

The budding of free speech in the mountain Kingdom of Bhutan

Abstract

Democracy and free speech is creating an active and mediasphere in tiny Bhutan, a country which uniquely places happiness before economic growth. As recently as 2002, Reporters Without Borders rated Bhutan 135 out of 139 in its Press Freedom Index. However since then, Bhutan has moved towards democracy with the first free polls conducted in 2008. Bhutan's first constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and the right to information. It sparked new laws, aimed at protecting and regulating Bhutanese media.

This article examines the evolution of these media freedoms since the elections. It does so by surveying the attitudes of more than half of all of Bhutan's registered journalists, seeking their opinions on dealing with government and bureaucracy. The survey has been complimented by a content analysis of Bhutan's oldest newspaper, *Kuensel*, as it reported on democracy and change.

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Introduction:

On March 24, 2008, thousands of Bhutanese voters inundated the polling stations across the country to cast their votes for the first ever parliamentary election. With media and observers from around the world gazing at the event with great interest, the small Himalayan country stepped into democracy before the night fell.

A new government was established, led by Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Harmony Party) who secured a landslide victory, a new cabinet was appointed, and a new parliament was put in place. Thus the country embarked on an exhilarating journey to become a Constitutional Democracy. This was a defining moment for a country that thrived under Monarchy for over a century.

More than two years later and Bhutanese democracy is still evolving. Bhutanese media is meanwhile realising its relationship with democracy. The passage of two years allows time to reflect on how this intern-relationship is evolving.

Media underpins democracy with its ability to act as a tool to empower citizens and engage them in decision making processes. To do this, it is important for media to be free and independent. Is Bhutanese media living up to the democratic needs of the country? Does it have enough freedom to carry out the roles and responsibilities? Is it any different from mandates before the democracy?

Bhutan's first ever constitution guaranteed media freedom, freedom of speech and the right to information. It resulted in new laws , aimed at protecting and regulating Bhutanese media.

Does media get to exercise the rights guaranteed by the Constitution? Do media houses have enough liberty to keep a proper check on the government? Is media free from internal and external influences? What level of media freedom can Bhutan afford to have? Is the Western concept of watch dog role applicable to Bhutan, a small country that is struggling to maintain its identity and sovereignty?

This research paper attempts to offer fresh perspectives of the Bhutanese media by looking at the changes brought about in the role and freedom of Bhutanese news media after the institution of democracy in 2008. It is an endeavour to define the role news media ought to play in democratic Bhutan, while at the same time, ensuring there are necessary instruments in place.

It does so by exploring the attitudes of Bhutanese journalists towards the changes taking place. With the help of an online survey, views of Bhutanese journalists have been attained and analysed. It offers a great insight on their experiences in a new political scenario. Content analysis of the oldest newspaper, *Kuensel*, also helps establish the findings of the survey. Additional interviews have been conducted to ascertain the points. Before that, for a better understanding of Bhutanese media's state today, it is important to know the story of this young media operating in this small nation.

Young Country, Young Media

Bhutan is one of the most recent countries to become a democracy. Located between two giants; India and China, Bhutan established links with the outside world only a few decades ago. In the early 1960s, socio-economic changes spurred and diplomatic relationships were initiated.

For a country with a population slightly over 634,000 (Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2005), its unique culture and tradition and the natural environment was symbolic as it represented the identity, sovereignty and security of the nation. Transformation to modernisation became a challenge. As a remedy, Gross National Happiness (GNH) became Bhutan's guiding philosophy in 1972. It took a holistic approach towards social and psychological wellbeing of the people and was given more importance than the economic gain of the country.

Like many of the other sectors, Bhutanese media is also in a budding stage. Until 2006, mass media comprised of *Kuensel*, the national newspaper, Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) television and radio, internet and cinema.

Kuensel (roughly translated as offering clarity) was started in 1967 as official bulletin catering mainly to the officialdom. It was turned from a government gazette to country's foremost newspaper in 1986. Radio was first broadcast in 1973 by a set of volunteers before it was taken under the government's wing. A major boost for two media organisations happened in 1992 when a Royal Decree delinked and corporatised the BBS and *Kuensel*.

Marking an era in a Bhutanese media history, the only broadcast television was launched in June 1999, along with the internet. In January 2005, the first two independent newspapers were licensed under private ownership. Today, Bhutan has six newspapers, seven FM radio stations and one television

network (BICMA, 2010). There are also four magazine publications catering to range of audiences. Except for the BBS radio and television, the FM stations and the magazines cater mostly as an entertainment tool. Most operate in two languages- *Dzongkha*, the national language, and English.

The growth of media has been in consonance with the socio-economic development of the country. It reflected the changes taking place in the social, political and economic evolution of the country. It worked to fulfil government mandate of establishing a well informed and knowledgeable society. When the nation stepped into democracy, media was thrust into a whole new situation that was different and challenging.

Welcoming Democracy

Under the reign of the monarchs, Bhutan was in a stable and prospering position, facing no political threat in any sense. In 2006, the Fourth King announced his abdication and informed the Bhutanese that it was time for Bhutan to transition to democracy.

Sinpeng (2007) wrote that while many dictators and military juntas around the world were using both coercions and military might to hang on to power, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck concluded that his autocratic rule had come to an end and Bhutan must transition to democracy.

Sinpeng writes that announcing the abdication, the King had clarified that democracy was not necessarily Bhutan's goal but a part of good governance and a key pillar of the King's ultimate objective to achieve GNH.

Thus the young, nervous nation embarked on a journey to democracy.

During the run-up to the parliamentary elections, along with other agencies, media engaged in playing its part to prepare the nation for democracy. It ventured to educate people about the upcoming political change. It went right from teaching people how to operate an electronic voting machine, to explaining the procedures, and informing voters of their candidates.

Radio and television aired live parliamentary debates while papers scrutinised the candidates and political parties. Stories and issues were taken up to help people make informed choices on the day of the election.

Media, for the first time, had to deal with pressures from political parties. Journalists and media organisations were accused of favouring different

parties and candidates. It demanded professionalism and sought commitment to remain non-partisan. It was then that media was required to draw a fresh perspective on the role and freedom in the new political scenario.

Today, the prevailing understanding of the role of media in a democracy is to empower people by engaging them in constructive discourses. Media is also expected to hold the government accountable for their actions and keep public abreast of the plans and policies concerning them. Is Bhutanese media transforming well to shoulder these responsibilities?

Research Question:

With the institution of a Constitutional Democratic form of government in Bhutan in 2008, what changes has it brought to media in terms of the role and freedom?

Literature review

A free and independent press is considered essential for democracy; among others, it acts as independent watchdogs of the political, social, and economic institutions and conjures public interests to be prioritised in government policies (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston 2007).

While democracies evolve under different circumstances in different countries (Christains et al.2009) two elements remain consistent; “equality” and “liberty”, “equality” could be seen as an opportunity for every individual to participate in the decision making processes to rule themselves while “liberty” was the “right of mutual influence” like the freedom of communication that bestows everyone the benefit of un-coerced debate and discussion. Media freedom is therefore recognised as a very vital ingredient of democracy.

Keane (1991) relates “numerous struggles for a free press” that marked the history for most developed countries. He asserts the importance of free press to ensure prevalence of democracy and considered media freedom as a critical ingredient of politics, understood as a precarious balance between the rulers and those who are ruled. Nash (2003) supports the view explaining press freedom as an institutionalised extension of rights to freedom of expression and communication.

As for the news media itself, different journalistic forms started emerging; from print to broadcast to online, and the institutions encountered different pressures of space, time and format (Christains et al. 2009). Earlier in 2004, Champagne unfolded the “double dependency” nature of journalistic field pointing out that the major dilemma that struck the line of work was its ambiguous position between politics and markets. He pointed out that competition, urgency, sales considerations, and political constraints always weighed on the production and diffusion of news (Champagne 2004).

