

Still a Bud

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***Bhutan Annual Press Freedom Report
2011-12***

Quality and the constraints of the market

Media in Bhutan did not witness any major developments in the year under review, though journalism could be said to have made important strides. So too has media consciousness developed vastly among the youth. Particularly vigorous in terms of their use of the new media have been civil society activists and politicians.

Major contributory factors have been the regular workshops carried out by Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy and the expansion of social networks such as Facebook, and the Internet access ever increasing numbers in the country. Mobilisation through social networking has proven a powerful mode of effecting changes for the better in policy, as when it led the government to revise its arbitrary law on tobacco control and induced the king to pardon sixteen convicts.

Despite increasing media awareness, there is a sense that reading habits are slipping. In a small market where institutional purchases are important, schools have reduced newspaper purchases for students and teachers, and government departments have also cut subscriptions as a part of cost saving. But there remain questions if the government is able to save a significant amount by restricting employees from reading newspapers. Private establishments buy only a few copies of selected papers for employees. These factors are collectively causing growing losses in the media industry, where firms are struggling to sustain their limited earnings through advertisements.

Five years after it was thought of, the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) was [formally established](#) on 7 February 2012 when media practitioners from various organisations voted to elect its leadership team. Pasang Dorji is the new president, Kinley Tshering, the general secretary and Chhundu Tshering, the treasurer.

Pasang is associated with The Bhutanese, Kinley with Business Bhutan and Chhundu Tshering with Druk Neytshuel. Other members of the executive committee include Nam KhaiNorbu (editor of [Bhutan Times](#)), Sonam Pelden (of [Kuensel](#)), Dawa (of [Bhutan Broadcasting Service](#)), Kuenga T Dorji (of Radio Valley) and Kelzang Thinley (of Radio Waves).



Journalists posing for pictures with king and ministers after receiving Order of Merit

All 105 journalists present were granted voting rights for elections to the JAB leadership posts. However, the organisation began on a shaky note with two elected members of the executive committee pulling out and some media houses undecided on whether they should cooperate with the association's activities. Tenzin Rigden former CEO of Bhutan Times and Tenzing Lamsang (CEO of [The Bhutanese](#)) pulled out of the executive committee. Rigden pulled out before the committee held its first meeting saying he had been nominated and elected without his consent. Some call it an unfair election process and demanded re-election.

There are several important tasks that the JAB is expected to carry out, including ensuring fair compensation to working journalists and initiating consultations on the proposed advertisement policy. The drafted advertisement policy has been the cause of contention between the government and media after majority of the private media firms opposed the provisions. The government had proposed that public advertisement would be distributed among media outlets based on their reach to the people. The private media fear this will give more advantage to public media, which are already receiving government subsidy.



Journalists gather to elect new office bearers of JAB

Also on the agenda for JAB is a government directive making it mandatory for all newspapers to have a section printed in Dzongkha, the national language of the country.

The first informal meeting of the new committee decided to submit to the government a proposal mooted by senior editors a month before, suggesting changes to the advertising policy that is under

preparation and doing away with the mandatory publication of Dzongkha sections in English language papers.

Editors of private newspapers had proposed that the government discontinue the stipulation that they carry Dzongkha editions of their English language papers. They say that this has become a "huge financial burden" and was having a serious negative impact on sustainability of media, while not serving the government plan to promote the national language. Media houses have invested heavily in Dzongkha, but for very meagre returns in terms of increased readership. As part of their cost cutting strategies, the papers have now turned Dzongkha editions into inserts to their main publication to meet the formal stipulation while keeping costs low. They rarely keep an independent Dzongkha editorial team. Some papers like [Business Bhutan](#), have chosen to outsource their Dzongkha editions.

Dzongkha editions are likely to turn media houses bankrupt in long run. Bhutan Observer's chief executive officer, Phuntsho Wangmo, says they spent Nu 100M

in the past five years on their weekly Dzongkha edition alone but sales only 10 per cent of the English edition.

The emphasis on having a Dzongkha edition, they said has instead “adversely impacted” quality.

BICMA’s April 18, 2011 letter to the media houses stated, “...we have received the directive from the government that stopping the Dzongkha editions of the English newspapers at this stage would tantamount to revoking the policy decisions of the parliament as well as that of the government”. The government had earlier warned Bhutan Observer to revoke its license for stopping Dzongkha edition.

All newspapers, the letter stated, must continue publishing the Dzongkha editions and have the responsibility to publish Dzongkha editions. The BICMA Act of 2006 does not specifically state the requirement of a Dzongkha edition.

