

N A T I O N - W I D E S U R V E Y



The state of **Journalism** in Bhutan





Contents

07

Health of journalism
in Bhutan



1 Executive summary

3 Introduction

4 State of journalists:
A global perspective

7 Health of
journalism in Bhutan

12 Objective

13 Methodological
framework

18 Findings

18 An overview of
journalism in Bhutan

24 Personal safety
and security risk

30 Policy on safety
and security

33 Rights of
journalists

42 Overall index of
the risk to the rights
of journalists

43 Access to
information

52 Recommendations

53 Works Cited

54 Annexures



Occupational
category of the
journalists in
Bhutan

18

Findings

Domains of
personal safety
and security risks
to journalists
(% share)



24

Personal safety
and security risk

Mean score on
composite indices:
gender-wise



30

Policy on safety
and security



43

Access to
information



The state of Journalism in Bhutan



Executive summary

Bhutanese media consists of seven newspapers, one TV, three commercial radios, and five OTT platforms

- Journalism in Bhutan is characterised by relatively younger, mixed experience, and displays a greater gender parity. The average age of journalists is 34 years, 25 percent of journalists have less than one year of experience and 44 percent of journalists are females.
- Print media is the dominant medium of work, accounting for 41 percent of journalists, followed by TV (28%). Headquarters staff accounts for 60 percent of the journalists and field-based staff accounts for 30 percent of journalists. In TV and online media, a larger fraction of females are engaged, while in press, radio and other media a greater fraction of male journalists are engaged.
- On average, journalists in Bhutan cover 2 to 4 stories a week. About two thirds of the journalists in the country work on pitches. The number of pitches they receive rises with experience. Female journalists receive disproportionately large shares of pitches.
- Most journalists working in print media are members of JAB, while a much lower number of female journalists, less experienced journalists and journalists working in TV and radio are members of JAB. They are more likely to be deprived of the organisational support for professional training and protection of their rights that JAB extends.
- More than three fourths of journalists in Bhutan have received training on basic journalism and only 35 percent of journalists have received special training on journalism. Less than 20 percent of the journalists have received training on occupational health and safety, first aid and hostile environment.
- 93 percent of the journalists in Bhutan believe that they are safe. Verbal intimidation, insult/abuse/hate speech, online intimidation, and trolling on social media are major domains that adversely affect the safety perception of the journalists in Bhutan. Cases of sexual harassment, physical intimidation, and defamation charges have also been experienced by one in every six or seven journalists in the country. Journalists working on the online platforms face disproportionately large incidences affecting their safety. Perpetrators of crime against journalists are very unlikely to get implicit impunity.
- 84 percent of the journalists practise self-censorship. Male journalists are one and half times more likely to practise self-censorship compared to their female counterparts. Mid-level journalists tend to practise self-censorship less frequently than the entry level and senior journalists. Small society syndrome and the fear of backlash are the two major reasons why journalists practise self-censorship.
- Most media organisations in Bhutan do not have a safety policy, as reported by 60 percent of journalists. Of those who have a safety policy, 59 percent have a clear procedure to report the cases, and only 31 percent ef-

fectively implement the safety policy. Organisational support to victim journalists is not holistic, and is limited to reporting of cases, legal support and paid leave.

- Legal, political and economic environment is not conducive for the protection of the rights of journalists. The composite indices reflect that online journalists, freelancers, and print media are the most vulnerable groups.
- 61 percent of journalists believe that the constitution and other rules and regulations protect the rights of journalists in Bhutan. 36 percent of journalists believe that the government is unlikely to uphold legal protection for the rights of the journalists. Journalists' right to information is neither clearly defined nor is there a systematic procedure to secure public records. The government-owned media are not very likely to get any preferential access to information.
- Editorial directions and pressure from the authorities tend to affect the journalists' choices of stories. The government-owned media are largely perceived to be pluralistic and represent the voices of the entire political spectrum.
- 64 percent of the journalists believe that public officials are unlikely to talk to them. 82 percent of the journalists believe that their stories are subject to censorship. Only 10 percent of the journalists feel comfortable picking up investigative stories. Armed forces, regulatory authorities and ministries are more likely to impose censorship. Political parties, local governments and business enterprises are less likely to impose censorship.
- 64 percent of the journalists believe that media houses are less or very less likely to operate independently due to resource constraints. Small size of the market, declining readership/viewership, and limited private advertisements impose limitations on the capacity of the media houses to generate adequate revenue and achieve financial sustainability. The government subsidy and advertisement support has become critical to the financial viability of all the media houses, which compromises the principle of independence of media. Equal financial support to all the media houses, irrespective of their market share, has resulted in the protection of inefficiency.
- 84 percent of the journalists reported vari-

ous degrees of difficulty to get information. Sports (70%) and culture (42%) are the two easiest sources of information, while politics (30%) and economy (22%) are the two most difficult areas to obtain information on.

- Two thirds of the journalists reported that their request for information is often refused by authorities. 'Not authorised to share information', 'information is under process', 'do not have information' are most cited reasons behind the refusal. Lack of a mechanism to provide information, mentality of the public officials, and lack of legal procedures are major obstacles to access information. Besides, limited trust of young journalists also forces public officials to refuse information.
- The journalists in Bhutan mostly acquire information through personal contacts (38%), from experts (24%), and government agencies (17%). The enactment of the Right to Information Act is considered vital for vibrant journalism in Bhutan.
- A large percentage of Bhutanese journalists prefer to write about the social issues (61%), followed by the economy (15%). Culture, entertainment, politics and sports are other categories of items covered in a descending order of importance, together accounting for 24 percent of published items. Survey reveals that it is easier to obtain information on non-controversial stories related to sports and culture, while it is more difficult to obtain information related to more sensitive realms like politics and economy.
- Journalists in Bhutan face a moderately risky environment in terms of protection of their rights, however gender-based differences are not observed. Online and freelance journalists face greatest risk to their rights.
- The financial status of the media houses is unlikely to change over the next 3 to 5 years. The media houses are likely to become smaller and the revenue from advertisements will decrease as the government strengthens e-procurement. Experts believe that the market can sustain only up to three newspapers in Bhutan. Newspapers are most likely to shift towards online versions with improved and non-sharable features of subscription.

Introduction

The purpose of journalism is to provide coherence to society by fostering tolerance to plurality, facilitate democratic process, lubricate commerce and facilitate cultural growth



The importance of an independent media, also known as the Fourth Estate, cannot be understated. Its role as an institution to provide unrestricted access to verified information is vital for a democratic system.

The purpose of journalism is to provide coherence to society by fostering tolerance to plurality, facilitate democratic process, lubricate commerce and facilitate cultural growth (Chadwick, 2019).

Journalists are the key players in these mechanisms. A journalist can be broadly defined as “a person who works as an editor, writer, reporter, correspondent, photographer, proofreader, and cartoonist, mainly as a primary and substantive activity, either on a digital platform or in a traditional print and electronic media, either employed by others or a freelancer.”

A growing volume of research suggests that the boundaries that define journalists are rapidly getting blurred (Wunderlich, Holig, and Hasebrink, 2022) due to the stupendous growth of social media. Despite the growing difficulty to tightly define journalists, there is near complete unanimity that journalists provide a vital public service.

State of journalists: A global perspective

Rights of journalists

The freedom of journalists is essential to facilitate deliberative democracy and foster transparency and accountability in the functioning of public institutions. In the words of Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur, “A free, independent and diverse media fulfils society’s right to know, as well as journalists’ right to seek, receive and impart information.” It is an inherent duty of society to provide and protect the rights of the journalists through a well-defined and codified framework. Journalists have the right to the freedom of opinion, expression, and seek, receive and impart information without any interference. These rights of the journalists are ensured through a complex interdependent interplay between the legal, political and economic environment under which the journalists operate (Freedom House, 2016).

All the media persons are entitled to the right to life, to liberty and security of person, right to privacy and to physical integrity. The obligation to protect the rights of the journalists finally rests with the government. Global resolutions and conventions provide directions to the country-specific efforts to promote safety, security and rights of the journalists. Some of the important global resolutions and conventions are mentioned in Table 1.

The violation of the journalists’ right to access information tends to violate individuals’ right to be informed. The right to access information is one of the most significant, yet most elusive across the globe. Throughout the world, journalists encounter multiple obstacles to get information, and most of them are created by government officials (Asoghik, 2008).

The violation of the journalists’ right to access information tends to violate individuals’ right to be informed.

Table 1: Major global resolutions/conventions for the rights of the journalists

Resolution/Convention
UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948
UNGA Resolution on the Protection of the Journalists Engaged in Dangerous Missions In the Areas Of Armed Conflict, 1970
UNESCO General Conference Resolution 4.3 on Promotion of Press Freedom in World, 1991
UNGA Resolution on the Safety of the Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, 2021
Human Rights Commission Resolution on the Safety of Journalists, 2022



Silencing of the scribes

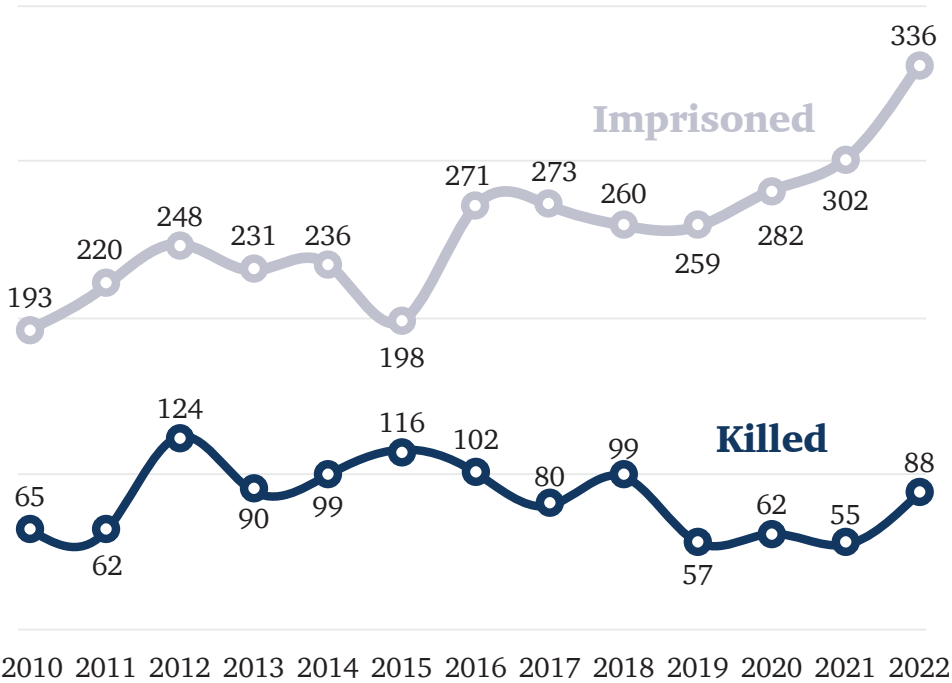
Despite global efforts to promote and protect the rights of journalists and media freedom, the safety of journalists has declined considerably around the world with alarming consequences on human rights, democracy and development (UNHR, 2022). Emerging patterns reflect three major concerns – online and offline attack and killing of journalists with impunity; legal and judicial harassment of journalists, erosion of independence, freedom, pluralism and viability of the media. Since 2010, 1,099 journalists have been killed throughout the world. In the last two decades ending in 2022, 1,615 journalists were killed, half of them in the conflict zones, and about 8 percent of them were women.

Syria and Iraq are the least secure place for journalists as they together account for over 36 percent of journalist killings since 2003. Journalists are also subject to ille-

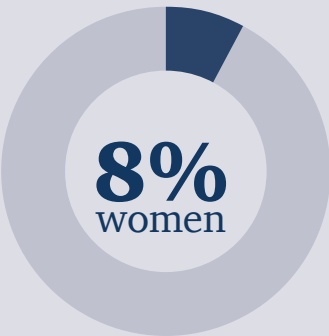
gal detention on false charges. Since 2003, about 4,300 journalists have been imprisoned throughout the world. The number of journalists detained has been rising since 2018. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), about 13 percent of the detained journalists are women. China accounted for about 17 percent of the detained journalists in 2022. The number of journalists abducted, missing or assaulted physically is not even documented.

CPJ report also states that 67 percent of journalists are detained on the charges of anti-state activities and 19 percent were detained without any charges. Most of these detentions are arbitrary and vindictive. All this evidence indicates that journalists work under high risk conditions, which is worsening with every passing year. Increased rate of conflict and rising dictatorial nature of governance in many countries has contributed to this slide.

