the sources, parent organisation or advertisers, although the fear of prosecution remains one of the causes.

For a democratic Bhutan where citizens expect the media to play a critical role in promoting informed citizenry and accountability, authorities and media organisations must ensure minimal instances of self-censorship. Therefore, through the respondents' accounts, the paper recommends that agencies concerned develop or strengthen legal frameworks to protect journalists' sources, work towards improving media's access to information and the Parliament relook at tabling the Right to Information Bill.

In essence, it may be challenging to monitor or measure self-censorship in absolute terms when individual rulings govern it. Nonetheless, authorities and media organisations should build a conducive media setting where the practice does not thrive.

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