Schudson (2008) attempts to draw a relationship between journalism and democracy and argues that democracy does not necessarily produce journalism and nor did journalism produce democracy. He cites examples of British journalism that arose in a monarchy and American journalism, a journalism of colonial territories under a monarchical, colonial power that preceded American democracy.

However, he said where there was democracy, journalism provided a number of different services to help establish or sustain representative government.

A Bhutanese media scholar, Wangchuk (2006) bolsters Schudson’s view by stating that although democratic societies have been in the forefront in promoting press freedom, it did not go to say that other forms of governance have not encouraged a free press.

For Bhutan, the author declares that Bhutanese pressmen have always enjoyed a “relative” press freedom explaining that the country being blessed with a leadership whose concern for the welfare of the people was never doubted, and with a strong sense of patriotism prevailing in the country that extended to the media persons, media ended up adopting the government’s position on almost everything.

According to Wangchuk (2006), the editorial policy in media houses forged a sense of nation-hood under the figure head of a monarchy and this was done so for an obvious reason- “a country sandwiched between the two giants can only survive through a strong sense of national unity”.

Knight (1998) defined “development” journalism in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as placing the role of journalists within the task of nation building”. The author cited Singapore then, where the authorities heavily monitored its media in order, the Singapore government said to safeguard their society. The government claimed that “the social glue” was not strong enough to withstand the journalism practiced in countries like America.

Knight explained that the Western idea of press freedom not necessarily be accepted by some Asian governments, who perceived restrictions as a counter to the dangers associated with development. They promoted “Asian news values” that privileged national cohesion over liberal notions of marketplace of ideas.

So how does the news media in Bhutan define its role as it transitioned to democracy?

Bhutanese media experts like Dorji and Pek (2006) recommended public service media as the “most relevant and desirable form and approach” for the Bhutanese media. They explained that the public service media should balance the commercial media and provide a healthy alternative, combining public and commercial service and functioning with complete freedom from government and from commercialism. And in anticipation of democracy, the authors also highlighted the importance of media to become the public space for Bhutanese society in the new political setup, calling it the “building blocks of democracy”.

Bhutanese media was also cautioned to streamline their role in the democratic Bhutan reminding the increased impact media will have on the Bhutanese society and the new challenges democracy and elections will bring along in 2008 (Balasubramanian & Nidup 2006).

Today, more than two years after Bhutan embraced democracy, it is time to look back and study how media has changed in terms of its role and freedom in the new political scenario. Is Bhutanese media performing its duty as an independent watchdog in the democratic institution? Are they exploring new realms of freedom to cater to the need of the public and empower them? At a time when some of the “freest press” are failing when democracy needs it the most (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston 2007), it becomes very important to study at how Bhutanese media is adjusting with the change.

Methodology

The political changes that occurred in March 2008, the first parliamentary election ever and the establishment of a new democratic government thrust Bhutanese news media onto a fresh pulpit altogether. This is interesting for a media functioning in the world’s youngest democracy. The new democratic set up demands a lot more than it did earlier under the comforting drape of the monarchs.

Therefore, to understand the changes, it was very important to find out the media practitioners’ perspectives regarding the subject. An online survey of the journalists in Bhutan formed the main method to conduct the research. The survey findings were further backed by email interviews, case studies, publications and news reports. Thorough analysis of the contents of one of the newspapers also formed an essential basis to answer the research question.

Online survey of the Bhutanese journalists:

To gauge the views of Bhutanese journalists, a survey titled “Media freedom in Bhutan” was constructed using a free online survey tool called SurveyMonkey at www.surveymonkey.com. Ten open-ended questionnaires were framed in a manner that it answered the research question and extracted other elements involved in determining the changes in the role and freedom of media in the new political scenario.

While the open-ended questions were necessary to obtain insights from the Bhutanese journalists, those questions were also formatted in a manner that it began with a definite “yes”, “no” or “to a certain extent” answers followed by a need for further detailing.

The Bhutan Infocomm and Media Authority said that there were 42 accredited journalists in the country. However, the list was not updated and coming in of several media establishments in recent years had the number of journalists going beyond that figure. Thus, attempts were made to contact different media houses to avail the estimate figure as well as the contact details of the journalists.

At the end, 40 journalists were selected ensuring substantial representation from all print, television, and the two radio stations (BBS Radio and Kuzoo FM- stations that catered to news programmes) and with different years of media experiences were selected. The sample accounted for more than 70 percent of the total.

On April 23, the link to the survey was emailed to all the 40 Bhutanese journalists with a note explaining the objective of the research project. Due to a time constraint, the survey was closed on May 17, after being open for a month.

Survey Result:

An overwhelming result of 26 journalists out of the total 40 responded to the survey at the end a response rate to 65 percent.

The 26 respondents include journalists from the six print media, the two FM stations and the BBS TV. Offering a diverse view from all aspects the respondents included journalists from the headquarters in the capital, Thimphu, and the correspondents serving in bureaus and remote districts in the country. Providing a wide range of experiences, the respondents included journalists who served for over 20 years to those who stepped into second year of their journalism stint, presenting fresh perspectives. The average tenure of the respondents was six years.

Survey Analysis:

While analysing the survey answers, one question was studied at a time and an average of “yes”, “no” or “to a certain extent” was drawn from the total. Most popular views formed the basis of the research, backed by the reasons stated. Unique and less popular views were also taken note of and have been included in the report whenever required.

The majority representation of similar views from the journalists made it easier to determine the changes in news media’s role and freedom. The survey established whether media freedom improved with the coming in of democracy or not. It revealed the media freedom elements mainly ascertained by whether government officials were receptive of media and whether public in general were amenable to media after the institution of democracy.

In preparation for the new system of governance, private media establishments were encouraged and thus began a series of media proliferation. The survey looks at whether media diversification played a part in accomplishing free speech or proved detrimental by compromising with the qualities and media ethics in the process.

A very important aspect of the research is in discerning the media legislation in a democracy and thus, the survey helped find out whether media law was restrictive and curtailed media freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. Finally, the survey ends with journalists listing some of the biggest challenges they are encountering today.

Using relevant information from the survey, different chapters have been set up presenting neat details about the changes in the role and freedom of news media in democratic Bhutan.

Additional interviews and reports:

Additional interviews of appropriate organisations and individuals were conducted to endorse the findings of the survey. This included international press-freedom organisations like the Reporters Sans Frontiers, Freedom House and the International Federation of Journalists. A range of international perspectives were achieved along with the records maintained. Representatives from media regulatory body in Bhutan and independent centres keeping track of media and democracy were also interviewed to seek different views.

A detailed use of literatures, both local and international papers, helped grasp the issue in a broader context. Government and NGO publications were widely used to understand different rules and regulations and also the wide range of initiatives undertaken. Newspaper articles were also broadly referred for facts and figures, and also to track down the transformation over the period of time.

With the help of the publications, a case study was also conducted as and when required. The case portrayed tussles between the news organisations and the government, clearly depicting the transition.

Content analysis of *Kuensel* newspaper:

Kuensel newspaper (the name roughly translated as offering clarity) the oldest and the largest circulated national newspaper; with a daily circulation of over 10,500 copies.

Owing to an unavailability of free access to the paper’s archive, a special request had to be made. A month from 2006 to 2010 was examined as a method to narrow down the approach and maintain focus. The country historically transitioned to democracy in March 2008. As such, articles were analysed from the two years before democracy; 2006 and 2007, during the transition in 2008 and two years after the establishment; 2009 and 2010. To maintain uniformity, January month was selected from all the five years.