Figure 1: The number of journalist killed and imprisoned throughout the World



Source: UNICEF and CPJ



In the last two decades ending in 2022, **1,615** journalists were killed, half of them in the conflict zones, and about 8 percent of them were women.

Health of journalism in Bhutan

Growth of media in Bhutan

In 2006, the private sector made its entry in the field of journalism.

Since 1960, Bhutan has witnessed a slow and uneven expansion of the media. A large part of the media is owned by the government. The growth of the media recorded its golden phase from 2006 to 2010. In 2006, the private sector made its entry in the field of journalism. With the arrival of democracy in 2008, the privately-owned media experienced a sharp growth. Figure 2 provides the timeline of the growth of mass media in Bhutan.



Media type	Organisations
Newspaper	Kuensel, The Bhutanese, Bhutan Times, Business Bhutan, Bhutan Today, The Journalist, Gyalchi Sarshog
TV	BBS (3 channels)
Commercial radio	Kuzoo FM, Radio Valley, Centennial Radio
OTT	Samuh Mediatech Pvt Ltd., Shangreela, Songyala, Gaatro Entertainment, Zhabthra Media Tech Pvt Ltd

Table 2: List of media organisations in Bhutan, as on September 2023

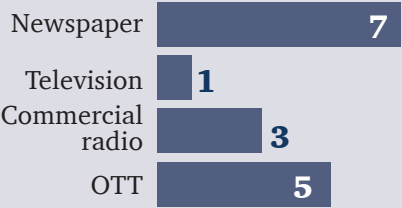
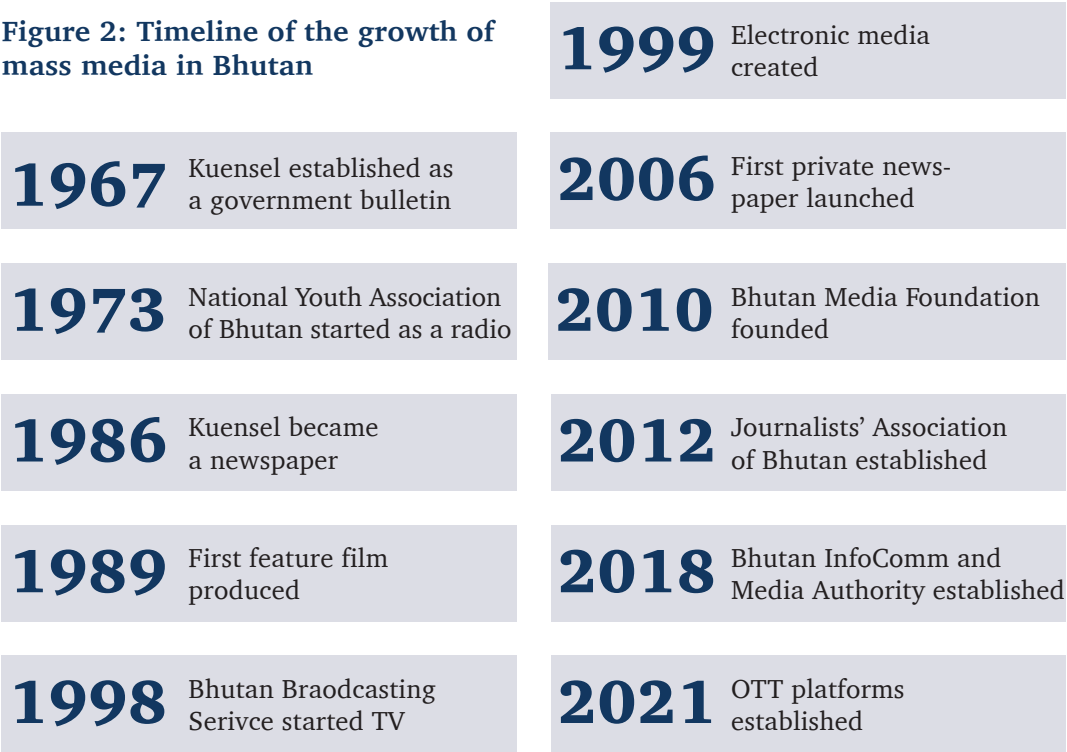


Figure 2: Timeline of the growth of mass media in Bhutan



Institutional arrangement for freedom of media

Apart from the constitution the country does not have any law that ensures the media’s right to access the information.

Freedom of expression and access to information constitute the rights of journalists. Article 7 (1 4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan provides for such rights to the citizens of Bhutan. Article 7(5), specifically provides for the rights of media to disseminate information, while Article 7 (20) proscribes arbitrary detention and arrest. However, the country does not have any law that ensures the media’s right to access the information. Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) regulates the media sector in Bhutan through the Information, Communication and Media Act of Bhutan 2018 (ICM Act 2018). The Act provides for procedures and criteria for the accreditation of media in Bhutan (RGOB, 2018). It lays down a detailed code of conduct for the journalists in Bhutan. As the government makes the appointment of all the board members of BICMA, the autonomy of BICMA is seen to be compromised. As all the private newspapers in the country heavily depend on the subsidy and advertising revenue from the government, it is generally felt that the government imposes invisible censorship on the editorials. Table 3 enlists major rules and regulations governing the media in Bhutan.

Table 3: Major rules and regulation governing the media in Bhutan

Regulation/Rule	Major feature
Rules and Regulations of Printing Press 2019	Empowers BICMA to examine records and equipment
Rules and Regulations for Publications 2022	Lays down licensing procedures and obligations
Rules and Regulations on Content 2019	Regulates the content of publications for greater interest
National Radio Rules and regulations 2021	Lays down licensing procedures and obligation and process for the allocation of radio frequency
ICM Act of Bhutan 2018	Provides a legal framework for the growth of media in line with GNH principles

Media in Bhutan: On ventilator support

After a short-term boom between 2006 and 2012, the media in Bhutan started to face a challenging time that threatened its new-found vibrancy. Due to market saturation and the government's e-procurement policy, the private media started to face serious challenges to its existence. The small readership, the small size of the economy, and scarce resources have contributed to the challenges of the mass media in Bhutan. Due to the small readership in the country, the private media heavily depend on government support for its financial viability. Five newspapers, three radio stations and two magazines have closed down since 2013. Now, there are seven newspapers, one TV station, four radio stations and two OTT platforms in Bhutan. A study noted that the

circulation of the newspapers in Bhutan has witnessed a significant downward trend since 2013.

Except for Kuensel, the circulation of the rest of newspapers is less than 1,200 (RGoB, 2018). Due to the small size of the market, the private newspapers cannot generate adequate revenue and are dependent on the government subsidy for survival. It is clear that the media in Bhutan has grown beyond what market size permits, mainly because of the subsidy support from the government. The subsidy is equally divided among all the private media houses irrespective of their market share. It has not only protected the inefficient media houses, but also prevented greater efficient gains for the more efficient ones.

Five newspapers, three radio stations and two magazines have closed down since 2013.




A safe haven for journalism

Despite being a nascent democracy, Bhutan offers a safe working environment for journalists. There has not been a single incidence of killing, physical assault and illegal detention of journalists in the country. Journalists are not subject to persecution and arbitrary detention by the state. Yet, the journalists in Bhutan prefer to follow a safe path and avoid controversial stories and investigative pathways. A survey undertaken

by the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) observed that about three fourth of the journalists believed that journalism had lost its attraction due to the fear of reprisal and difficulty to access information (The Bhutanese, 2014). Most journalists in Bhutan practise self-censorship because of small society syndrome, a term used to describe a well-knit society, where everybody knows everyone else.

Searching a black cat in a dark room

The journalists' ability to acquire information in the country is like a search for a proverbial black cat in a dark room.



The main task of journalists is to disseminate information. Journalists' ability to disseminate verified information depends on the protection of their right to seek and access information. Denial of the right to access information compromises their duty to disseminate information. This is the fundamental dilemma of free journalism in Bhutan. Journalists have been bestowed with the freedom to disseminate information without any corresponding freedom to access information (Lamboglia, 2022).

This indirectly affects the freedom of the media in Bhutan. Right to information is yet to see the light of the day. Government regulations prevent civil servants from sharing information with the media and there is no systematic and institutional mechanism to facilitate access to information. In this situation, personal contacts, anonymity, and discreteness rule the system of accessing information. This process obviously affects the validity and reliability of information. Journalists struggle to pick up beats that are not repetitive, superficial and bland. Successive governments have placed the right to information in the cold storage. The journalists' ability to acquire information in the country is like a search for a proverbial black cat in a dark room. Largely due to recent weakening of the institutional arrangement to access information, mainly because of restrictions placed on the civil servants to speak to the media, the press freedom ranking of Bhutan declined steeply from 33 in 2022 to 90 in 2023.

Right to anonymity and protection of sources

The freedom to provide information also requires protection of journalists' right to non-disclosure of sources. None of the laws in Bhutan ensures the protection of journalists' right to non-disclosure of sources of information. It is based on discretionary arrangements. Some journalists in Bhutan have experienced threats and harassment aimed at forcing them

to reveal the source of their story. A Kuensel article, "Stress of being a journalist" illustrated an incidence of harassment a journalist faced for not disclosing the source of the story (RGoB, 2022). In the absence of any documentation, the magnitude of this problem is not known. Some journalists have also faced defamation charges.

Objective

This study is primarily aimed at generating data on the current state of journalism in Bhutan with the focus on three basic issues – safety and security of journalists, rights of journalists, and freedom to access information. There is no documented evidence on the level of freedom and professional space for journalists to effectively perform their duty. The broad aim of this study is to gather baseline data, which will support evidence-based interventions to tackle emerging challenges facing the mass media in Bhutan. The findings will be disseminated across relevant audiences to determine corrective measures.

Specific questions of the study were:

- 1** Provide an updated demographic information of the journalists in Bhutan.
- 2** What are the major safety and security threats to the journalists in Bhutan?
- 3** How effective is the policy framework to ensure safety and security of the journalists in Bhutan?
- 4** How effective is the legal environment to protect the rights of journalists?
- 5** How effective is the political environment to protect the rights of journalists?
- 6** How effective is the economic environment to protect the rights of journalists?
- 7** What is the level of ease to access information?
- 8** Which sources are easy/difficult to obtain information from?
- 9** What is the intensity of the problem of refusal to provide information?
- 10** What are the major obstacles to access information?

Q

Methodological framework

Right to anonymity and protection of sources

The survey aims to capture the current state of journalism in Bhutan, specifically in terms of the safety and security of journalists, rights of journalists, and access to information. Besides, this survey captures gender-specific information. All the survey questions are close-ended, except one. All responses are captured in an ascending order of risk/difficulty. A five-point Likert scale is used to measure the sample's perception on various relevant issues. Descriptive and inferential statistics are used for the analysis. To concisely analyse the major issues, a composite index is created for the analysis of safety and security and the rights of journalists. Composite indices of legal, political and economic environments for the rights of journalists were developed. Each index is calculated by taking the average score of the relevant questions and rescaling them out of 100. The composite score is categorised as low risk/difficulty (0-29.9), moderate risk/difficulty (30-69.9), high risk/difficulty (70-100). This categorisation is based on the freedom house methodological framework (Freedom House, 2016). Composite index for safety and security is also calculated and analysed in a similar manner.

Study design

A single-stage study was conducted to estimate the current state of the journalists in Bhutan. All the journalists in Bhutan form the population for this study. A nation-wide cross-sectional survey was undertaken to collect the required primary data through three methods – an extensive questionnaire-based survey (Annexure 1), focused group discussion (Annexure 2), and key informant interviews (Annexure 3). The survey and the questionnaire were designed to collect valid and reliable data.

Sample design

In the absence of any information on the population size, a single stage cluster-based approach was applied to select the samples. Thirteen media houses and freelancers served as clusters that included 7 Newspapers, 1 TV station, 3 radio stations, 2 OTT platforms, and one separate category – freelancers. These clusters contain the entire population of this study. A list of journalists from each cluster was obtained, which served as the sample frame. The freelancers' list was obtained from the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB). Based on the sample frame, the population of journalists in Bhutan is 136. A pilot survey was undertaken before the survey questionnaire was applied for data collection. The pilot survey was carried out on 10 September, 2023. The actual survey was undertaken between 12 September, 2023 and 19 September, 2023. Each selected member of the population was contacted through email as well as mobile phone. A google survey form was shared with them. Reminders were sent to those who did not respond in the next two days. Ninety eight journalists responded to the request to complete the survey, of which three responses were removed due to discrepancies. The actual sample size of the study is 95, and the calculated margin of error is 5.25 percent.