Prior to receiving such directives from the ministry, BICMA said its licensing requirement of a Dzongkha edition was based on the decision of the 281st Cabinet of the Council of Ministers (CCM), which was held on November 27, 2005 and on the resolution of 87th session of the National Assembly in June 2007.

The National Assembly had resolved that based on the contents of the royal Kasha and the resolutions of the past National Assembly sessions, “...efforts should be made to publish notifications in our national language and the contents and quality of both the Dzongkha and English language newspapers should be same.”

Food Corporation of Bhutan
Post Box No. 080
Phuentsholing, Bhutan

Project Dantak Thimphu Golf Club
DANTAK OPEN GOLF TEES OFF TO GRAND OPENING

Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan (RICB)
RICB OPENS MICRO OFFICE IN JOMOTSANGKHA, Jomotsangkha, Bhutan

Sl No	Location	Remarks
1	FCB Phuentsholing Nagar	Pring lower market (FCB Building)
2	FCB Paro	Above Service Station
3	FCB Paro	Main Road
4	FCB Thimphu	Above Court Entry
5	FCB Sarpang	Sarpang Th
6	FCB Damsing	Above proper road
7	FCB Buthang	Inner street looking
8	FCB Ngazun	On the way to Ngazun town
9	FCB Thimphu	Inner corner gate
10	FCB Wangrang	Near Chungyang Court
11	FCB Wangrang	Below Electric Substation
12	FCB Wangrang	Below General Hospital
13	FCB Wangrang	On the way to Wangrang town
14	FCB Geyson	On the way to Lhakhang Street (opposite 15)
15	FCB Miriga	Miriga (2.5 km beyond Miriga town)
16	FCB Namchi	Demchaka
17	FCB Dagaletse	Proper Dagaletse
18	FCB Wangpa	Pringang (New town)
19	FCB Thimphu	Changganging

An example of insert from 'The Journalist' weekly newspaper. Papers feel it is just fulfillment of formalities set by the government.

The campaigners argue that with four independent Dzongkha papers already in the market and some more waiting to be licensed, English language newspapers should be “freed” of the obligation to come up with Dzongkha editions. Dzongkha as a media language is more popular in TV and radio than in print. Radio and TV programs are run in the main, in Dzongkha and with more channels coming up,

other means of meeting the official goal of promoting the national language would emerge.

Private initiatives

Initiatives have been taken to bring private TV channels into the market. Of the five applications that have been submitted for opening TV channels, the government is yet to approve four. Only a second channel of the official broadcaster Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS2) has come into operation from early 2012.

Four private companies and individuals have expressed an interest in starting TV stations. Rabsel Media Services has proposed a 24-hour news channel, while three others, DrukSel TV, the Singay and Lhaki Group and Ugetsu Communications (owned by film director Ugyen Wangdi) propose to offer mixed fare.

Earlier Druk High TV and Wangchuk Dorji (vice chairman of Tashi group of companies) had shown interest in venturing into TV business but withdrew later.

DrukSel TV is going to be more like infotainment channel that will feature soft news and entertainment will be their main priority, according to the proposal. On the other hand, Rabsell Media Services is planning a 24/7 news channel. Most of them proposed 24X7 news and entertainment channel.

There are no rules about the number of TV channels that would be permitted in Bhutan and it is likely that all applicants meeting specified criteria will be given licences. There are controversies that too many commercial channels might invite unethical competition, which might be risky for Bhutan in terms of cultural sensitivities and social harmony. In a debate in October 2011, experts pointed out that too many channels might compromise the social mandate of TV as they compete on the commercial front. Some politicians advocate that market forces should determine how many channels are on air, rather than a government stipulation.

Honorary consul of Bhutan to the UK, Michael Rutland, who was one of the participants at the broadcast forum, said Bhutan's population size cannot support too many TV channels, particularly if they are to be commercial and financially successful.

He said that leaving television broadcasting to market forces is a dangerous strategy, particularly in the early days of Bhutan's democratic progress. He said market forces place the maximum emphasis on financial success rather than social responsibility.



There is evidence that politicians are beginning to engage with the importance of media and freedom of expression as essential elements of a vibrant democracy

and a cohesive society and more important for a new democracy like Bhutan. In several debates, politicians have expressed support for media freedom and right to freedom of expression. National Council vice chairman [Sonam Kinga](#) and member [Sangay Khandu](#) are two notably vocal contributors to the movement for media freedom.