The study examined how the paper covered major government stories during those periods. The identified articles were thoroughly scrutinised to check the sources used and the style of reporting in terms of language, headline and the approach of the story. Most important, the issues covered were properly analysed to find out how media functioned before and now. The range of articles from the identified period reflected the nature of media's function and changes it lived.

What the journalists thought: Media freedom in a democracy

Free media and democracy may be symbolic. For Bhutan, it has been over two years since media dipped its toes in a democratic pool and is interesting to note the new developments taking place.

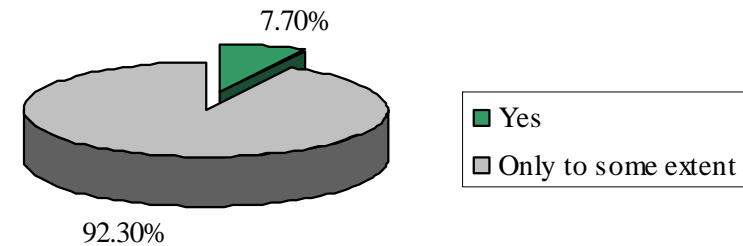
For one, democracy is bestowing an affable environment for Bhutanese news media to mushroom. An overwhelming 92 percent of the survey respondents said that the advent of democracy gave media a much needed "room to stretch its wings".

"The government (DPT) recognises that media is important in ensuring the success of democracy. Therefore, there is a fair degree of openness," said a respondent.

"The Bhutanese media has been emboldened to a great extent. The government, especially the elected executives, has been very accessible to the media," said another respondent.

Journalists claim that media, newspapers in particular, have been playing a very bold role in the democracy unlike before. "Bhutanese newspapers today tackle almost every issue related to corruption in the government and private sector, elected leaders and their accountability to electorates, human rights, public policies....," said a journalist.

One journalist reasoned that media gained its prominence by default owing to the pattern of the last parliamentary election result where the ruling government won a landslide victory and media had to step in as an opposition.



Survey Chart 1: Do you believe media freedom has improved with the coming in of democracy

"The new mandate brought tremendous spark of promise for media in Bhutan and with both public and government taking media seriously, it did finally translate into more freedom for Bhutanese media," said a private paper reporter.

Some pointed out that it was the Constitutional guarantee of the press freedom that emboldened the news media to act valiantly post 2008.

However, a few respondents are of the opinion that the freedom for media ended with the slight improvement in terms of access to information. They said media did not have any other forms of freedom.

"As a broadcaster, it is not just about protecting what you say, but its more about how we get the information, whether we are protected, and whether we have the real media freedom," said one respondent.

But in a democracy, government being the key determining factor, it appears like Bhutan has started on a positive note. Most journalists are of the view that the new government is comparatively media friendly. About 61.5 percent of the survey respondents believe the government officials are more receptive of media today.

As Bhutan celebrated first anniversary as a democracy on March 24, 2009, one of the newspapers, *Bhutan Times*, published an assessment of the DPT government's performance. Under the press freedom and media, it wrote:

Not too long ago young writers who wished to interview senior government officials waited a long time for approval. The appointment, when it eventually arrived, came with the understanding that the "interviewer" would be told to reproduce almost the verbatim the exalted opinion of the government representative.

The most direct evidence of our new democratic freedom this year is the ease with which the kingdom's young media professionals can now get hold of government leadership including, even, the Prime Minister himself. (Dorji 2009)

The article goes on to reveal quotes from journalists awed at their privileged access with the ministers. The survey respondents agree that what took them days of bureaucratic procedures to avail an appointment or fetch information was now only a "phone call away".

But whether it is a political agenda or otherwise, the new government did take initiatives to accommodate media in the fledgling democracy by appearing more accessible. In a move to give media access to their day to day activity, a "Meet the Press" initiative was commenced by the government where a press conference was to be held with the cabinet every month.

An editorial in *Kuensel* gladly welcomed the move:

In a way, it is an unprecedented move, perhaps not seen anywhere else, where the cabinet of the ruling government actually makes itself available to the press to answer questions and clarify doubts on what the government is doing and not doing.

Such an interaction only goes to show that greater transparency benefits all players involved. The government gets a chance to get heard and clarify doubts that might be lingering in the minds of media personnel; and journalists get a clearer picture of what is going on, resulting in more accurate reporting, as opposed to misinforming. ('Coming out of the Cabinet' 2010)

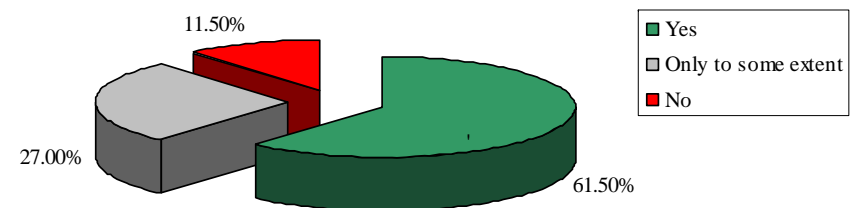
Started in March, 2010, the monthly event would put the cabinet ministers on the dais to answer queries from the journalists on the last Thursday of every

month for an hour. The government press secretary, Tenzin Rigden was quoted saying, "the programme will provide a platform, where journalists can ask any questions that are of public interest, and the people of Bhutan will be informed of the activities of the government and be able to assess its performance and form independent opinions, based on accurate and reliable information."

But another article suggested that the free flow of information was still a problem in the *dzongkhags* (districts) with most decision makers refusing to talk to the media without a green signal from their bosses in the capital (Penjore 2010).

The same government had earlier made an attempt to appoint focal persons who would act as media spokespersons for all ministries and autonomous agencies. This was to make information widely available. This however, failed to take off. The appointment of spokespersons had only proved to be a barricade, disallowing them from contacting officials directly and making things more difficult for reporters. Reporters were made to submit questions and the response depended on the "gravity" of the questions (Wangdi 2008).

About 27 percent of the survey respondents thought that to some extent, government cooperation totally depended upon the nature of the story. The more sensitive the stories, it was less likely to get a good response from them. But a positive story invited the same organisation to spare substantial amount of time for the reporters. Bureaucracy, however, seemed to be the biggest problem. One journalist stated Bhutanese bureaucracy as "still coated with lots of dead wood that needs speedy lopping".



Survey Chart-2: Is the new government receptive of media?

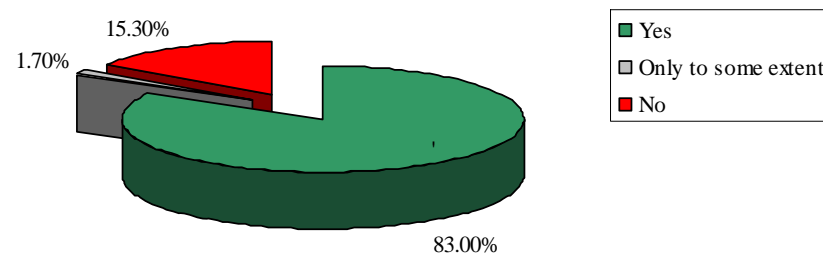
Journalists did not deny that there were still civil servants and some constitutional post holders reluctant to raise voices or share information without 'permission'. The fear of losing jobs or jeopardising careers acted as a bottleneck in the flow of information. According to the survey, those who dared to share information were "marked", reprimanded and considered disloyal. "The advantage of being a small society and Bhutanese journalists having friends and relatives to rely for tip offs is also backfiring, as authorities try to hunt down officials with relatives working in the media," said one journalist.