Sample units

Journalists under each cluster served as the sample unit. For this study, a journalist is defined as “A person who works as an editor, writer, reporter, correspondent, photographer, proofreader, and cartoonist, mainly as a primary and substantive activity, either on a digital platform or in a traditional print and electronic media, either employed by others or as a freelancer.”

Focused group discussion

A semi-structured focused group discussion amongst nine members representing various media houses was carried out on 28 September, 2023. The agenda for the discussion was based on the issues that emerged from the initial findings and desk review. This allowed more in-depth review of the major issues concerning the media houses and journalists in Bhutan. Major findings of the discussion are integrated into the relevant parts of the report.

The actual sample size of the study is 95, and the calculated margin of error is 5.25 percent.

Limitations of the study


Findings of this study are subject to the following limitations:

1 Cluster sampling tends to induce higher risk of bias as compared to probability sampling. Given that the members between clusters are less homogenous, it may result in over representation of certain subgroups.

2 In cluster sampling, some clusters are randomly selected and the entire population of the selected cluster is studied. However, in this study, all the clusters were included and the entire population of each cluster was included. The response rate was about 70 percent.



The small readership, the small size of the economy, and scarce resources have contributed to the challenges of the mass media in Bhutan.



Findings

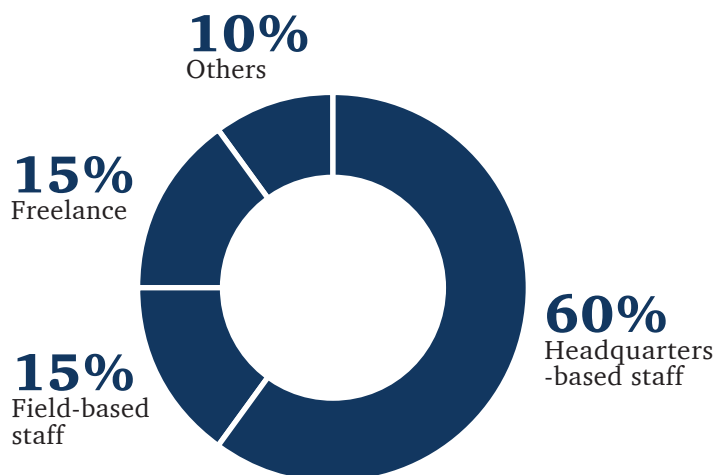
**An overview of
journalism in Bhutan**

Youthful, mixed experienced and female firepower journalism

Unlike any other profession, journalism in Bhutan displays greater gender parity, with 44 percent of journalists being female. The average age of journalists in Bhutan is 34 years, while the average age of female journalists is 29 years, and male journalists 38 years. Journalists in Bhutan have a good mix of experience, all four categories (less than 1 year, 1-5 years, 5-10 years and more than 10 years) have almost equal representation.

In terms of occupational category, headquarters staff dominate with 60 percent share, followed by hired field-based staff and freelancers (reporters) each constituting 15 percent share, while others constitute 10 percent share.

Figure 3: Occupational category of the journalists in Bhutan



The newspaper is the most dominant primary medium of work for journalists in Bhutan (41%), followed by TV (27%), radio and online (13% each), and others (OTT), the youngest medium, holds 6 percent share (Figure 4). Seventy two percent of journalists use online platforms as the secondary medium. Female journalists prefer TV and online as the primary medium more than their male counterparts. Thirty three percent of female journalists are engaged in TV, while only 23 percent of male journalists are engaged in TV. Similarly, in online platforms, 14 percent of female journalists are involved as compared to 11 percent of male journalists. In the print media, radio and other media, a greater fraction of male journalists are engaged (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Primary medium of work for the journalists in Bhutan

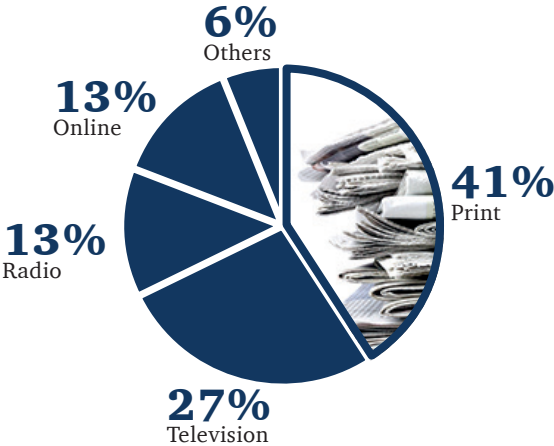
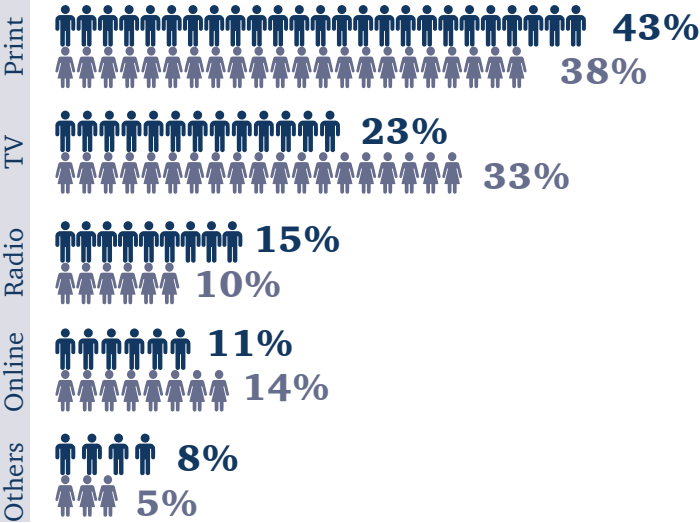
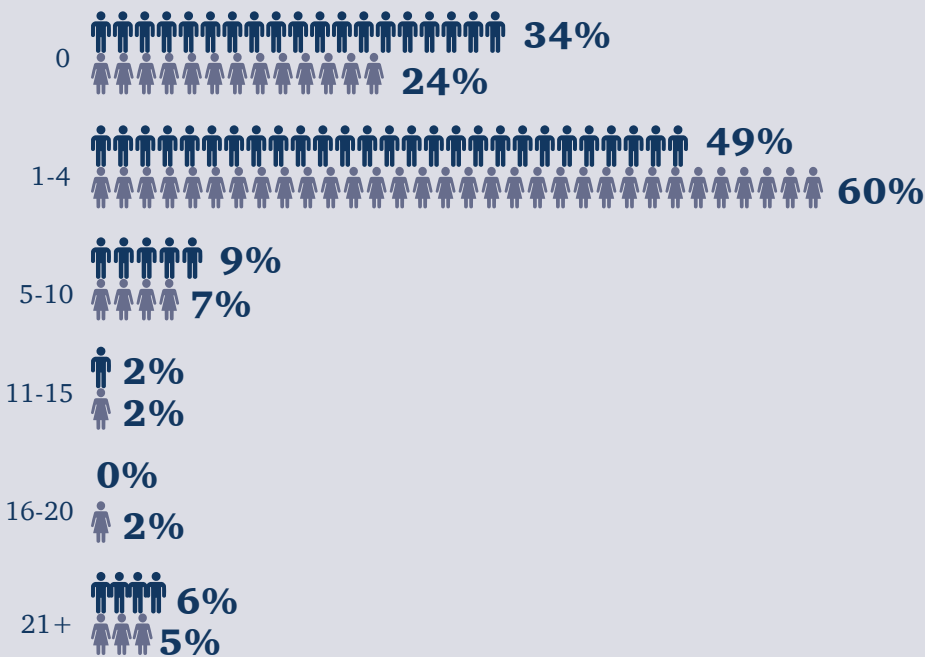


Figure 5: Primary medium of work for the journalists in Bhutan, gender-wise




About half of the journalists publish/cover 2 to 4 stories a week, 12 percent of journalists cover 5 to 7 stories a week, while another 12 percent of journalists cover more than 8 stories a week. Almost two thirds (66%) of journalists work on pitches. About 54 percent of journalists receive 1 to 4 pitches a week. 8.5 percent of journalists receive 5 to 10 pitches a week. Interestingly, 5 percent of journalists receive more than 21 pitches a week. The survey shows that 60 percent of the journalists who receive 21+ pitches a week have 5 to 10 years of journalistic experience, while 20% of the journalists with more than 10 years of experience receive 21+ pitches. Greenhorn journalists receive fewer pitches.

Figure 6: Percentage of pitches received every week



Gender-wise disaggregation of work shows that females share a disproportionately larger share in the pitches received. About 60 percent of female journalists receive 1 to 4 pitches a week as compared to 49 percent of the male journalists. The share of female journalists in the higher number of pitches received is not much different from the male journalists (Figure 6).

Fewer female journalists join professional association



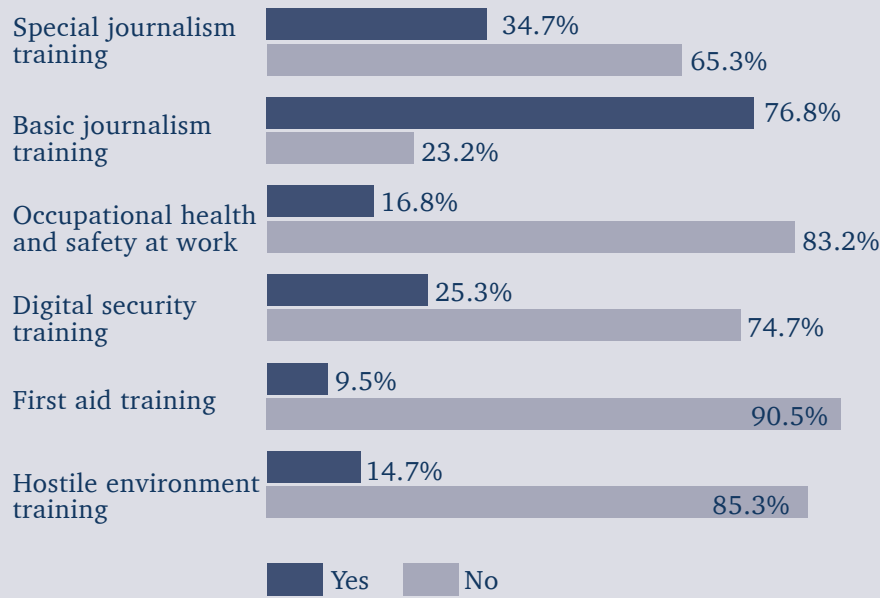
Only 46 percent of journalists with less than one year of experience are members of JAB, as compared to 76 percent of journalists with more than 5 years of experience.

Journalists’ Association of Bhutan (JAB) is a professional body that aims to strengthen the constitutional rights of journalists, foster professionalism among them and provide protection to them. About 66 percent of the journalists in Bhutan are members of JAB. Ninety three percent freelance journalists are registered with JAB, 87 percent of the journalists engaged with print media are the members of JAB, while a much lower percentage of the journalists with TV (46%) and radio (42%) are registered with JAB. Seventy six percent of male journalists are members of JAB as compared to only 55 percent of female journalists. Lower propensity of female journalists to be members of JAB is a potential source of limited institutional support to female journalists in Bhutan. Only 46 percent of journalists with less than one year of experience are members of JAB, as compared to 76 percent of journalists with more than 5 years of experience. JAB needs to expand its umbrella to promote membership among inexperienced journalists, female journalists and those working with TV and radio.

Undertrained professionals

While 77 percent of journalists in Bhutan have received basic journalism training, only 35 percent of them have received specialised training, only 17 percent have received training on occupational health and safety, 25 percent have received training on digital security, only 10 percent received first aid training, and 15 percent of them received hostile environment training (Figure 7). There is a definite need to train journalists to meet the emerging challenges of journalism. The survey reveals that gender-based differences do not exist in training opportunities, except in the case of occupational health and safety training where the coverage rate is almost half for female journalists (12%) as compared to male journalists (21%).

Figure 7: Various training received



Higher attrition rate among journalists has led to a major focus on basic journalism training and the media houses run out of funds to support other training.

Personal safety and security risk

Bhutanese journalists are safe

The survey shows that only 7 percent of journalists feel very unsafe or unsafe in Bhutan, 40 percent feel that they are moderately safe, 41 percent feel safe and 12 percent feel very safe in Bhutan.

