



The Changing Role of Asia

Selected Cultural and Educational Aspects

edited by
Joanna Marszałek-Kawa

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adam marszałek

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and Educational Aspects

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The Role of Bhutan Media Foundation in Fostering Free Media in Bhutan

Abstract

Bhutan, a secluded country in the Himalayas, between China and India, for centuries remained in self-imposed isolation, however, the geopolitical tension in the 1950s forced it on a path of modernisation. An array of educational, governmental, and social reforms was initiated. Press in the late 1960s and radio and the beginning of 1970s were introduced and in 1999 television and internet as one of the last countries in the world. Moreover, in 2006 the king abdicated in favour of his son, the media were allowed to be private, and the country began changes of its political system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. All the above transformations were tumultuous for very traditional and custom bound Bhutanese society, therefore strong media on the guard of democracy had to be fostered. Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF), an independent organization was created. This paper presents the beginnings of BMF, describes its core areas of work and activities it conducts. It is based on the deepened interviews conducted by the author in November 2015 and data available online. Conclusions are also drawn from the opinions of BMF actions recipients.

Keywords: Bhutan Media Foundation, BMF, Bhutan, media, free media, democracy

This paper presents the role of the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) and is based on the sources available on-line and on deepened interviews with individuals that work for BMF or that benefited from their actions. It consists of a few parts. First, there is an introduction that presents the country's rich history and moves towards democracy, then there is the main part that describes the creation of BMF, and its actions towards building a better democratic media in Bhutan. The article finishes with a beneficiary's opinion on BMF, and the conclusion.

Introduction

Bhutan is a small country in the Himalayas that for centuries remained in self-imposed isolation. High mountain ranges prevented human migration and enabled the creation of specific customs and traditions, influenced by Buddhism and neighbouring Tibet. After centuries of independent fiefdoms, Bhutan was united by The First King of Bhutan – Ugyen Wangchuck, in 1907. After the incorporation of Tibet by China, Bhutan stepped on the path of modernisation, that led to the introduction of radio and newspapers in 1970's and television and the Internet in 1999, as one of the last countries in the world¹.

¹ "Bhutan", [in:] *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 2, Chicago 1994; C.J. Conlon, "Bhutan", [in:] S.A. Gunaratne (Ed.), *Handbook of the Media in Asia*, New Delhi 2000, pp. 67–83. D. Penjore, "Security of Bhutan: Walking Between the Giants", *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 10, 2004, p. 108–131; L.S. Rathore, *The Changing Bhutan*, Jodhpur 1973; S. Sherpa, "Bhutan: Between Two Giants", *World Policy Journal* 30 (4), 2013, pp. 41–44; S.R. Muppidi, "Bhutan", [in:] S.R. Muppidi (Ed.), *Asian Communication Handbook*, Singapore 2012, pp. 172–184.

In 2006 The Fourth King – Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated in favour of his son: Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. At that time private media were allowed to be created. During those exciting times, another change also happened: in 2008 Bhutan changed its political system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy².

Diagram 1. Bhutan's Press Freedom Score (2002–2015)



Source: Calculation based on the Freedom House reports: freedomhouse.org.

The introduction of private media was connected with the introduction of constitutional monarchy. "In Bhutan, things are much different. We plea differently because of the regional leadership and this is where the difference lies. [...] If you see media in other countries, its evolution is: more people wanting the information from the government. People want that, and more

² Shaw, B., "Bhutan", [in:] J. Love (Ed.), *South Asia 2010*, New York 2013, pp. 201–237. More: D. Lhendup, *One Hundred Years of Development*, Thimphu 2014 and S. Kinga, *Polity, Kingship, and Democracy. A Biography of Bhutanese State*, Thimphu 2009.

come – a market-driven situation. In Bhutan, it was a vision from the throne. That said, Bhutan needs a good media and because we need media we have to assure that the public make informed decisions and the government is kept accountable. So, people should know what the government is doing and what the state is doing, so that is the whole reason why the establishment of media has taken place”³. However, after the establishment of media, and a very profitable time for media owners, when a lot of financial help came from the government, the media proliferated and all of them had to share the same pool of government funds. At that time there was a need to create an independent body to both support and animadvert media.