Meanwhile, about 11.5 percent of the survey respondents thought the government was still not receptive of media and attributed it to the lack of their understating of media and its role. Government was seen as lacking faith in Bhutanese media and had the "tendency to provide incomplete or incorrect information". A reporter who entered the profession after the new government took over recalled having officials deny cooperation on almost every occasion.

In its journey to freedom, media also claimed to have received enthusiastic reception from the public in general. Having played important role in preparing the nation as it embarked on the democratic path, thus creating a lot of media awareness, it earned enough trust from people across the country.

Survey respondents gladly admitted that people believed in media and the public space they have created for discourses. In an absence of a strong opposition party, people looked at media to check on the government and were very willing to extend their support, according to the journalists. They said public now understood and valued the news media, which was earlier perceived as a government tool.

They had people coming up to them with issues, which was rare in the past. They notified the reporters on activities happening in their localities, on and off record. Interestingly, journalists noted that people in rural areas were more media friendly than those in urban areas. "Rural people are the ones deprived of basic facilities government ought to provide and therefore make themselves available to media for they have nothing to lose," said one.



Survey Chart-3 Do you think public in general are receptive of media

Those in urban areas were media conscious and uncertain about the repercussions. Meanwhile, radio played an effective role in the rural areas. It was still the main source of news and has the highest reach (*Media Impact Study 2008*).

Those who had been observing the evolution concurred with the journalists view on media having attained a certain level of freedom. Director of Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, Siok Sian Pek Dorji (Dorji 2010, pers.comm., April 29) commented that media had found a new boldness.

"Screaming headlines (unfortunately leaning more towards sensationalism), direct accusations, and finger pointing have become more evident. Media have also begun to question the elected leaders and this is a good development. We must continue to hold our leaders, and our bureaucracy, and indeed even our businesses accountable," she said.

She said media has also suddenly "bloomed" and that the media Act and the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of information, and media freedom, had led to quick proliferation of media catering to a variety of audiences.

"Media have been pushing back the boundaries of free speech for the past two decades or more and will continue to do so," she said.

The improvement in the freedom of press in Bhutan is visible not just to the media associates in Bhutan, but also to the international organisations watching Bhutan.

Through the international lens

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

The right to freedom of speech is recognised as a human right under Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948. To safeguard this, there are several international agencies keeping check of the press freedom in countries around the globe. Bhutan, although a small nation, has not been spared of their surveillance.

Reporters Without Borders was one such international non-governmental organisation that advocated press freedom. When it first released the press freedom index of the countries in 2002, Bhutan ranked 135 out of 139 countries ('Press Freedom Index 2002 ' 2002).

The index was drawn up by asking journalists, researchers and legal experts to answer 50 questions about the whole range of press freedom violations (such as murders or arrests of journalists, censorship, pressure, state monopolies in various fields, punishment of press law offences and regulation of the media). The final list included 139 countries. The others were not included in the absence of reliable information (*How the index was compiled* 2009).

Bhutan gradually climbed up the rank and in 2006 it hit the 98th mark out of 168 countries. In 2008, there was a drastic climb to 74 out of 173 countries. As of last year (2009), Bhutan ranked 70 out of 175 countries. In fact, Bhutan ranked the highest in the South Asian region, leaving its immediate neighbour and perhaps the biggest democracy, India, at 105 position, Nepal at 118 and Bangladesh at 121 position.

According to RWB, the 175 countries ranked were those for which the organisation received completed questionnaires from a number of independent sources. Some countries were not included because of a lack of reliable, confirmed data.

Nalinee Udomsinn of Asia Pacific Desk in Paris (Udomsinn 2010, pers.comm., April 22) explained that between 2002 and 2010, there had been a sharp improvement in press freedom in Bhutan and thanks to the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression, freedom of the press has flourished in Bhutan. "Democracy has indeed brought positive changes in politics and those changes affect the press in a good way," she said.

Freedom House was another independent organisation that examined and supported the expansion of freedom in the world by monitoring political rights and civil liberties worldwide since 1972. It analysed developments that occurred each year through surveys and assigned freedom status – either Free, Partly Free or Not Free to the countries based on the scoring of performance in key freedom index.

While Bhutan had always been tagged Not Free, its status improved from Not Free to Partly Free in 2009. A Freedom House report stated that this was largely successful due to national elections held in 2008.

Freedom House research director was quoted saying South Asia was a rare standout in the year's survey because of historic elections in several countries that restored civilian governments and strengthened the political citizens. Competitive elections in Pakistan, Maldives and Bhutan helped move these countries from the Not Free to Partly Free category. ('Freedom House Welcomes Progress in South Asia' 2009)

Further, a report in 2010 indicated that the only region to show overall improvement was Asia-Pacific, spurred by notable gains in South Asia that included changes in Bangladesh and Bhutan from Not Free to Partly Free and a numeral score jump for the Maldives. ('Restrictions on press freedom intensifying' 2010)

"Freedom of expression is fundamental to all other freedoms. Rule of law, fair elections, minority rights, freedom of association, and accountable government all depend on an independent press which can fulfil its watchdog function," Jennifer Windsor, executive director of Freedom House was quoted saying in the report.

International Federation of Journalists, one of the largest organisations of journalists that promoted international action to defend press freedom and social justice through "strong, free and independent trade unions of journalists" also noted the transition and welcomed the press freedom provisions in the country's constitution. Government's decision to allow the two privately run newspapers and later three radio stations in 2006 was also highly appreciated. (*The Fight Goes On- The press freedom report in South Asia (2006-2007)* 2007)

In its annual press freedom report then, IFJ pointed out that with the promulgation of a draft constitution of the kingdom of Bhutan; there were signs of hope that the freedom of press it envisaged would become a reality. "The media is one of the major components that can demonstrate the

democratic system in a country by explaining the extent of the people's participation in governance. A vigilant media is essential for a free and democratic society and also plays a role in ensuring that the government fulfils its responsibilities and obligations" (*Journalism in Troubled Times-The struggle for press freedom in South Asia (2005-2006)* 2006).

Media diversification

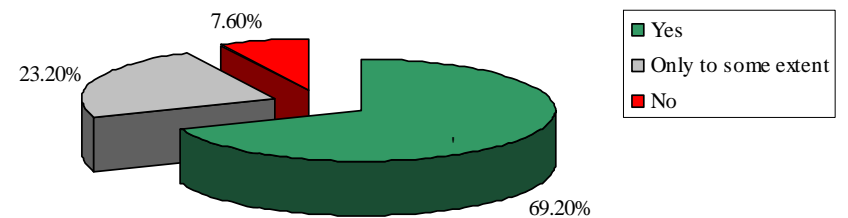
Before 2006 Bhutan's mainstream news media comprised of one newspaper, one television and one FM radio station. The Bhutanese media saw a considerable growth since 1980s with the establishment of BBS and the newspaper *Kuensel*, and the small information revolution that took place in the 1990s with the introduction of television and the Internet (Dorji & Pek 2006).

In gearing for the nation's new democracy, private media initiatives were welcomed. In a significant move in the history of Bhutanese media, the first two independent newspapers under private ownership were licensed in 2005 (Wangchuk 2006). It hit the news-stands in 2006, remarkably followed by more FM radio stations and newspapers.

In 2010, Bhutan had six newspapers, seven radio broadcast (of which only two catered with news programme), and a single television channel. Suddenly, the face of news media in Bhutan changed and the small society was engaged in a range of news and entertainment programmes unlike before.

While media diversification itself was a product of a move for democracy, a system that mandated accommodating free press, how far did it shape the aspects of Bhutanese media's role and freedom?