Physical and psychological safety of journalists is a necessary prerequisite to protect the rights of journalists. Globally, journalists face increased threat to their safety and security. On the contrary, Bhutan provides a safe working environment for journalists.

The survey shows that only 7 percent of journalists feel very unsafe or unsafe in Bhutan, 40 percent feel that they are moderately safe, 41 percent feel safe and 12 percent feel very safe in Bhutan. On a descending scale of safe working environment, the average score is 2.44 out of 5, the mean score of safety for male journalists is 2.34, as compared to 2.57 for female journalists. Female journalists face a relatively risky working environment.

Out of 17 domains of safety and security of journalists (Figure 8) in 11 domains, journalists are very safe, in 2 domains they are safe, while in 4 domains they are unsafe. If 70 percent or more reported no incidence under any domain, the domain is defined as very safe, 50-70 percent margin of no incidence is defined as safe, if no incidence is lower than 50 percent it is treated as an unsafe domain.

Very safe domain

About 8 percent of journalists faced ambush situations, 4 percent stated that their property was attacked, and 17 percent faced physical intimidation.

Eight percent of journalists experienced physical surveillance, 13 percent stated that their equipment was under surveillance. Eleven percent of journalists faced sexual harassment, while only 2 percent experienced sexual violence. Nineteen percent of female journalists faced sexual harassment as compared to 4 percent of male journalists. Women journalists are at a greater risk of gender-based violence.

Three percent of journalists were subjected to illegal detention, 14 percent faced defamation charges, 3 percent faced criminal charges, and 6 percent were subject to violation of anonymity.

Safe domain

Online intimidation and threat are other areas of threat to journalists in Bhutan. Twenty eight percent of journalists admitted to having personally experienced such threats. Twenty percent of journalists faced digital hacking.

Unsafe domain

Insult, abuse or hate speech is the most prevalent form of harassment to journalists in Bhutan. Thirty nine percent of journalists personally experienced such incidents. Twenty five percent of journalists experienced trolling on social media. Journalists who experience such incidence are less likely to engage with the audience and adopt self-censorship.

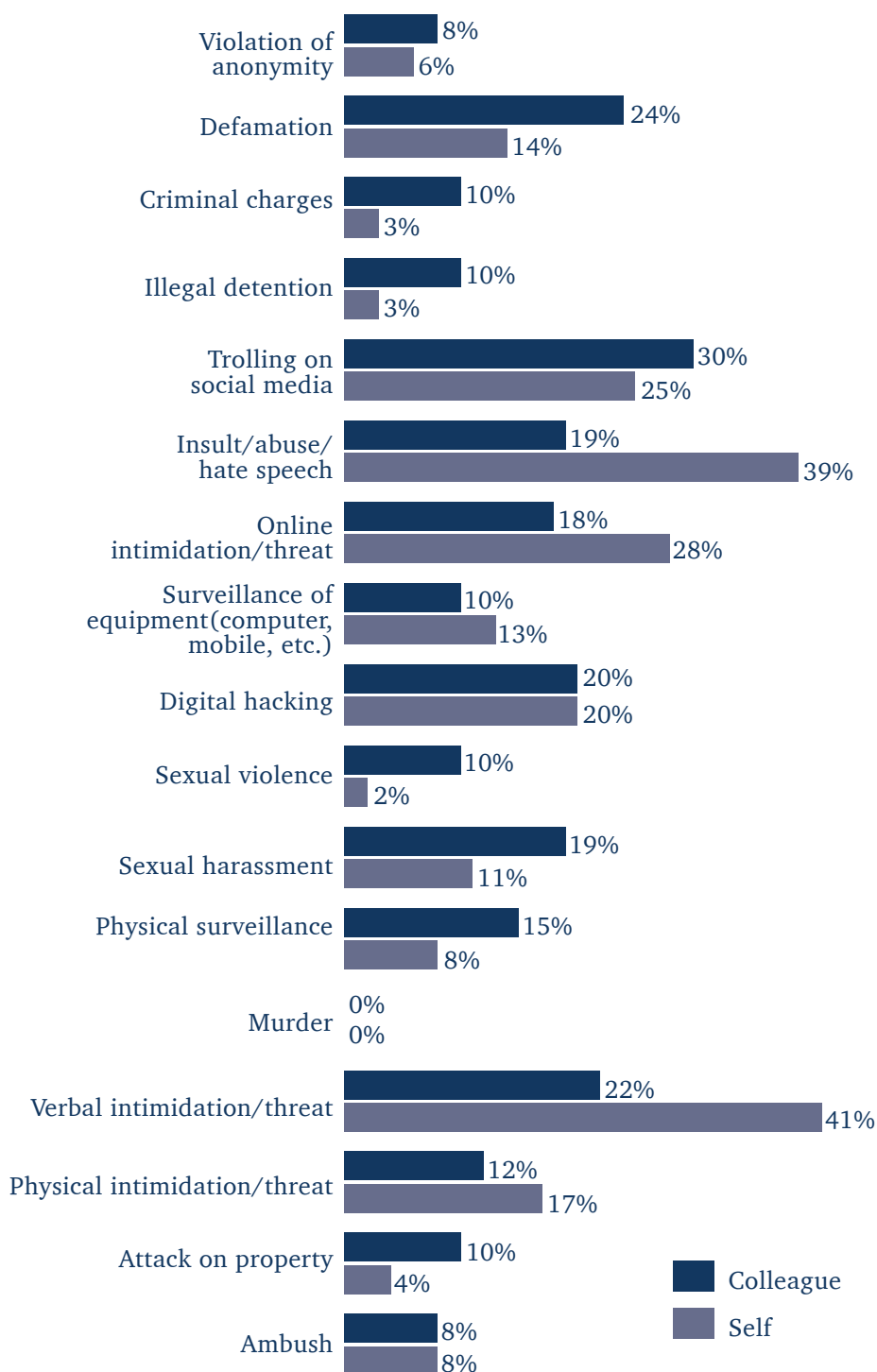
Verbal intimidation and threat is the most prevalent risk to journalists in Bhutan, with 41 percent of journalists saying that they experienced such threats. In none of the domains, except sexual harassment, gender differences are large. In fact, male journalists receive greater online threat, insult, abuse, hate speech, and trolling compared to their female counterparts.

TV journalists reported that social media had become very critical and has trolled/abused them.

Journalists working in print media are the most affected victims of crime against journalists in Bhutan, while journalists working on the online platforms face disproportionately large attacks on their safety and security.

The issue of safety and security of journalists is also associated with the kind of stories they cover. Most journalists in Bhutan practise self-censorship and focus on non-controversial stories, consequently they do not experience threats to personal safety and security. However, those who cover investigative/analytical stories tend to have psychological fear and face safety and security challenges. TV journalists reported that social media had become very critical and has trolled/abused them.

Figure 8: Domains of personal safety and security risks to journalists (% share)




Composite index of safety and security



Higher levels of self-censorship are probably a reason why journalism in Bhutan is a less risky profession compared to other parts of the world.

The average score on this index is 53, which reflects only a low moderate risk to the personal safety and security of journalists, with minor and statistically insignificant difference between the average scores of male and female. The average score on this index, differentiated on the basis of primary media, reflects that the risk to personal safety and security of journalists is low moderate, with radio (45) and others (48) facing the least risk, while online (58), TV (55) and print media (53) have higher risk to personal safety and security. From the occupational category perspective, others (44) and freelancers (49) operate in the least risky areas, while field-based staff (57) face a higher risk.

Inverted U-shaped self-censorship



About 59 percent of journalists practise self-censorship sometimes, while 25 percent practise it often (Figure 9). Self-censorship is a mechanism to reduce the risk to personal safety and security. Higher levels of self-censorship are probably a reason why journalism in Bhutan is a less risky profession compared to other parts of the world. Journalists refrain from publishing stories that are controversial, and politically and socially risky. A higher percentage of male journalists (30%) tend to practise self-censorship more often than female journalists (19%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Practice of self-censorship

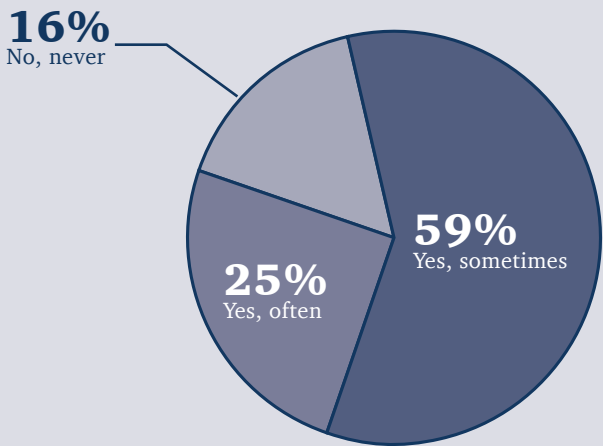
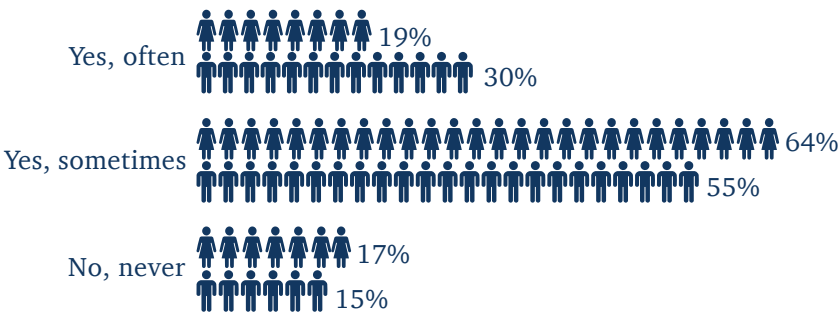


Figure 10: Practice of self-censorship, gender-wise



The incidence of self-censorship follows an inverted U-shaped pattern with respect to experience — 75 percent of less experienced journalists practise self-censorship compared to 96 percent of mid-level journalists and 75 percent of very senior journalists.

Fifty three percent of journalists stated small society syndrome as the most important reason for self-censorship. Fear of backlash is found to be the second most important reason for self-censorship, with 48 percent of journalists citing it as a reason. Rest of the reasons (external regulations and avoid possibility of incitement and fear of losing job) are almost equally rated.

Policy on safety and security

Gaps in the organisational support to journalists

Organisational policy framework for the safety and security of journalists is important to address the challenges journalists face through a well-defined institutional system. Such a framework covers both precautionary measures and curative measures relating to the personal safety and security of journalists.

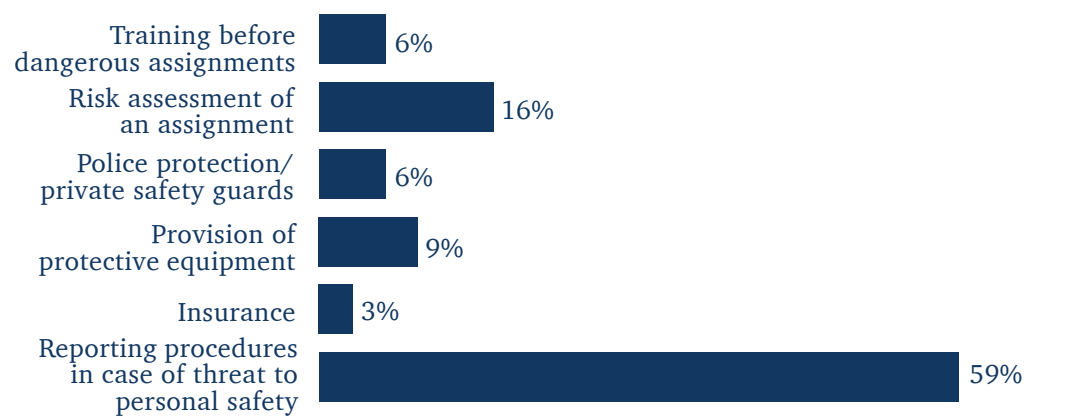
Forty percent of journalists stated that their workplace has a policy on safety and security, 25 percent said such a policy does not exist, while 35 percent was not aware whether such a policy exists. Thirty one percent of journalists reported that the policy related to their safety and security is effectively implemented, 11 percent reported that the policy is not effectively implemented, while 58 percent of them were unaware of it.