The private media wanted to perform better but “the capacity to perform was limited”⁴ – that is the moment that the King decided to create Bhutan Media Foundation. At this moment is also worth noting how the Bhutan positions itself on the freedom scale.

Establishment of the BMF

The BMF was established with a Royal Decree on February 21, 2010⁵ – a date that coincides with the King's birthday⁶. The media has to play a very important role in the new system – democra-

³ Interview with Dawa Penjor, November 11, 2015.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ *Charter of Bhutan Media Foundation*, Thimphu 2011.

⁶ A creation of news institutions or introduction of new laws and regulations often coincides with important dates from the royal family (such as birthdays or jubilees). For instance, introduction of free media in Bhutan happened on the 100th anniversary of the monarchy. This scheme is pushed even further: citizens often name their endeavours in favour of jubilees, i.e. name

cy. But the private media financial capacity and resources were not adequate to function in a democracy setup, so a support system had to be established. So the media can become professional, and support democracy. So media professionals from public and private media gathered together and drafted the Charter for Bhutan Media Foundation. It is worth stressing that even though the idea came from the monarch, the rest had been done by the people representing the institutions (newspapers, radio stations) that may benefit from the establishment of BMF.

The first executive director of BMF was Lilly Wangchuck who served from January 2011 until December 2012⁷, then Dawa Penjor took that position until now⁸. He was educated in the United States, who worked in inter alia Department of Information and Media for many years⁹. BMF's staff is rather small and consists of four people. Besides the director there is also Sonam Tshomo – programme and research division, Dawa Tshering – administration and finance division, and Sonam Wangmo – office secretary¹⁰.

Seed fund was provided by the King when the foundation was established, so they profit from that, at the same time BMF tries to increase their budget by seeking donations or charity from individuals and organization that want to donate directly. They write grants and work on projects with donors, for example with

of Centennial Radio relates to that even. Interview with Nima Gyeltshen, November 12, 2015.

⁷ Correspondence with Dawa Penjor, May 17, 2016. Compare “Bhutan Media Foundation Calls Stakeholders Meeting”, *Business Bhutan*, March 26, 2011.

⁸ T. Wilhite, “In Focus: Exec. Director Dawa Penjor and the Bhutan Media Foundation”, *Democracy Speaks*, August 25, 2014, on-line.

⁹ “Dawa Penjor”, Personal Profile at *LinkedIn*, on-line.

¹⁰ “BMF Team”, *Bhutan Media Foundation*, 2016, on-line.

the Swiss Foundation¹¹. The BMF Director, however, points out that “at the same time, a lot of international organization donors do not see the need to invest in [Bhutan] because they feel that everything is alright. But I always tell them. Yes, it is alright but we have to sustain that [...] what is good. It is very important and especially in the revolving democracy it is even more important for us to make sure that the media remains free, plural and independent, and become professional. Just not free but professional is very important because we want to show that Bhutan has a set of journalists, a set of media houses that have standards and they do not bow down to yellow journalism, sensational journalism, etc.”¹². He also adds that “for our society and our country [...] we cannot afford such thing that are practised in others because we do not have the caring capacity or the absorbing capacity to do that. We are a very small nation with a small population and [...] sometimes gossip travels faster than newspapers and news. Word of mouth is faster than anything else and that is why we have very high standards for the media so that they will be able to deliver and live by their principle and objective”¹³.

The BMF with the Kidu Foundation (launched in February 2011), that takes care of the wellbeing of Bhutanese citizens have “been seen by some as evidence of the development of an administration in parallel with the elected Government, representing a «safety net» in early case experiments democracy should founder. However, others see these developments as a reflection

¹¹ “Development and Cooperation”, *Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation*, on-line.

¹² Interview with Dawa Penjor, November 11, 2015.

¹³ Ibidem.

of the expected leadership role of the monarch to help strengthen institutions in contemporary Bhutan”¹⁴.