According to the survey, almost 69 percent of the respondents believed that the emergence of private media steered Bhutanese media towards freer speech. Today, an issue was reported by different journalists from different angles. While doing so, the attempt to get the story first and to get it right naturally heightened the competition. This enabled journalists to become daring and push boundaries. This manifested into a different level of media freedom.



Survey Chart 4: Do you think the diversification of media (establishing private newspapers and radio stations) has contributed to free speech

"More media means more options and more forums and more access to media for the people," said one respondent.

Journalists were of the opinion that news media offered the public more choice and deeper understanding of issues, thus helping shape their opinion and engaging them in rational discourses and decision making.

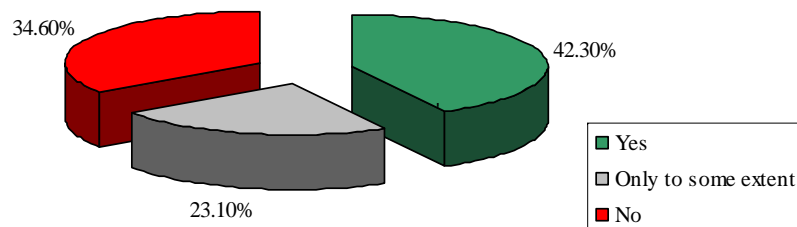
"It has contributed in creating a bigger public space thereby creating a greater prospect of public empowerment through information dissemination," said a senior journalist. Media outlets also encouraged anonymity and thus emboldened people with free speech.

In 2008, a study showed that with the emergence of private newspapers and radio stations, educated Bhutanese devoured spirited newspapers, which opened up government and individuals to scrutiny never seen before. Increased competition among the organisations, for news and advertisements, asserted importance of independent press (*Media Impact Study* 2008).

A journalist raised concern on the need for private TV channels to end the monopoly of the lone government owned BBS TV. "Unless it gets a legal status of a public service broadcaster, which means an independent editorial and a secured funding, we are not going to see much of a change," said the respondent.

However, some journalists believed media diversification invited criticism and compromises with qualities. "Most media houses are still manned by untrained professionals. There have been embarrassing public slip-ups because of this," said one journalist.

About 40 percent of the journalists said media proliferation resulted in major sensationalism and exaggeration in the process of beating the competition to “sell well”.



Survey Chart-5 Has the diversification resulted in media houses compromising with the qualities and ethics?

“Diversification leads to competition, which is healthy but given the small market base in Bhutan, some media houses with shaky financial conditions fall into the hands of influential businessmen and bureaucrats who use them for their own benefit. In pursuit of financial stability, they compromise with ethics,” said a journalist.

One said there was a lot of “copy-paste” journalism being practiced and more often, stories were exaggerated to cater to the market. Flashy headlines and hyped issues were more than rare.

Media Impact Study (2008) indicated that media was coming under more criticism, for everything from factual errors to biases to sensationalism. The study also pointed out the degradation of content, reliability of sources, and tendency towards negative stories.

However, certain percentages of survey respondents argued that media proliferation did not lead to quality compromises and has in fact encouraged media houses to draw strong in-house code of ethics to boost credibility. Some said while competing for the market, ensuring quality was important and as such, called for caution and professionalism.

“When the readers and viewers have choice for information sources, media houses are vying to capitalise qualitative journalism and information

gathering underscored by ethics to maintain the competitive edge and retain the readership/ viewership base,” said one.

Media struggles: presenting cases from the past

Bhutanese media might have come a long way but the journey had not been smooth. Incidents reported in the past propelled a picture of numerous struggles media lived to gain the status they enjoy today. And yet, although most of the survey respondents pride in having democracy brought in media freedom to some extent, numerous factors still impede free functioning of media. Thus the battle to win media freedom is still on.

In what could be one of the first disputes between the media and the government after the institution of democracy, in December 2008, the media regulatory body called Bhutan Infocomm and Media Authority (BICMA) had reacted to a panel discussion aired by the BBS TV.

BBS TV was fined Nu. 18,000 (about US\$400) following a discussion about confusion in the pay system of taxi-services. The authority had claimed that the “form and manner of the panel discussion in question breached the Code of Ethics for Journalists”.

Subsequently, *Kuensel* newspaper had picked the issue arguing such “authoritative power” over a media organisation intended going against the freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. The article argued that it meant depriving citizens of information they needed to make “informed judgments about their elected leaders’ policies and actions”.

The authority then summoned and briefed the *Kuensel* journalist on “distorting” the facts. They distributed a letter to media houses justifying the penalty. This further sought attention from media who perceived the fine enforcement as a worrisome infringement on the right to expression and free press (Wangdi 2009)

International observers like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) took note of the incidents and raised concern about the act being “contrary to the spirit of media freedom” and that it set a bad precedent in terms of media’s watchdog role. IFJ’s Asia-Pacific Director Jacqueline Park was quoted saying, “as Bhutan goes through a significant transition to popular democracy, it is essential that a clear signal is sent that media freedom and the public’s right to free speech will be protected.” (‘Fine on Bhutan Broadcaster Contravenes Spirit of Media Freedom’ 2009)

Whether the clash made both the parties learn a lesson is a different story but it continued for journalists to be berated in public and offices while doing their job.

In June 2009, a reporter was reproached by a minister while approaching him after a parliament session to seek views on a corporate pay hike. The newspaper the reporter in question represented published an article reminding the minister about the constitutional warranty of access to information and press freedom. It emphasised minister's "constitutional responsibility" to disclose public information and demanded the right to be treated with dignity ('Freedom of information is no favour' 2009).

And although more than half the survey respondents yielded to the fact that government officials were more receptive to them today, problems seemed to persist at the front of what was seen as Bhutanese media's one of the major stumbling blocks.

An editorial published in *Kuensel* in April this year grieved about how information was still refused as officials were directed by higher authorities to avoid interacting with media. It highlighted on how civil servants still contained fear of losing jobs and avoided media confrontation. Those who dared to share information were reprimanded or considered disloyal ('Dear Authorities' 2010).

The Royal Civil Service Commission refused to share information on the progress of a proposal for the off-hour clinic services made by the health ministry in June. Having received no cooperation, an editorial of a newspaper said, "journalists considered themselves lucky to even hear a commission official at the other end of a phone, who otherwise are either unapproachable or demand an unusually long time to answer questions..." ('Against the grain' 2010).

It went on to say how Bhutanese officialdom was being far too defensive about opening themselves up to the public, a prevailing culture of secrecy which might take generations to transcend. "Civil servants must change their mindset and realise that the information they hold is owned by the public, that they are mere custodians, and that citizens have a right to obtain information".

In 2008, an initiative to appoint heads of a ministry's policy and planning division as press spokespersons was condoned by media stating the move was a means to "disallow reporters from contacting directly". While bureaucrats had accused reporters of being poorly trained and making factual

errors, "these were the same officials who puff up their chests and smile if it's a PR story" (Wangdi 2008).

Besides the war of words, journalists also stood tested against the corporate interference. A conflict between management and the editorial team of Bhutan Times newspaper in October last year led to resignation of about six of its reporters and an editor. Although the tussle between journalists and managements and the advertisement and editorial was not new to media industry around the world, this was a first in Bhutan.

The team had cited "persistent editorial interference from the management" and the editor was quoted saying the mass resignation was "primarily to protect independent journalism in Bhutan" and to live up to the "professional principles and values" (Dema 2009).

Once again, IFJ had raised concerns saying, "no successful newspaper can be run by assaulting the professional morale of journalists and questioning the basic premises on which they conduct their daily tasks" ('Mass Resignation in Bhutan's Daily Newspaper Raise Concerns' 2009).