An organisational policy for safety and security of journalists requires a mechanism through which issues are reported. Only 46 percent of journalists reported affirmatively about the existence of such a reporting mecha-

nism in their organisations. Fifty four percent of journalists said that they reported to their employers about the incidents adversely affecting their safety and security, while 25 percent reported to government authorities (police), 13 percent reported to the association (JAB) and 8 percent did not report the incident to anyone. Only 28 percent of journalists reported that their employers had safety and security measures in place, 37 percent reported negatively, while 35 percent were not aware whether such measures were in place.

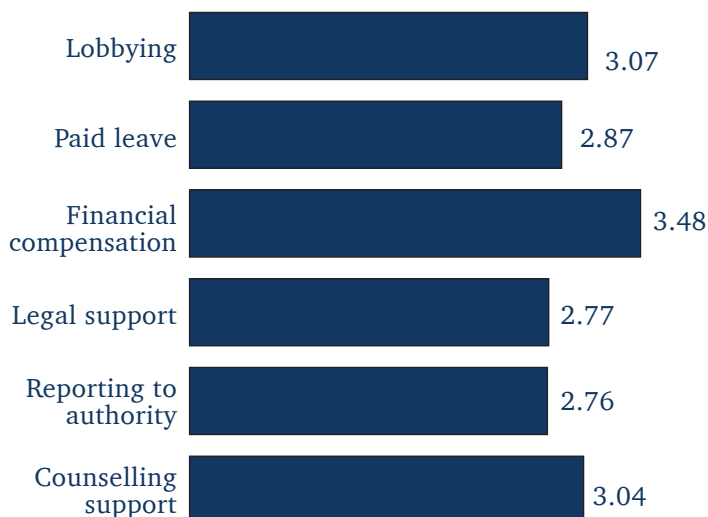
Of the journalists who reported safety and security measures existed at their workplace, 59 percent identified clear reporting procedures as the most prominent measure in place. Risk assessment of an assignment is found to be the second most prevalent measure (17%), while provision of protective equipment (9%), police protection (6%) and pre-assignment training (6%), and insurance (3%) are less prevalent measures (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Coverage rate of safety and security measures for journalists



The type of support provided by employers/associations plays an important role in mitigating the impact of an incident adversely affecting the safety and security of journalists. The efficacy of policy support is measured through the mean value of Likert scale of 5, whose higher values reflect higher unlikelihood of policy support. Organisations are perceived to be only moderately likely to report the case to the authorities, provide legal support to affected journalists and grant paid leave to them. Counselling and lobbying are perceived to be an unlikely action taken by their organisations, while financial compensations are perceived to be the least likely choice of action by the organisations (Figure 12). Organisational support to affected journalists is not perceived to be holistic and substantive. This virtually leaves journalists in Bhutan without an effective protective umbrella to mitigate the risk.

Figure 12: Post-incidence support index from employers or association to journalists



Rights of journalists

The rights of journalists are determined by the environment in which they operate. This study focuses on three environments – **legal, political and economic.**

A weaker legal environment

As government-owned media houses compete with private media, the question of preferential access to information to the public media is pertinent.

The legal framework in a country regulates the work of journalists. The regulatory system provides for the rights of journalists as well as ensure the protection of their rights. The legal environment is created by the rules and regulations governing the rights of the media, usually guaranteed by the constitution and other regulatory systems. Sixty one percent of journalists agreed that the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan and other legal systems protect the rights of journalists, while 26 percent believed otherwise, and 13 percent were ignorant about it.

The extent to which journalists believe that the government is likely to uphold legal protection of the rights of the media is an important indicator of the faith of journalists in the institutional system. Fifty four percent of journalists only moderately agree that the government is likely to uphold legal protection of journalists, while 36 percent believe that the government is unlikely or very unlikely to protect journalists' rights. Only 11 percent of journalists have faith in the government to protect their rights.

Implicit impunity for crime against journalists is globally emerging as a major challenge as the perpetrators of crime against journalists are let free. It promotes crime against journalists and forces them to adopt self-censorship. Implicit impunity

is not an issue in Bhutan. About 42 percent of journalists believe that implicit impunity is unlikely to be provided, while another 50 percent believe it is only moderately likely that perpetrators of crime against journalists get implicit impunity.

Journalists' right to access information is not perceived to be clearly defined. About 54 percent of journalists in Bhutan believe that this right is not clearly defined and 37 percent believe it has only a moderate level of clarity. Only 8 percent of journalists believe that their right to access information is clearly defined. Fifty percent of journalists believe that there is no clear procedure to secure public records, while 42 percent believe that the procedure to secure public records is only moderately clear. Remaining 8 percent of journalists believe that such procedures are clearly defined.

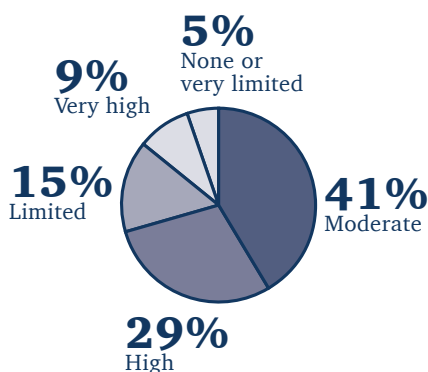
As government-owned media houses compete with private media, the question of preferential access to information to the public media is pertinent. Thirty five percent of journalists believe that the government-owned media have preferential access to information, while 34 percent believe that it is only moderately likely that the government owned-media are given favourable treatment. Thirty one percent of journalists do not perceive this as a likely situation.

Political environment

Limited choices for journalists

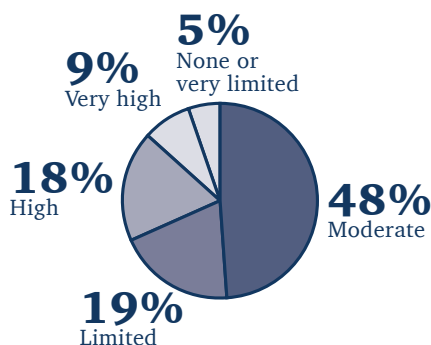
The democratic foundation of political institutions determines the degree of freedom journalists have to express. Editorial directions and pressure from authorities have a large impact on the freedom of journalists to work. Journalists in Bhutan work under a strict control in terms of the choice of stories. Thirty eight percent of journalists reported that such pressure is high or very high, 41 percent believe it is moderate, 15 percent think that such pressure is limited and only 5 percent believe that they have complete freedom to select their stories (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Magnitude of control on the choice of stories



The government-owned media (Kuen-sel and BBS) are very dominant in Bhutan and their ability to represent views of the entire political spectrum is crucial for free journalism. Forty eight percent of journalists moderately believe that the government-owned media are pluralistic, while the remaining 52 are split into two extreme opinions – less likely and more likely to represent pluralistic perspectives. Only 9 percent of journalists fully believe that the government-owned media are free from biases and act as a neutral player (Figure 14).

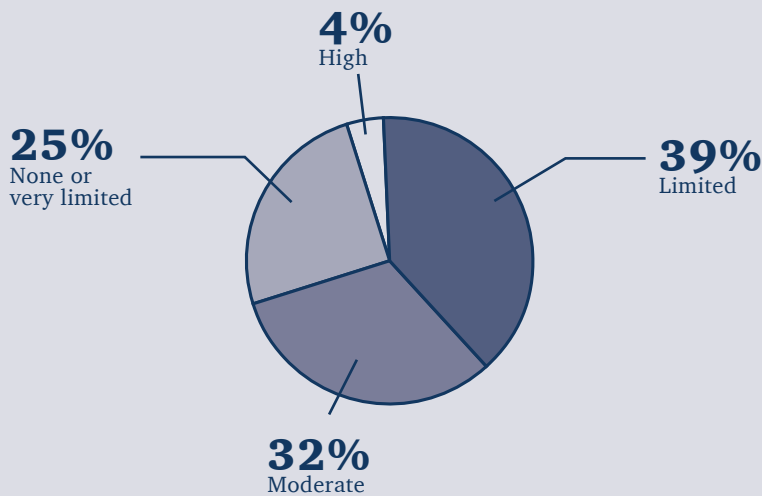
Figure 14: Does government-owned media represent views of the entire political spectrum?



Distance from journalists

The willingness of public officials to talk and impart information is an important feature of deliberative democracy. It is reflective of transparency and accountability in their operation. The unwillingness of public officials to talk to media personnel reflects inhibitions to share information or deliberate. None of journalists very strongly believe that government officials are willing to talk to journalists. Sixty four percent of journalists believe that public officials are very unlikely or unlikely to talk to them, while the remaining 32 percent only moderately believe so. Only 4 percent of journalists think that public officials are highly willing to talk to them. It is quite clear that public officials are either apprehensive or reluctant to talk to the media, adversely affecting transparency and accountability (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Willingness of public officials to talk to journalists



Those who are willing to talk are not perceived to be fair in terms of giving equal access to all representatives of the media, only 16 percent believe that they provide fair access. Forty eight percent only moderately believe that public officials provide equal access to information, 36 percent believe that it is unlikely or highly unlikely for public officials to grant fair access to information.

To let or not to let

Interestingly, 41 percent of journalists do not have any idea about the existence of an official censorship body. Thirty six percent of journalists believe that there is no official censorship body. About a third of journalists believe that journalists are highly subjected to external censorship, about a half of them rate moderate chances for external censorship. Only 17 percent of journalists believe in a lower likelihood of external censorship imposed on them.

Thirty two percent of journalists reported that it is likely and highly likely that published/broadcast materials are subject to pre-censorship, whereas 50 percent moderately believe so. Only 18 percent of journalists consider that pre-censorship is unlikely to be practised.

Investigative journalism is a hallmark of free media and allows it to play the role of a watchdog. Due to its nature, it is subject to extreme pressure on journalists. Fifty five percent of journalists in Bhutan reported that they are very hesitant to practise investigative journalism. Only 10 percent of journalists are more comfortable/less hesitant to pursue investigative stories, while 35 percent are moderately hesitant to pick up investigative stories.

Unlike traditional media, online publications are considered less susceptible to censorship. Thirty-four percent of journalists believe that online publications are more unlikely to be subjected to censorship, while 22

percent of them believe that online publications are likely to be subjected to censorship. About 44 percent think that the likelihood of censorship on online publications is moderate. Online publications also come under the scanner and can be subjected to blocking, filtration or removal, representing post-publication censorship. The incidence of post-publication censorship on online publications is perceived to be less prevalent. Forty three percent of journalists think that post-publication censorship is unlikely or highly unlikely, while 15 percent think such incidents are likely to happen.

Three organisations that are more likely to impose external censorship are armed forces (61%), regulatory authorities (45%) and ministries (39%). Three organisations that are least likely to impose external censorship are corporate and business (14%), local governments (14%), and political parties (22%). It portrays an interesting picture: the central government and its agencies are more likely to impose censorship, while the local governments and political parties are less likely to impose censorship.

Externally imposed censorship is also accompanied by a large application of self-censorship by journalists in Bhutan. This is potentially a big challenge for media freedom and to the rights of journalists due to a political environment that is not conducive for media freedom.

Economic environment

Media on crutches

The economics of media is an important determinant of media freedom. Media houses with strong and independent financial incomes are more likely to pursue a path of freedom. Their dependence on government resources makes them more vulnerable. Sixty four percent of journalists believe that media houses are less or very less likely to operate independently due to resource constraints, while 24 percent think they are moderately likely to operate independently. Only 12 percent believe that media houses are likely to operate independently. Fifty five percent of journalists believe that media houses do not have preferential access to credit, 36 percent believe that access to preferential credit to media houses is only moderately likely, while only 9 percent think that media houses have preferential access to credit.

Due to the small size of the market and declining readership, and limited private advertisements, the media houses are not able to generate adequate revenue to achieve financial sustainability. The government subsidy to the media is an important source of financial resources and keeps them afloat. Only 24 percent of journalists believe that the government subsidy is not adequate, 31 percent believe that it is highly adequate, and 45 percent think it is moderately adequate. About a third of journalists believe that government subsidies are unlikely to be fairly allocated, 15 percent believe that is likely to be fairly allocated, and 40 percent think it is moderately likely that government subsidies are fairly allocated, based on the market size. No

media house in Bhutan is financially self-sustainable.

Their dependence on the government makes them more beholden to the government. Government advertisements are an important source of revenue for the media. The government can use this situation as a leverage to scuttle the media's autonomy and freedom. Thirty six percent of journalists believe that the government is likely or highly likely to restrict advertisements to certain media houses, 21 percent believe that the government is more likely to fairly allocate advertisements, and 43 percent it is moderately likely that the government allocates advertisements on a partisan basis.