Five Core Areas of the BMF

The BMF work is diversified and abundant, and while it is difficult to mention all of its actions, they can be systematically arranged into five aspects of work. In an interview, Dawa Penjor describes them all. The first, and most important one is to build the capacity of the media, so they provide a lot of training: workshops, scholarships, internships for media personnel. Their emphasis is on the private media, because “the whole idea of the foundation is to see that private media grow together with the ones supported by the state, or who have state funding”¹⁵. More than 300 people have benefitted from their training and programmes, and it continues to grow. They even send local journalists to foreign agencies to gain hands-on experience.

The BMF’s training is also focused on the support staff, such as advertisement, marketing sections, as well as managers of various media houses so no one that works in media is left alone, without proper guidance. They also collaborate with the Sherubtse College¹⁶ that offers a programme in media studies, and are responsible for the support of the programme that will consist of “guest lectures, specialised training programmes, workshops, and seminars on various aspects of journalism and the media”¹⁷.

¹⁴ B. Shaw, “Bhutan”, op.cit., p. 212.

¹⁵ Interview with Dawa Penjor, November 11, 2015.

¹⁶ N. Zangpo, “Bhutan Media Foundation and Sherubtse Sign MoU”, *Bhutan Observer*, September 30, 2013, on-line.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

Secondly, they want to engage the communities. "When we talk about engaging communities we are talking about not just the media personnel but also stakeholders, audience, public"¹⁸. The BMF conducts conferences, debates and panel discussions. Mainly it is done at the local level because of the low budget, however sometimes they invite foreign participants: professionals, academics, parliamentarians and of course the public to discuss the issues regarding the media.

Thirdly they support advocacy and development of policies, – they talk about engagement with the authorities. "So when government drafts certain policies that are related to media and information, we get involved"¹⁹. They highlight certain issues that need to be addressed. For instance, the BMF took part in the drafting of the Freedom of Information Act. They were also invited to the screening committee to look over policies and new regulations.

Fourthly, the BMF supports media development and assesses "how best they can engage in sustaining themselves"²⁰. For instance, they recently conducted two different workshops on advertisement in newspapers²¹ and one about multimedia pres-

¹⁸ Interview with Dawa Penjor, November 11, 2015.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Newspapers advertisements and advertisements in general are peculiar in Bhutan. Buntjy Avieson wrote that "While street and shopfront advertising is largely absent from the Bhutanese landscape, the newspapers and magazines follow a business model that relies on income from advertisers, but few of them are paid consumer advertisements. Instead, a distinctly Bhutanese form has evolved, made up of felicitations to the kings; government tenders; and sponsorship of editorial specials, based around international >>days<< such as World Tuberculosis Day and Global Handwashing Day. These are paid for by government departments, such as the Ministry of Health, or aid agencies, such as Denmark's Danida or the Netherlands' SNV. Consumer advertising domi-

ence, where journalists and editors can use their online presence to attract audiences and generate revenue. They also engage with journalists within their mentorship program, they try to engage freelance journalists and those that left journalism to pursue other careers. For example, they sent senior journalists who do not work for any particular media outlet to the new media houses to mentor the young professionals there.

Last but not least is the support of their national language, Dzongkha, through media. While English usage became necessary in the mid-20th Century due to the process of economic modernisation, fewer people were interested in or benefitted from using Dzongkha. "If appropriate measures are not taken to resolve this issue, in the ten or fifteen years, the national language could suffer a major setback, which, in turn, could lead to the deterioration of [...] religion and culture which are dependent on Dzongkha for their preservation and vitality"²². In the eyes of those probable happenings, BMF actively promotes the use of Bhutan's national language, mainly through the organization of various activities such as Basic News Reporting and Writing Course (Dzongkha) or Intensive Editing Course (Dzongkha)²³.

nates western media, reflecting the capitalist values of the society. In Bhutan the forms of advertising that have developed reflect its culture and values". B. Avieson, *The Voice of the Dragon. The Emerging Media in the New Democracy of Bhutan*, Sydney 2013.

²² Dzongkha Development Commission, *National Policy and Strategy for Dzongkha Development and Promotion Approved during 100th Cabinet Meeting*, Thimphu 2012, on-line.