Media houses were often threatened or dragged to court in the past but in one of the first such cases, on June 29, a newspaper company and its reporter were asked by the court to pay the penalty for defaming a wife of a managing director of a company. While the reporter had provided tape-recorded evidence, the court ruled out by saying the interviews were sought without consent and violated right to privacy (Choden 2010).

Such incidences served as an eye-opener for the young news media about the numerous challenges they were up against in the transition. But on a very positive note, it was a good indication of media becoming bold and fighting to perform its role. It represented media's quest to uphold its freedom and promote independent journalism.

However, in the quest of performing the noble task of keeping the citizen informed, it was evident authorities and officials disapproved of media stepping on their toes. They were not without reasons.

Newsmakers often complained of dwindling qualities of media content, it becoming increasingly opinionated and biased. Many grumbled about journalists lacking skills and proper code of conduct, thus claiming they were misquoted more than often. Some were reported saying media imposed their views and opinions on the readers and made it appear like a public view (Pelvar 2008). One constant feedback on the Bhutanese press was that media,

print in particular, was only interested in negative coverage ('The media and the message' 2009).

IFJ, in its seventh annual report, noted that government felt media was over critical. The Bhutanese prime minister was reported criticising media for being over-critical and not ascertaining the facts that would enable them to interpret government actions in the proper context (*Under Fire- Press Freedom in South Asia (2008-2009)* 2009).

According to the chief info and media officer of BICMA, Lakshuman Chhetri, the media failed to distinguish themselves from an activist (Chhetri 2010, pers.comm., April 9).

He said media failed to understand the whole logic of freedom of speech. "They use it quite often in their favour without really realising the right of privacy as well as their fundamental duties. Sometimes, it appears as if media is above everybody and only the media personnel have the right to everything," he added.

In his address to the parliament in July 2010, the prime minister Jigme Y Thinley cautioned media to be analytical and competitive in the way the information provided by Bhutanese and outside sources were used, even as the media tried to promote the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and expression (*State of the Nation Address, 2009-2010* 2010).

However, as media struggled to perform its duties in an environment where its laws were new and interpreted in different manners, where civil servants refused public information, and where the media itself was equipped with young journalists, hopes were high and positive patterns were being established.

The media impact study showed that apart from issues like national security and royal family, media was reporting openly on the government and corruption. It said newspapers in particular, were playing a stronger watchdog role (*Media Impact Study* 2008).

Director of Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, Siok Sian Pek Dorji (Dorji 2010, pers.comm., April 29) said although Bhutanese media was expected to play the watchdog role, this need not necessarily mean a confrontational role. Most importantly, she said many Bhutanese did not understand the role of media in Bhutan and hence, media must be as objective and professional as possible to win the confidence of the people and to show them the importance of a free press.

"What works in other countries will not necessarily work for us. We need first to develop a culture of open feedback and criticism, and until then, media may find that they may not be as effective in getting responses if they use confrontational, demanding tactics," she said.

Taking note of the change: Analysing *Kuensel* newspaper

Bhutanese media has always mirrored the country's journey through time (Dorji & Pek 2006). Therefore, nothing can be more illuminating than examining the contents of its oldest newspaper, *Kuensel* (roughly translated as "clarity") in order to understand the changes brought to media's role and freedom with the institution of a constitutional democratic form of government in 2008.

Having become a full-fledged newspaper in the mid-1980s, *Kuensel* today had the highest circulation of about 10,500 copies daily. It functioned with about 12 reporters on the English desk and about five on the *Dzongkha* desk. *Kuensel* was also widely trusted for news and was the most read newspaper in Bhutan (*Media Impact Study* 2008).

News contents of *Kuensel's* January issues of the last five years (2006-2010) was analysed, paying attention to major government related issues covered during the months. Sources used, headlines, the tone of the story, and the way stories were approached were considered. However, it should be noted that the findings reveal the character of the print media and need not apply to the television and radio broadcast which functions under a comparatively closer supervision. More than 200 stories were studied from the identified months to determine the changes in the role and freedom of media.

Findings:

Although on a very small and random basis, the content analysis chronicled the way media evolved within the last five years. It revealed a visible shift in the function of media, the new watch-dog role media assumed unlike before and the new boldness and freedom it relished now.

Before the transition, it was found that media was taking an active participation in the nation's development process, with its contents dominated by government related stories and social issues. Media had also

joined hands with the nation to prepare and educate people about parliamentary elections and democracy.

As the big day in March 2008 approached, political and other related stories filled the newspaper. Suddenly media had taken up an indispensable role in closely monitoring the moves of the political parties and the candidates, initiated discussions and engaged people in discourses.

The shift to democracy had undoubtedly empowered media. What was earlier deemed as sensitive issues were now tackled enthusiastically. It began disclosing corrupt practices of individuals and organisations, scrutinising government's plans and policies and keeping track of political moves. Stories were adorned with bold headlines and credible sources including the high level officials. Media was also seen fighting for its own independence and rights to information.

Content analysis:

January 2006: The nation had begun preparations for the political transition then. The Fourth King's appointment of the chief election commissioner, the chairperson of the anti-corruption commission and the auditor general topped the issues in the month. There were follow ups on the establishment of the election commission office and the agendas set by the anti corruption commission. Another big story was the Fifth King's, who was then the Crown Prince, consultation with the people in different districts on the draft Constitution of Bhutan.

It is evident news media had cloaked its public service role and joined the nation in preparing for the emerging political system. Media was recording the significant developments taking place as the nation geared for democracy. Most important, it was informing and educating people about the new system. The stories were approached in a very objective manner, maintaining a very formal tone and sticking to press releases and a few interviews. For example, a story on the appointment of new judges to the High Court started as:

Taking yet another step in the historic process towards a democratic Constitutional monarchy His Majesty the King appointed, on the recommendation of the National Judicial Commission, five drangpons (judges) to the High Court on January 24 (Wangchuk 2006).

But this did not mean media overlooked other social and developmental issues. Stories like the progress of the foreign direct investment (FDI) policy and the safety standards of construction companies were carried out with thorough interviews and researches. The stories and editorials also questioned authorities for not reacting to the need of the time. For example, an editorial titled "All bark, no bite?" indicted authorities about not having a proper solution in place during a series of rabies outbreak in places.

January 2007: One year later and cases investigated by the anti corruption commission and their moves to prevent it were some of the major stories of the month. With the help of such democratic institutions, media was seen putting up a brave front to unfold sensitive issues. In a way, such democratic institutions have enabled media to adopt investigative approaches unlike before.

In the political front, media assumed full responsibility in keeping track of the run up to the parliamentary election and democracy. The month reported on the finalisation of the draft Constitution of Bhutan, announcement on the registration of political parties and the confirmation of National Council (upper house) election date. It is evident that media worked hand in hand with the election commission in educating people about the changes.

The elections to the National Council (Upper House) are slated to be held this fall according to the office of the Election Commission of Bhutan.

"The exact date of elections to the Council will be announced at a later date as per the laws," said chief election commissioner, Dasho Kunzang Wangdi.

The National Council, which is the upper house in other parliaments, will have 25 members. Twenty members elected by people, one from each of the twenty dzongkhags, and five "eminent members" nominated by the Druk Gyalpo (The King) (Penjore 2007a).

An interesting development noticed was the engagement of people in discussions being held on the political changes, the role media was mandated to play in a democratic setup.

Even as people ready for the first parliamentary elections, there is a general apprehension that a political party resorting to monetary assistance from registered members could lead to "rich hand rule".

The draft rule on formation of Political parties says that a party can receive money or assistance from its registered members only. An expatriate working in Thimphu says that the rule could put a party in danger. "The rule makes it

easier for the rich,” he says. “All they have to do is become a member of a party, they need not hold portfolio, but their money will control the party.” (Penjore 2007b)

It is evident that Bhutanese media then had realised an essential role they were expected to play in the process. Media was expected to educate people about the political shifts, which was new to Bhutan while at the same time, they ensured that people were involved in the discourses to make informed decisions.