Good quality infrastructure is important for the media to operate effectively and profitably. Forty four percent believe that infrastructural bottlenecks limit the dissemination of information in the country, 38 percent believe that infrastructural bottlenecks have moderate impact on the dissemination of information, rest cite it as a moderate issue.

An overwhelmingly large portion of respondents, 70 percent, reported that media houses find it difficult to be financially sustainable, while another 21 percent believe that difficulty to create sustainable media houses is moderate.

Exclusive dependence on government support, infrastructural bottlenecks, and partisan approach to provide support to selected media houses tend to create a restrictive economic environment for journalists and media's right to be a free voice of society.

Composite index of risk to rights of journalists

Composite index of legal environment

This index takes into account the following factors – legal protection to journalists' rights, the government's propensity to uphold it, access to information, clarity of procedures and non-discriminatory treatment between publicly and privately-owned media. The composite score of this index is 64, which implies that the legal environment is moderately risky for the rights of journalists. Gender disaggregated composite score of this index is 63 for male and 66 for female journalists. T test shows that gender difference in the mean value of this index is statistically not significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.159) > 0.1$ (Figure 16). The index varies across primary mediums, with moderately risky legal environments for radio (59) to high risk legal environments for online journalists (70). Results of ANOVA reflect that differences between mean values across primary media are statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.085) < 0.1$ (Figure 17). The index does not vary much across occupational categories, from 63 for field-based journalists to 67 for freelancers. Results of ANOVA reflect that the differences in the mean score across occupational categories are not statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.526) > 0.05$ (Figure 18). The legal environment is least conducive for upholding the rights of online journalists, freelancers, and while it is also moderately restrictive for others.

Composite index of political environment

This index takes into account the following factors – the ability to act independently without pressure, representation of the voices of the entire political spectrum, magnitude of explicit and implicit external censorship and self-censorship. The composite score of this index is 64, which indicates a moderately risky political environment for the rights of journalists. Gender disaggregated composite score of this index is 63 for male and 65 for female journalists. T test shows that gender difference in the mean value of this index is statistically not significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.259) > 0.1$ (Figure 16). Mean value of this index varies across primary media, ranging from 60 for radio to 69 for online journalists. However, ANOVA results show that the differences in the mean score across primary media are not statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.315) > 0.1$ (Figure 17). Like the composite index of legal environment, the mean value of this index is almost uniform, ranging from 63 for field-based journalists to 67 for freelancers. ANOVA results also show that the differences in the mean score across occupational categories are not statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.809) > 0.1$ (Figure 18).

Composite index of economic environment

Freelancers, press, online media and others are the most vulnerable groups to the prevailing economic environment to uphold the rights of journalists.

This index takes into account the following factors – adequacy of financial resources, infrastructure, fairness of government support, and overall financial viability. The composite score of this index is 68, which indicates a moderately risky economic environment for the rights of journalists. The economic environment is not conducive for the media houses and consequently journalists to ensure financial sustainability and consequent autonomy. It also represents the most risky environment for the rights of journalists. Logically, there is no difference in the gender disaggregated mean score for this index, 69 for male and 68 for female. T test shows that gender difference in the mean value of this index is statistically not significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.839) > 0.1$ (Figure 16). Mean value of this index varies across primary media, ranging from 65 for TV and radio to 73 for others. ANOVA results show that the differences in the mean score across primary media are statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.057) < 0.1$ (Figure 17). The mean value of this index varies widely across occupational categories, ranging from 63 for others to 73 for the freelancers. ANOVA results show that the differences in the mean score across occupation categories are statistically significant at 10 percent confidence level, as $p(0.075) < 0.1$ (Figure 18). Freelancers, press, online media and others are the most vulnerable groups to the prevailing economic environment to uphold the rights of journalists.

Figure 16: Mean score on composite indices: gender-wise

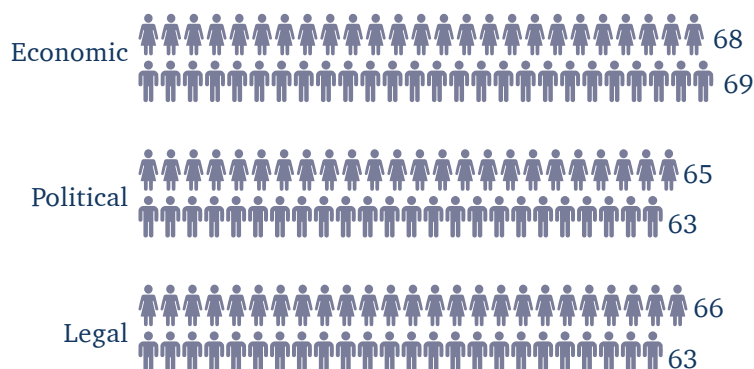


Figure 17: Mean score on composite indices: primary medium-wise

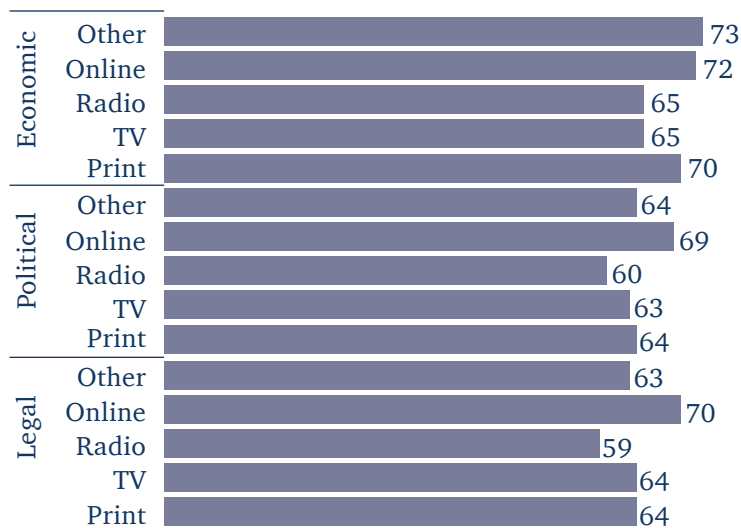
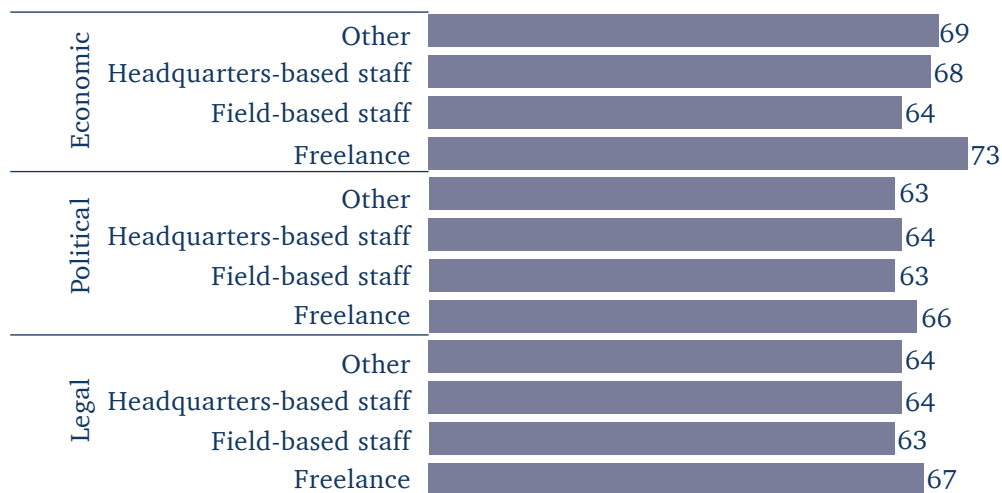


Figure 18: Mean score on composite indices: occupation category-wise



Overall index of the risk to the rights of journalists



This index takes into account two elements – **safety and security, and rights of the journalists**. It was constructed by taking an equal weighted average of the composite indices of legal, political and economic environment for the rights of journalists. Average score on this index is 65, with the minor difference between male (65) and female scores (66). Online journalists with a score of 70 face a highly risky environment, followed by others (67) print (66). Freelance (69) and home-based staff (65) are the most vulnerable in terms of the protection of their rights.

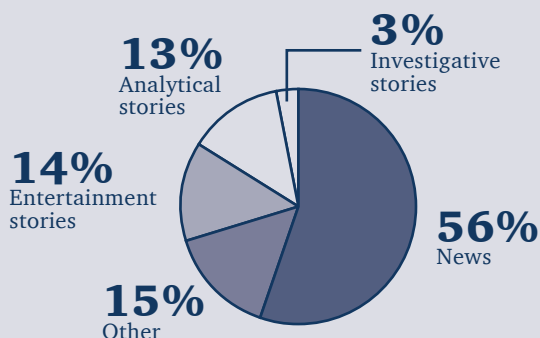
Access to information

Information is key for journalists. To produce stories, journalists need to obtain information from relevant sources. Research shows that journalists' ability to produce good stories depends on the selection of right sources by balancing the competing needs of accessibility, speed, quality, and risk (Hertzum, 2022) (Diekerhof, 2023). The ease of access to required information is critical for journalists to exercise their freedom to produce and disseminate information. The ease of accessing information is largely determined by the nature of stories covered and cultivated relationship with the selected sources (Hertzum, 2022).

News items and social issues most covered

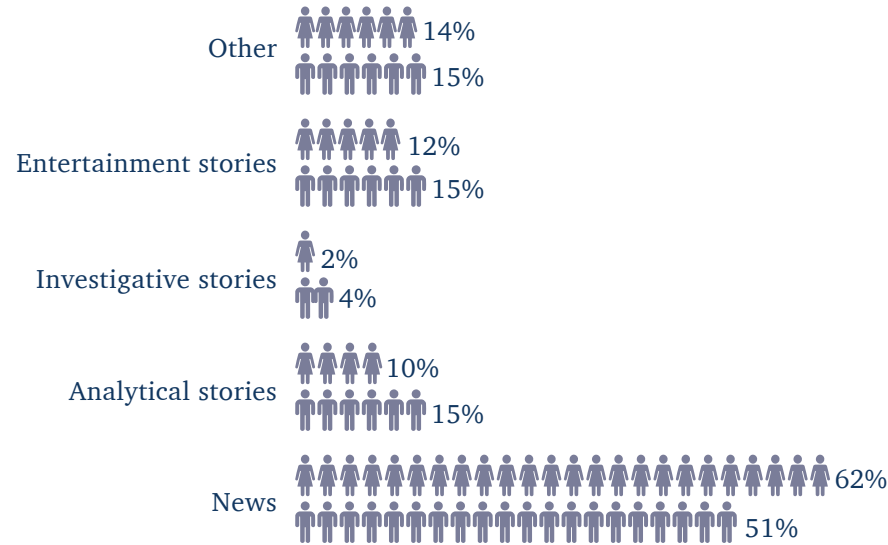
Most journalists write news articles (56%), while analytical stories, entertainment stories and others are almost equal in proportions (about 12% each), very few journalists (3%) write investigative stories (Figure 19).

Figure 19: What do the Bhutanese journalists mostly write/publish?