²³ "Activities", *Bhutan Media Foundation*, 2016, on-line.

The BMF Activities

Among all the works of the BMF, the main activity focuses on educational efforts. The Foundation has organized a multitude of training and workshops on different aspects of the media. It is worth noting that some of them were groundbreaking, for instance first the investigative journalism workshop "Digging deep and uncovering the facts" November 19–21, 2012²⁴, or the Annual Journalist and Editors Conference jointly organized with the Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB) where the code of ethics was also launched (June 22, 2015). It was a historical moment when issues such as sensationalism, professional integrity, social responsibility, and many others were codified²⁵.

The BMF also "trained journalists on important gender issues like woman's role in journalism and also how to portray women in the news. In addition to being more gender sensitive, BMF is actively trying to develop a guideline reporting on gender issues in the media"²⁶. Womens rights were also exercised at the Leadership Training/Workshop for Women Journalists (April 20–22, 2015) or launch of the Bhutan Forum for Environmental Journalists (October 18, 2013). The BMF has carried out more than 60 training and other media activities so far²⁷. This is a staggering number in a country with around 100 active journalists²⁸.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ *Code of Ethics for Journalists*, Thimphu 2015.

²⁶ T. Wilhite, "In Focus: Exec. Director Dawa Penjor...", op.cit.

²⁷ "Activities, Trainings and other Media Related Activities Carried out by BMF", *Bhutan Media Foundation*, 2016, on-line.

²⁸ B. Josephi, "Journalists for a Young Democracy", *Journalism Studies* 16 (1), 2015, on-line.

The BMF has also published so far two issues of *Bhutanese Journalism Review Magazine* where the state of the media and state of the journalism were described and criticized. From an organization with a government funding and ties, one might expect certain leniency towards researching such subjects, however in the case of the BMF that notion is wrong. Articles in *Bhutanese Journalism Review Magazine* are very critical of the local media. For instance, they ponder about Bhutanese journalism²⁹ or bow down on dwindling international hardcopy newspapers subscriptions³⁰ or simply pinpoint spelling mistakes that are published³¹. They also published a multitude of Internet and television safety brochures for children and parents³².

The BMF in the Eyes of Its Recipients

Local media coverage that BMF receives is mostly positive and in the times of the BMF establishment anticipatory texts were published such as editorial in *Bhutan Today*, where the author of the text perceives BMF as a beacon of hope in the progress and support of media³³. Other texts often mention training and workshops organized by BMF³⁴.

²⁹ "Is There Journalism?", *Bhutanese Journalism Review* 2 (2), 2015, p. 6.

³⁰ "International Hardcopy Subscriptions in the Dumps", *Bhutanese Journalism Review* 2 (2), 2015, p. 32.

³¹ "Some of the More Common and Glaring Errors Readers Helped Point out", *Bhutanese Journalism Review* 1 (3), 2014, p. 42 and "Some Common and Glaring Errors Readers Helped Point out", *Bhutanese Journalism Review* 2 (2), 2015, p. 38.

³² "BMF Publication", *Bhutan Media Foundation*, 2016, on-line.

³³ "A Silver Lining. Editorial", *Bhutan Today*, March 26, 2011.

³⁴ "Bhutan Media Foundation Calls Stakeholders Meeting", *Business Bhutan*, March 26, 2011; "BMF's First Media Consultation Workshop", *Bhutan*

Democracy has been 'forced' upon Bhutanese society. That idea came from the Fourth King, who compared to the majority of other monarchs in the world, that strongly cling to their thrones, decided to give up his absolute power and introduce equality and fairness. However strong national peculiarities remain, for instances of the interviewees mentions: "We have also this concept of being Bhutanese, and then being journalists. Journalism is an old profession, but for Bhutan is a new practice, and in the close-knit society like ours, practising journalism has not been very easy"³⁵. That attitude was mentioned many times during the interviews, and it justifies the workings of BMF to foster and strengthen democracy.