January 2008: The month was full of activities. *Kuensel* covered its first, National Council election across the country that elected candidates from the 20 districts to represent the upper house of the parliament. Events were recorded, candidates were scrutinised and followed, and election results were analysed. Stories and editorials reflected on the election experiences. An editorial titled “A people’s election” provided an overall picture of the first nation-wide election and the numerous elements involved.

With the entire world watching and listening this week, Bhutan took the first step in a vital political transition. In a process like democracy the journey is as important as the destination. We are on our way.

The month also saw one of the biggest news in its history; the declaration of the National Assembly election date. It read:

BREAKING NEWS - January 17, 2008 - Bhutan’s first general elections that will elect 47 candidates to the National Assembly will be held on March 24, the Election Commission of Bhutan announced this morning.

Then followed a series of election related articles. Two political parties submitted their manifestos to ECB, rules for the television debates of the candidates were announced and the seating arrangements in the National Assembly hall after the election were declared. There were other selling stories on the impact of party politics in local governance, about the multiple mudslingings occurring between the two parties and election commission sorting out the cases reported to them.

It was as if Bhutanese journalists had a handful to write all of a sudden. Political stories were new to many and it was happening everywhere. The way issues were handled and portrayed demonstrated sudden courage and media attained. It was also apparent that people were developing some sense of media importance in the changing society. An editorial revealed how

media received cooperation from people in terms of information access unlike before.

A few stories in the Bhutanese media, in recent weeks, have anonymous sources. They have come from confidential, in some cases preliminary, documents that have reached the press. The documents themselves are not outstandingly sensational but they do raise questions, particularly within officialdom...

...In Bhutan when someone suggested, “Why don’t you write about this?” it used to be about development activities. Then it became crime and corruption. Now it is politics. But it has always been there. And it will always be there (‘Our first deep throats?’ 2008).

January 2009: Less than a year after democracy set in and media is seen playing a dynamic role. Articles on the discussions in the parliament dominated the month, clearly displaying the watch-dog role media embraced. It highlighted the steps taken by the ruling government, focused on the contradicting points raised by the opposing parties and analysed the resolutions of the assembly. The article “Locked horns over earmarked funds” is one such example.

The National Council and Assembly are at odds over constituency development grants

January 10, 2009 - Members of the National Council, on Thursday, tried to close all doors to the possibility of approving the much-debated constituency development grant (CDG), calling it unconstitutional, faulty, and ambiguous.

Council members, like in the first parliament session, spoke in unison, objecting to the proposal, unanimously voted against it and decided to appeal to His Majesty the King for guidance.

CDG was a proposal of the National Assembly (NA) to grant an annual budget of Nu 2 million for each assembly MP to carry out developmental work in their constituencies. In the last session, the NC, after objecting, asked for more details before any decision was made (Lamsang 2009).

Stories on the revision of salary for the civil servants and numerous other follow-ups on revealed the investigative stance media adopted over the time. The vigilance of media delivered timely information to people on the proposals and differences before the salary scheme was finalised.

The month also carried articles that were significant in the sense it portrayed the maturity of media and its quest for freedom. “The right to expression” is an example of how media had begun to fend for its independence in the new political context.

The Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) has been fined for doing its job.

The government by allowing the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) to flaunt such authoritative powers over BBS is trampling on the Constitution. It violates free press and free speech (Wangdi 2009). Such stories defined the parameters media had begun to explore in the interest of democracy. This was a very healthy indication for media was sending out messages of the need for independence from any sort of interference. This also indicated the aspirations of Bhutanese to take media to a new level of freedom with an objective to ensure success of democracy.

January 2010: Early this year, Bhutanese media had continued to execute its watch-dog role. Somehow, the tone of the articles suggested noticeable confidence and appeared at ease with the investigative roles they have assumed.

The month saw an unfurling of corruption issues and flaws in the system prevailing within the health ministry of the country. Such attempts could have been unimaginable some years ago. It revealed the frequent trips made by the health officials for trainings and seminars that were irrelevant to them. This is how the story was approached:

Civil servants often say that bumping into a health personnel from Bhutan is very likely when travelling out of the country. At least 30 health officials travel out of the country in a month, which is one health official going out every day.

But the issue, according to health workers in the dzongkags, is that a majority traveling outside are those at the headquarters and not people in the field for seminars, workshops and conferences for whom, it may be more relevant (Choden 2010).

Stories appeared with bold headlines like in the case of an airport hangar story which was titled “Nu 7.5 million for gates that don’t work” and the story itself was no less intrepid:

Nu 55 million and four years after construction, the Paro airport hangar still has no doors, with its eight large electronic gates unable to close, exposing Druk air planes to technical risks, the elements and security threats.

The hangar was built in March 2006 by the Indian construction conglomerate Jai Prakash industries, associated with Bhutan’s mega-hydroelectricity projects, which had sub-contracted the gate to Lloyds (Lamsang 2010).

Media continued to tail the prime minister and the government. It recorded the prime minister’s views on the progress of democracy and the political parties, the investment of constituency development grant (CDG), among others. Stories and editorials also offered analysis on the criticism suffered by the government for hiring a global consultancy firm, McKinsey, to accelerate socio-economic growth of the country. The month also saw media portraying differences between the government and the tour operators regarding the revision of tariff system. All these are evidence enough to conclude that Bhutanese media today is playing a very credible role in a democracy. If not more, it is on its way to win its independence, conjure people’s trust and become the Fourth Estate of democracy.

Media Legislation in Bhutan

Article 7 of the Constitution of Bhutan on Fundamental Rights states;

Part two: A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression.

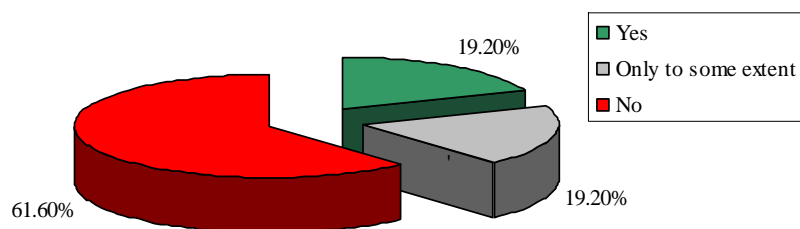
Part three: A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to information.

Part five: There shall be freedom of the press, radio and television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic

(The Constitution of The Kingdom of Bhutan 2008)

Bhutan has a legal instrument in the form of Constitution asserting freedom of its people, including freedom of speech, right to information, and media freedom. Its official adoption in 2006 had come as a shot in the arm for the Bhutanese media in pursuit of freedom.

Almost all the journalists that responded to the survey said the constitutional guarantee served as the much needed bedrock for the function of media. Sixty one percent of the survey respondents credited it to the provisions in the constitution to conclude that media law in Bhutan was not restrictive.



Survey Chart- 6 Is media law restrictive and curtails media freedom guaranteed by the constitution?

But Bhutanese media is fortunate in the sense it had been receiving a fair share of space and admittance right from before. A major boost was the issuance of a royal decree by the Fourth King in October 1992 to delink *Kuensel* and BBS radio (only news media then) from the communications ministry and establish as an autonomous corporations.

Kuensel's editor-in-chief, Kinley Dorji, in one of his articles, reflected that encouraged by a royal decree that freed *Kuensel* and BBS from government control, “we were testing and expanding the boundaries of free speech despite resistance from the society itself. We had to nurture the idea of a free and, by the standards of an unexposed readership, aggressive media” (Dorji 2009).