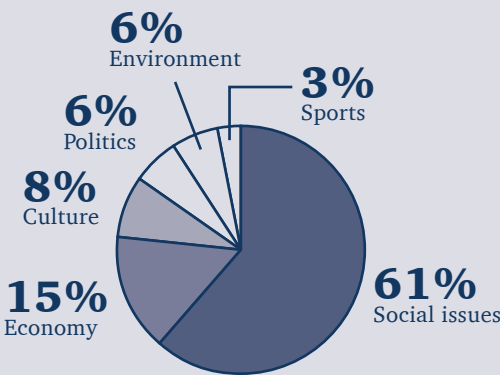
The choice of stories reflects almost a common pattern between male and female journalists in Bhutan, news items are most preferred, investigative stories are least preferred and rest are almost equally preferred. A larger fraction of female journalists prefers to cover news items (62%) as compared to male journalists (51%). Only 2 percent of female journalists pick up investigative stories as compared to 4 percent of male journalists (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Gender-wise differences in the choice of stories



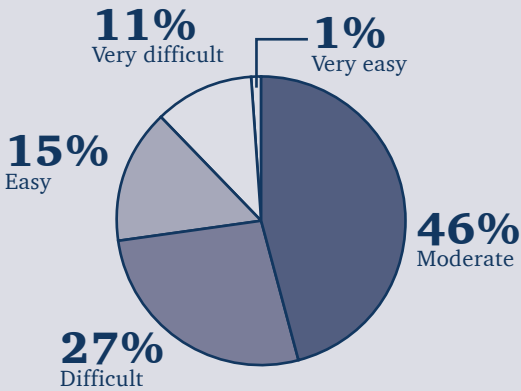
A large percentage of Bhutanese journalists prefers to write about social issues (61%), followed by the economy (15%). Culture, entertainment, politics and sports are other categories covered in a descending order of importance, together accounting for 24 percent of published items (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Issues covered by the journalists in Bhutan



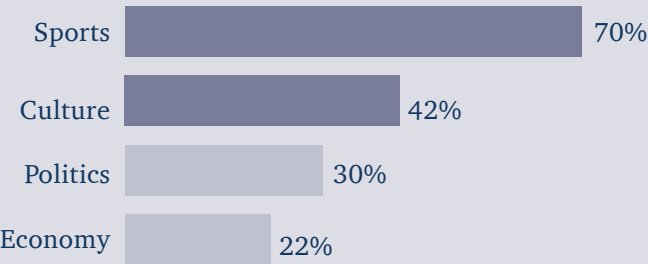
Thirty eight percent of journalists reported that they find it difficult or very difficult to get information, 16 percent find it relatively easy to get required information and the rest find it moderately difficult to get information (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Ease of access to information on the major issues covered by the journalists



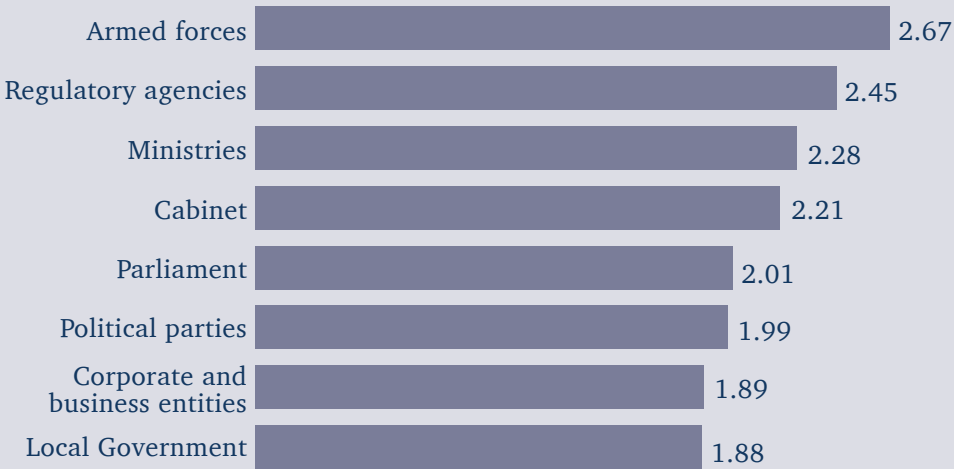
Most journalists find it easiest to get information on sports (70%) and culture (42%), while information related to politics (30%) and economy (22%) are the two most difficult areas to obtain information on (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Ease of obtaining information on various issues



The ease of getting information is measured on an ascending order of difficulty using a Likert scale of 3. A higher mean score reflects higher difficulty to access information. Various sources of information are compared for the ease/difficulty with which they impart information. Based on the mean score, local government (1.88), business entities (1.89) and political parties (1.99) are found to be sources that are more open to share information, while armed forces (2.67), regulatory agencies (2.45) and ministries (2.28) are more restrictive to share information (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Sources on the level of ease of obtaining information

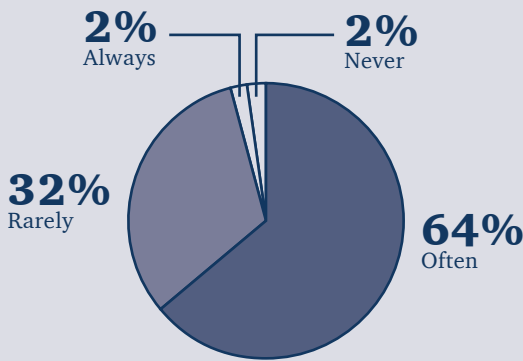


For the journalists in Bhutan, personal contacts (38%) are the most widely used source of information, followed by experts (24%), and government agencies (17%). NGOs and international organisations are the least preferred sources of information. Personal contacts enable speedy access to information, while experts serve to foster quality aspects of information. Less preference of government agencies as the source of information is not surprising as public officials are tight-lipped.

General difficulty to obtain information

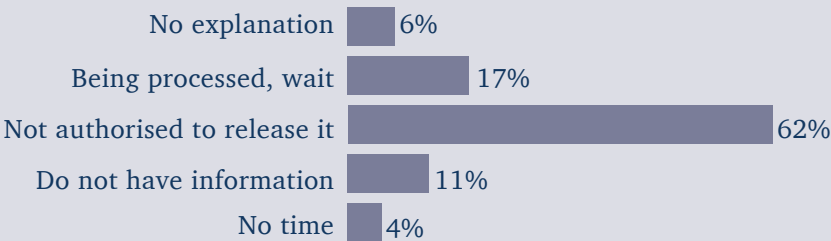
The **journalists** in Bhutan are faced with a dilemma to acquire information. 64 percent reported that their request for information is often refused, 32 percent reported that it is rarely refused, and 2 percent each reported that it is never and always refused (Figure 25).

Figure 25: How often requests for information is refused

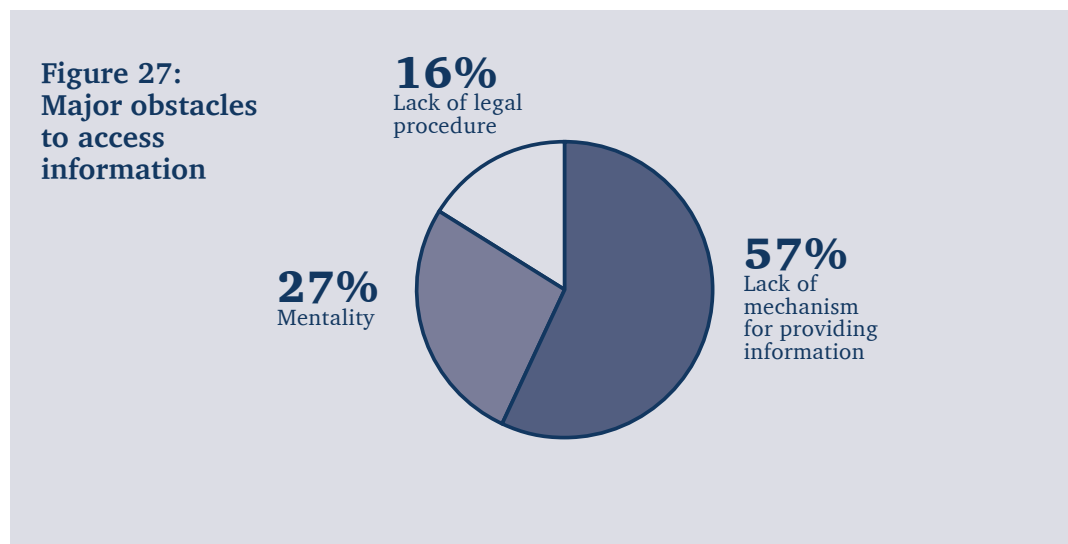


In **62%** of refusal cases, the reason was stated to be not authorised to share information. Rest who gave other reasons, ordinarily means will not give information, which included- information is under process, wait (17%) do not have information (11%), and did not even bother to give reason (6%), do not have time (4%) (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Reasons cited for the refusal of information



The survey shows the major obstacles to access information are lack of mechanism to provide information (57%), mentality (27%), and lack of legal procedures (16%) (Figure 27).



Focused group discussion pointed out that the reluctance of public officials to share information with younger journalists is also affected by a general lack of trust and confidence. Public officials often believe that these journalists do not do proper homework and can potentially misrepresent the information. A recent memorandum of understanding among constitutional bodies to not share information with the media has virtually deprived the right of the media to disseminate information. Even the media focal persons in public offices either do not have adequate information or do not have authority to share the information they hold. It was also reported that, to overcome this challenge, the government has enabled better access to information by authorising senior officials to talk to journalists.

Given the insurmountable obstacles to access information, the importance of the right to information (RTI) act is self-evident. Successive governments in the country have shown limited political will to enact this important legislation. It has severely compromised the access to information in Bhutan.

Longer working hours and lower pay

Because of the low revenue and relatively smaller financial support (subsidy support per circulation), the media houses are not able to provide adequate compensation to their journalists who work for longer hours. More experienced journalists caught in this situation continue to look for greener pastures, contributing to a higher attrition rate. As a fall out of this process, the media houses end up exhausting the professional development funds just to provide basic journalism training to larger numbers of new entrants, consequently higher levels of training courses take a backseat. Financial constraints have also prevented media houses from undertaking technological up gradation.

...female journalists are provided flexible working hours and flexibility to work from home and do not face a glass ceiling.

Friendly workplace for female journalists

Unlike their global counterparts, female journalists in Bhutan have a very friendly working environment. The female journalists stated that they are confident enough to take field-based work as they do not face any sexual harassment or are not subjected to sexual violence. The challenges they face are not gender-specific. They also stated that female journalists are provided flexible working hours and flexibility to work from home and do not face a glass ceiling.



A feeble association

JAB has multiple functions to perform and has grown in terms of membership. JAB is faced with financial constraints that prevent it from effectively fulfilling its mandate. It has not been successful to mobilise adequate resources through donations, largely because of the limited capacity of the private sector. Its membership needs to expand among female journalists, and the journalists working with TV and radio.

Relationship between the media and newsmakers

Broadly, the relationship between the media and newsmakers in Bhutan is one of peaceful coexistence and harmony. However, there is some contention between them. Newsmakers are broadly defined as political players, government, legislators, regulatory authorities and society. The private media partly depends on the subsidy from the government. The government has never subjected the media to illegal detention, repression and protection to the perpetrators of crime from implicit impunity. Dialogic process works as an effective dispute resolution mechanism. The mutual trust is sometimes broken by specific events, such as the recent memorandum of understanding between regulatory agencies to not share information with the media. Cases of threats and intimidation are not common, but take place when the media either misrepresent the information, or is factually incorrect. The intolerance to critique has been declining over the period of time as media literacy programmes spearheaded by Bhutan Media Foundation are increasing.

The relationship of the press with the larger members of society is rapidly changing due to the growing popularity of online platforms and social media. As the media is increasingly using online platforms, the incidence of online trolling, hate speech and abuse is on the rise.

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on journalism

The Covid-19 pandemic temporarily affected the journalists' right to freedom of expression due to safety and security considerations. The journalists believe that Covid-19 restrictions prevented them from reporting stories from the field. However, they also believe that they are better experienced and trained to handle their work during crisis times. The circulation of newspapers has seen a downturn and is unlikely to reach its pre Covid-19 levels.

Way ahead for Journalism in Bhutan

All the journalists who participated in the focused group discussion felt that the financial status of the media houses is unlikely to change in the next 3 to 5 years. The media houses are likely to become smaller and their revenue from advertisements will decrease as the government reinforces its e-procurement system. Experts believe that the market can sustain only up to three newspapers in Bhutan. The pace of digital transformation is likely to pick up. Newspapers and other media are most likely to shift towards online versions with improved and non-sharable features of subscription. The government-owned media houses like BBS will face cuts in budgetary support, which might push them towards commercially-oriented programmes.

The media in Bhutan will have to shift from quantity to quality, moving towards the role of gatekeepers from its current narrative driven approach. The media houses in Bhutan and the government will need to encourage innovation and foster flexibility to evolve with changing trends and technology. The media houses/organisations will be required to make new investments in the latest technology.

The journalists in Bhutan will need to collaborate with international news agencies or global media houses to add to experience as well as earnings. This will call for an appropriate supportive regulatory framework. Agencies like BMF and JAB will have to establish better linkages with higher education institutes to support the professional needs of a new age media. Training support from the donor agencies should be governed by the needs of Bhutanese media.

...The media houses in Bhutan and the government will need to encourage innovation and foster flexibility to evolve with changing trends and technology.