Also in the view of the mentioned above: "The important aspect of media in Bhutan is that [...] it is still in the process of finding its own media culture [...] We were taught in college that media in Bhutan cannot be identical to media in any part of the world. I mean, we have to have a unique media culture of our own. We have to find our unique way of covering stories, telling stories"³⁶. That is quite a heavy burden put not only on the recent graduates but also on the whole media system in general. The BMF seems to embark on this mission when it was created.

One of the segments of this research was to reach out to journalists and receive their unbiased opinions on the BMF. One of the Bhutanese journalists anonymously commented on that it "has been working for the development of the media in Bhutan but its approach needs to change, primarily because [the] BMF is

Times, March 27, 2011; "Training for Editors", *Bhutan Times*, July 29, 2012; N. Tshoki, "Trainings for Media Personnel Begins", *Kuensel*, July 25, 2012; N. Zangpo, "Journalism in the Age of Internet", *Kuensel*, July 26, 2012.

³⁵ Interview with Tshering Yangi, November 12, 2015.

³⁶ Ibidem.

looking into micro issues such as training/ workshops/ seminar etc. It needs to first have a strong macro perspective on how to develop the media in a holistic manner. And as a Foundation, we expect [the] BMF to be the main player in the sourcing of funds and making it available to the media and journalists community. For instance, [the] BMF gives out journalism grants – such grant making schemes are wonderful and would facilitate journalists to write better stories. [the] BMF must seriously try to work with the private media [to] develop a long-term strategy to address the ongoing sustainability issues confronting the private media"³⁷. Another journalist also suggests that "[the] BMF should look at the larger picture beyond organizing workshops, [for example] funding bureau offices"³⁸.

Social media play an important role in the dissemination of information in Bhutan, and one may observe that daily or weekly newspapers lack a website, but have very active social media channels. One such example is *The Bhutanese*, a weekly newspaper run by the most popular Bhutanese investigative journalist and editor – Tenzin Lamsang³⁹. Once a week they publish most of their articles online on Facebook and Twitter in the form of regular posts. One of the interviewed journalists ads that "[the] BMF should also support social media growth. People are now depending more on the social media platform for breaking news and information as compared to newspapers"⁴⁰ and it goes hand in hand with the need of the BMF to "support journalist that are investigative by nature"⁴¹.

³⁷ Interview with Journalist 1, anonymised personal communication.

³⁸ Interview with Journalist 2, anonymised personal communication.

³⁹ "The Bhutanese". Fanpage at Facebook, on-line.

⁴⁰ Interview with Journalist 3, anonymised personal communication.

⁴¹ Interview with Journalist 4, anonymised personal communication.

Conclusion

The Bhutan Media Foundation has been around for only a couple of years and already one can see the impact they have on local media and media personnel. Not only do BMF provide training and workshops for journalists, but they actively cooperate with Sherubtse College. Tshering Yangi, a recent graduate from that school, who was doing her internship with BMF when I spoke with her, belongs to the first batch of students that graduated from Media studies and English course. The 21 year old is eager to learn, and her voluntary internship at BMF is a great chance to do so, however, no monetary gain is off-putting. During her interview, she also mentioned all sorts of issues that plague Bhutanese media "The biggest one being the financial crisis that our private media is going through"⁴². Hopefully, the BMF would be able to provide guidance and support during this transition time. It is speculated that there is only place for a couple of media houses⁴³ that could share governmental tenders and perhaps even incorporate advertisements, of course under the condition that society will be ready to adapt to modern ways of marketing.

Definitely, the BMF fulfils the mission that drove its creation, and actions they take upon are reverberated internationally. In one of the journalistic articles on the BMF one may read: "Though a small Himalayan nation, the world can learn a lot about the role of media in freedom from Bhutan. That being said, I like the way Dawa summed it up best, »if media can play the role to support all of that freedom, we will have a very good democracy«"⁴⁴.

⁴² Interview with Tshering Yangi, November 12, 2015.

⁴³ Interview with Tshering Wangchuck, November 12, 2015.

⁴⁴ T. Wilhite, "In Focus: Exec. Director Dawa Penjor...", op.cit.

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