The royal decree stated clearly the objective of the move was to give media the “flexibility to grow in professionalism and to enable them to be more effective in fulfilling their important responsibility to society”.

A government’s report in 2005 also recognised media as an essential tool to strengthen the three pillars of Good Governance- efficiency, transparency and accountability. It indicated government’s commitment to draw a proper media regulation and support from “direct budgetary grants to indirect input like infrastructure and tax waivers” (*Good Governance Plus* 2005).

Then there was the Information and Media Policy in 2006 that identified media as an essential instrument towards attainment of country’s development policy of Gross National Happiness. Among others, the policy stressed on establishing a vibrant, responsive and responsible media in the kingdom that would respect and uphold national interests and make a

positive and meaningful contribution to nation building (*Information & Media Policy* 2006). MoIC had also come up with policy guideline on information sharing to create and encourage “a culture of open and free sharing of information” (Pelden 2008).

Ultimately, the introduction of the Information, Communications and Media Act in July 2006 offered a concrete framework and offered written parameters for media personnel. The converged act covered all the communications systems in the country, like the newspapers, radio, broadcast, internet, telecommunications, drama and films. Among others, it facilitated privatisation and competition in the establishment of the services.

The act prevented monopolistic practices and imposed limits on the ownership and control by one person. It discouraged cross-media ownership and control of ICT and media companies (*Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act 2006* 2006).

A code of ethics for journalists, drawn in accordance with the act, encouraged journalists to uphold the media freedom as the social obligation to the public and the country and further persuaded to “promote, guard and defend this freedom both from internal or external influences and interferences”. It also motivated journalists from defending the independence from those seeking influence over news content.

However, the Code differed with some points which asked journalists to refrain from reporting on anything that might incite religious, ethnic, regional or communal conflicts. A journalist was asked to place the national interest and security above everything (*Code of ethics for journalists* 2007).

Survey respondents observed that the media laws were fairly liberal but it dealt mostly with matters related to the regulation and licensing policy and ownership but nowhere did it guarantee the protection of journalists. Another journalist said the issue at the moment was not about the law being restrictive but a need for proper interpretation of it by media and enforcing agencies.

According to the Chief info & media officer, Lakshuman Chhetri (Chhetri 2010, pers.comm., April 9) of BICMA, how much ever the authority tried to let media houses self-regulate, especially in terms of content, conflicts arose and more than often, interpretation of the Rules and code of conduct pertaining to media had been “the bone of contention for such conflict”.

He reminded that section 33 of the act on the Rule making process stated clearly that the authority must publish a public notice and a proper consultation is needed to be carried out before making any rules and

presenting to the authority for endorsement. “The entire process of making the “rule” is conducted in a transparent manner based on the Act,” he said.

Media was restricted to publish or air any indecent article or programs such as nudity, violence and graphic pictures and violation of such restrictions meant imposing fine. “However, imposing fine is the last measure we take to regulate the media sector,” said Lakshuman Chhetri.

Meanwhile, media houses were eagerly waiting for the Right to Information (RTI) bill to be endorsed. While it was drafted and submitted to the government by the Ministry of Information and Communications early this year, it was yet to be discussed in the parliament.

In a recent development, the government had refused to share a copy of the RTI bill with the media stating that the Bhutanese society was not ready to discuss the law. A minister was quoted saying, “Bhutanese in general failed to understand the basic essence and values of democracy, how would they fathom what RTI entailed”. This invited a lot of argument from different agencies and individuals, including media (Wangchuk 2010).

Conclusion

Bhutanese news media has discovered and pursued a new role as a keeper of the country’s democracy. It has come a long way from the times it acted as a development tool, reflecting socio-economic transformations taking place in the country. In essence, mandate of media did not change from pre-transition. But again, a need for a vibrant media has never more crucial than today.

Fortunately, the paper reveals that the emergence of democracy offered media a much needed space to operate on. Journalists believe the government and the public in general are comparatively more receptive of them now. Evidently, the media has also achieved a milestone in terms of information access from the government. Journalists delight in being able to approach the officials directly for news and information, including those who were once considered unreachable.

Being able to access information is a very healthy pattern in a democracy for it would not only ensure that citizens are informed and made responsible about their choices but it also serves as a check and balance of the elected representatives of the promises they have made.

The Constitutional guarantee has reiterated the freedom and emboldened media practitioners to come out of the box to explore broader responsibilities. Journalists are today tackling issues earlier deemed sensitive, government is being watched and questioned, and every plan and policy is scrutinised and reported.

Stories and cases presented in the paper are evidence enough to conclude that media has embraced its watch-dog roles seriously. It has also put across clearly its aspirations to act independent and free from factors that curtail media freedom. This is a very good sign. Media is standing up to the democratic need of the country.

However, while media is braving new fronts to make a place for itself in the Bhutanese democracy, media houses themselves have a lot to work on to win public trust. Only then can they produce an enlightened society that is central to the success of democracy.

Survey respondents have pointed out that one of the biggest challenges Bhutanese media is facing today is the lack of trained human resources. So-called unqualified reporters are costing media houses their credibility and market scope. In a democracy, it poses a huge risk of the amateur teams confusing media freedom for sensationalism.

The new political scene saw media proliferation for the first time, bringing along its gains and drawbacks. Considering the small market, media organisations are struggling for advertisements and circulations. A survey respondent raised concerns about the excessive dependence of media on government for stories, government also being the largest source of advertisement for all news media. This could lead to compromises with qualities and ethics.

Media practitioners also have a surmount task of penetrating the bureaucracy, who time and often choose to shield media from public information. Taking a professional approach towards the responsibilities and maintaining an ethical standard could be a way to win their acceptance.

In recent years, media legislations became more visible along with the regulatory body meant to function as a backbone for media institutions. However, difference in the interpretation of media law has invited conflicting ideas between the media houses and the authority on numerous occasions. Although there exists laws facilitating media freedom, it will not serve any purpose if the implementation is off-beam. Survey respondents worry protection for journalists or sorts hardly feature in any of the laws.

Although there are no government censorships being imposed, constant interference from the managements and board members decipher into some form of censorship. There is also a need to end the monopoly of the single government initiated television and encourage competitive news broadcasts.

It is important to understand that while trying to establish its liberty in a democracy, Bhutanese media has a mandatory role to act as a public service considering the development stage of the country. Bhutanese media experts stresses on the need for media to be understood in the context of Gross National Happiness. They explain GNH requires for the people to make important decisions. The role of media is thus to provide information, to empower them to make those decisions. This, in essence, is no different from the democratic objectives of the media.

Democracy elsewhere has failed in vital societies. So has media. There are restrictive governments trying every possible trick to restrain media freedom, simply to promote selfish agendas. There are media establishments that fall for political spinoffs and commercial propagandas. Many media around the world are still fighting for the very liberty of press Bhutan has conveniently been granted through the Constitution.

Considering these aspects, Bhutanese media cannot be in a better form today. It is increasingly becoming central to political and socio-economic life in a democracy. Media in Bhutan also has the advantage of choosing the right path cautioned by the mistakes committed by those in advanced countries. Democracy has just begun to put down its roots. If the present relationship persists, media and democracy will help each other grow.

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Annex:

Survey Chart 1- Do you believe media freedom has improved with the coming in of democracy?

Survey Chart 2- Is the new government receptive of media?

Survey Chart 3- Do you think public in general are receptive of media?

Survey Chart 4- Do you think the diversification of media (establishing private newspapers and radio stations) has contributed to free speech?

Survey Chart 5- Has the diversification resulted in media houses compromising with the qualities and ethics?

Survey Chart 6- Is media law restrictive and curtails media freedom guaranteed by the Constitution?

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