Recommendations

- 1** Younger journalists should be trained adequately so that they are professionally capable of handling stories and effectively communicate with the audience without distorting information. This will help assuage trust deficit between young journalists and public officials.
- 2** The government should develop standardised information sharing procedures through which registered journalists can access information in a given time frame. Refusal to grant access to information should be backed by written reasons.
- 3** The membership of JAB should be promoted among female journalists, journalists working with TV and radio, and online journalists to extend its services and support to a wider group of journalists.
- 4** Mechanisms to allocate subsidy support to the private print media needs to be redesigned by assigning higher weightage to the market share in order to promote efficient use of the scarce resources and help the market to reach its equilibrium level.
- 5** The media organisations and the government should work to create and augment endowment funds to support innovations, technological change and skill development in the media industry.
- 6** The media should be given the status of an industry and let it benefit from the policy umbrella that supports industries in Bhutan.

Works Cited

- Asoghik, Y. (2008). *Access to Information Right of Journalists*. USAID, Eurasia partnership Foundation.
- Chadwick, P. (2019, November 17). What is journalism for? In today's world, here are four key purposes. *Guardian*.
- Diekerhof, E. (2023). Changing Journalistic Information-Gathering Practices? Reliability in Everyday Information Gathering in High-Speed Newsrooms. *Journalism Practice*, 17 (3).
- Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom House*. Retrieved September 2, 2023, from <https://freedomhouse.org/freedom-press-research-methodology>
- Freedom House. (2023, 9 2). *Freedom of the press research methodology*. Retrieved from Freedom House: <https://freedomhouse.org/freedom-press-research-methodology>
- Hertzum, M. (2022). How Do Journalists Seek Information from Sources? A Systematic Review. *Information Processing and Management*, 59 (6).
- Lamboglia, A. (2022). *Press freedom in Bhutan: Journalists should have full and uncensored access to Information*. Pressenza.
- RGoB. (2018). Determining the Timely Reach and Circulation Figures of the Newspapers for the Year 2018. Thimphu: BICMA.
- RGOB. (2018). *Determining the Timely Reach and Circulation Figures of the Newspapers for the Year 2018*. Thimphu: BICMA.
- RGOB. (2018). *ICM Act of Bhutan 2018*. BICMA.
- RGOB. (2021). *Annual Statement Report of Newspapers for the year 2020* . Thimphu: BICMA.
- RGoB. (2022, March 22). Stress of being a journalist. *Kuensel*.
- The Bhutanese. (2014, 08 23). JAB Study Finds Poor State of Media in Bhutan. *The Bhutanese*.
- UNHR. (2022, June 24). *Latest /Media Center United Nations*. Retrieved September 9, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/ensuring-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-requires-urgent-concrete>
- Wunderlich, L., Holig , S., & Hasebrink, U. (2022). Does Journalism Still Matter? The Role of Journalistic and non-Journalistic Sources in Young Peoples' News Related Practices. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 569-588.

Annexures

Annexure 1: Survey Questionnaire

Survey on the State of Journalism in Bhutan

Survey Questionnaire

Sample code: _____

This study aims to develop a database on the state of journalism in Bhutan, including journalists' safety and security, rights and access to information. We invite you to participate in this survey. Kindly provide your consent. Privacy of the information collected through this survey will be strictly protected. Your identity shall not be revealed to anyone, in any form. Aggregated information will be used for the analysis.

Enumerator's information:

Name of the Enumerator: _____

Start time and date of survey: _____

End time and date of survey: _____

Sample information

1. Name of the respondent _____
2. Respondent's Mobile Number _____ Email ID _____
3. Gender: Male (0) Female (1) Other (2)
4. Age of the respondent (in completed years): _____
5. Education status (highest completed):
Higher secondary (1) Graduate (2) Post graduate (3) Other (4)
6. Which best describes your occupational category?
Freelance (1) Field-based staff (2) Headquarters-based staff (3) Other (4) -----
7. Which is the primary medium of your work?
Press (1) TV (2) Radio (3) Online (4) Other (5) -----
8. In addition to your primary medium, which other medium do you use often?
Press (1) TV (2) Radio (3) Online (4) Other (5) -----
9. How many journalistic stories, on average, do you cover/publish/broadcast every week?
0 (1) 1 (2) 2-4 (3) 5-7 (4) 8-10 (5) 11+ (6)
10. Do you work on pitches?
No (0) Yes (1)
11. How many pitches do you receive every week?
0 (1) 1-4 (2) 5-10 (3) 11-15 (4) 16-20 (5) 21+ (6)
12. How long have you worked in the field of journalism?
Less than 6 months (1) 6-12 month (2) 1-5 years (3) 5-10 years (4) More than 10 years (5)
13. Are you a member of the Journalists' Association of Bhutan?
No (0) Yes (1)

14. Which of the following training have you received?

#	Training module	No (0) and Yes (1)
A	Hostile environment training	
B	First aid training	
C	Digital security training	
D	Occupational health and safety at work	
E	Basic journalism training	
F	Special journalism training such as climate reporting training	

Personal Safety and Security Risks

15. Have you and/or your colleague(s) experienced the following incidence (tick all that apply)

#	Incidence	Self	Colleague
A	Ambush		
B	Attack on property		
C	Physical intimidation/threat		
	Verbal intimidation/threat		
D	Murder		
E	Physical surveillance		
F	Sexual harassment		
G	Sexual violence		
H	Digital hacking		
I	Surveillance of equipment (computer, mobile, etc.)		
J	Online intimidation/threat		
K	Insult/abuse/hate speech		
L	Trolling on social media		
M	Illegal detention		
N	Criminal charges		
O	Defamation		
P	Violation of anonymity		

16. If your answer to Q11 is affirmative, please elaborate the incidence -----

17. Do you practise self-censorship to reduce your risk to safety and well-being?
No, never (0) Yes, sometimes (1) Yes, often (2)

18. Overall, how secure do you feel?
Very safe (1) Safe (2) Moderate (3) Unsafe (4) very unsafe (5)

19. Overall, what is the level of risk to personal safety and security faced by journalists in Bhutan?
No risk (1) very Low risk (2) Moderate (3) High risk (4) Very high risk (5)

Policy on Safety and Security

20. Does your workplace/organisation have a policy on safety and security?
Yes (0) No (1) I don't know (2)

21. Is the policy effectively implemented?
Yes (0) No (1) I don't know (2)

22. Is there any incidence reporting system in your organisation?
Yes (0) No (1)

23. Who do you report to when encountering an incidence threatening your safety and security?
Employer (1) Authorities (2) Association (3) No one (4)

24. Does your workplace/employer have any safety and security measures in place?
Yes (0) No (1) I don't know (2)

25. If your answer to 24 is yes, identify the measures in place? (tick all that apply)

#	Measures	
A	Reporting procedures in case of threat to personal safety	
B	Insurance	
C	Provision of protective equipment (helmet, bullet proof vests, satellite phone, etc.)	
D	Police protection/ private safety guards	
E	Risk assessment of an assignment	
E	Training before dangerous assignments	

26. How likely is your employer/association to provide support after an incident that compromises personal safety and security of people in your profession?

#	Type of support	Very likely (1) Likely (2) Moderate (3) Unlikely (4) Very unlikely (5)
A	Counselling	
B	Reporting to authority	
C	Legal support	
D	Financial compensation	
E	Paid leave	
F	Lobbying	

Legal Environment for the Rights of the Journalist

27. Do you think that the constitution or any law provides freedom of press?

Yes (0) No (1) I don't know (2)

28. To what extent would you say the government is likely to uphold legal protection for the freedom of media?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

29. To what extent would you say there is implicit impunity for those who commit crimes against journalists?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

30. To what extent would you say a journalist's rights to access information is clearly defined?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

31. To what extent would you say journalists are able to secure public records through a clear procedure?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

32. To what extent would you say that the government-owned media receive preferential treatment?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

Political Environment for the Rights of the Journalist (Independence of Media)

33. To what extent are journalists subject to editorial direction or pressure from the authorities?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

34. To what extent would you say that the government-owned media reflects views of the entire political spectrum?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

35. To what extent are public officials willing to talk to journalists?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

36. To what extent do public officials grant equitable opportunity to journalists regardless of which media house they are from?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

37. Is there any official censorship body?

No (0) Yes (1)

38. To what extent are the broadcast programmes/publications subject to censorship?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

39. To what extent would you say you have the freedom to publish/distribute content on the internet?

Very High (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or very limited (5)

40. To what extent is the content on online platforms blocked, filtered, or taken down under pressure?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

41. To what extent do journalists practise self-censorship in the media?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

42. What are the major reasons for self-censorship among journalists? Rank up to 3 ("1" is the most important reason)

#	Reasons	
A	Small society syndrome	
B	External regulations	
C	Avoid offending people/fear of backlash	
D	Avoid possibility of incitement	
E	Fear of losing job	

43. To what extent would you say that journalists are subject to external censorship?

None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

44. Which of the following organisations impose external censorship the most? Rank up to 3 ("1" is the most to impose external censorship)

#	Source type	Most easy	Most difficult
A	Regulatory agencies		
B	Parliament		
C	Ministries		
D	Local Governments		
E	Cabinet		
F	Political parties		
G	Armed forces		
H	Corporate and business entities		

45. To what extent do journalists feel comfortable/confident to pursue investigative reporting?

Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)

Economic Environment for the Rights of the Journalist

46. To what extent do media houses have resources to operate independently?
Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)
47. To what extent do media houses have preferential access to credit?
Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)
48. To what extent do infrastructural bottlenecks limit dissemination of news across the country?
None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)
49. To what extent does the government subsidise key inputs required by the media?
Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)
50. To what extent is the government support fairly allocated based on the market share?
Very high (1) High (2) Moderate (3) Limited (4) None or Very limited (5)
51. To what extent do authorities restrict advertisements to certain media outlets?
None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)
52. To what extent do private entrepreneurs find it difficult to create financially sustainable media outlets?
None or Very limited (1) Limited (2) Moderate (3) High (4) Very high (5)

Access to Information

53. What do you mostly write/publish?
News (1) Analytical stories (2) Investigative stories (3) Entertainment stories (4)
54. Which issue do you mostly cover?
Politics (1) Economy (2) Social issues (3) Culture (4) Environment (5) Sports (6)
55. How easy is it to obtain information on the major issue you cover?
Very easy (1) Easy (2) Moderate (3) Difficult (4) Very difficult (5)

Sources of Information

56. Which issues are the easiest to obtain information on? Rank up to 3 most easy issues ("1" is most easy)

#	Issue	Most easy
A	Politics	
B	Economy	
C	Social issues	
D	Culture	
E	Environment	
F	Sports	

57. Which do you prefer as a source of information?
State agencies (1) Experts (2) Personal contacts (3) NGOs/CSOs (4)
International organisations (5) internet (6)

58. Which sources are easiest and most difficult to obtain information from? Rank up to 3 most easy sources ("1" is the most easy/most difficult)

#	Source type	Most easy	Most difficult
A	Regulatory agencies		
B	Parliament		
C	Ministries		
D	Local Governments		
E	Cabinet		
F	Political parties		
G	Armed forces		
H	Corporate and business entities		

59. How do you request the information you need?

#	Source type	Always (1) Often (2) Rarely (2) Never (3)
A	Orally	
B	Written	
C	Email	

60. How do you get the requested information?

#	Source type	Always (1) Often (2) Rarely (2) Never (3)
A	Orally	
B	Written	
C	Email	

Refusal to Provide Information

61. How often is your request for information refused?

Never (1) Rarely (2) Often (3) Always (4)

62. What grounds for refusal of information are cited by the officials?

No time (1) Do not have information (2) Not authorised to release it (3)

Being processed, wait (4) No explanation (5)

Obstacles to Access Information

63. What are the major obstacles to access to information?

Mentality (1) lack of mechanism for providing information (2) Lack of legal procedure (3)

Annexure 2: List of participants in the Focused Group Discussion and key Informant interviews

Participants of focused group discussion

S. No.	Name	Organisation
1	Mr. Ashok Tirwa	JAB President/BBS
2	Mr. Ugyen Tenzin	Business Bhutan
3	Mr. Jigme Wangchuk	Kuensel
4	Mr. Yan Kumar Powdyel	Kuensel
5	Ms. Sherub Lhamo	Kuensel
6	Ms. Yangyel Lhaden	Kuensel
7	Mr. Nima	Freelance /BBS
8	Mr. Thukten Zangpo	Kuensel

Participants of key informant interview

S. No.	Name	Organisation
1	Mr. Ugyen Penjore	CEO Kuensel

N A T I O N - W I D E S U R V E Y



Bhutan Media Foundation
Telephone: 00975-02-331705 | PO Box: 1655
Zamdo Lam | Thimphu, Bhutan | Email:
s.wangmo@bmf.bt | www.bmf.bt