The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy has trained politicians, government employees, students and teachers about media, freedom of information and right to free speech. Taking a cue from these developments, the students in Sherubtse, the oldest college of the country, formed a “media society” to debate this entire range of issues.

Khandu has personally drafted a “right to information” (RTI) bill, which he plans to place before an upcoming session of the parliament. Despite commitments from Bhutan’s ruling party, the [Druk Phuensum Tshogpa](#) (DPT), the government failed to bring its version of the RTI. Ironically, media reports say the government officials are unaware of the draft RTI bill.

On the other hand, ministers and government officials see media as propagators of negative views and activities. Some officials even go to the extent of saying that good content is deliberately left out, with the media choosing mostly to focus on stories that put them in a bad light.

This manner of sentiment was publicly expressed at a media conference by Bhutan’s Minister for Works and Human Settlements, Yeshey Zimba. Even Bhutan’s Prime Minister, Jigmi Thinley, has at times accused the media of trifling with the truth.

The [Bhutan InfoCom and Media Authority](#) (BICMA), the national level regulatory body, restricted publication of Gyelchi Sarshok, a weekly Dzongkha newspaper, for two months on the grounds that it had started publishing before being granted a licence. The company took the plea that it was only printing sample copies, or “dummies” for testing market conditions. The paper started regular publication from the second week of November 2011. The paper seeks to carry a larger than usual complement of international news, to inform Bhutanese who read no English, of events around the world.

Druk Neytshuel weekly, the first privately-owned Dzongkha newspaper, hit the market in August 2011. The 24 page independent Dzongkha newspaper covers social, political, entertainment, history, environment, business, culture, religion and community issues. The weekly paper cost Nu. 10.

The first edition of the paper was distributed in the market free of cost. Chungdu Tshering, the Chief Editor said the paper would also feature news items and features for children. The paper employs 21 staffs.

Coinciding with the king’s birthday, The Bhutanese, a privately owned broadsheet newspaper, was launched in the capital city of Thimphu on 21 February 2012. According to owners, its prime focus will be on investigative

journalism, political, economic issues and corruption. Tenzin Lamsang, a former reporter with Kuensel, who also worked with Business Bhutan weekly, is the chief editor of the new paper. Though planned as a daily broadsheet, the paper currently publishes twice a week on account of uncertainties over sustainability.

Concerns over sustainability

Given the kingdom's rather small population and limited levels of advertisement spending, financial sustainability is a big concern for the increasing number of newspapers. Kuensel is the only newspaper that manages to sustain a daily circulation, though only on the basis of a subsidy from the government. The older papers are taking all measures to ensure their continued presence in the market. Bhutan Today, a daily, has gone biweekly since October since it reportedly found the operational cost very high and revenue sources limited. Bhutan Times, the first private newspaper in the country, laid off seven employees keeping only 24 staff. At the height of its success three years ago, it had 97 staff.

On the other hand, a few investors believe that the competition in the market will propel the growth of quality and professionalism in the country. The government for its part, has kept the doors open for any constructive proposal to start a newspaper.

One of the country's most popular, and at times, controversial online forums, the Bhutan Times shut down in November 2011. The news portal, which is distinct from the website of the newspaper with the same name, was set up in 2004 and run since then by a team of four.

With the departure of the most technically qualified member for opportunities in Silicon Valley in the U.S., the rest of the team reportedly found that they did not have the skills to keep the website running. Earlier in 2007, government had blocked this discussion forum accusing it of inciting violence and hatred in Bhutan. However, with SAMS and the IFJ expressing their concern over this rather draconian measure, the website was allowed to resume operations.

Environmental protection is one of the major goals of the Bhutanese government. And the country prides itself on being one of the leading players in wildlife and environment conservation in the region. The government has been making all efforts to get attention from the media to create awareness on environment conservation. The government has announced an annual conservation award to encourage media to give attention to wildlife and environment issues. The award will recognise and reward print media firms in Bhutan that publish the highest number of in-depth and comprehensive stories on forests, wildlife and environmental conservation.

The award is likely to be offered to a media house instead of individuals. The institution of this award for Bhutanese media houses comes at a time when environmental issues and environmental journalism are gaining popularity in the region.

Marking country's one hundred and fourth "national day" on December 17, the government announced a number of awards – the National Order of Merit – for the media for its role in nurturing a fledgling democracy.

The local authority in the south-eastern district of [Pemagatshel](#) has imposed a ban on satellite TV channels. The first Dzongkhag Tshogdu (District Council) of Pemagatshel in August decided to impose a ban, despite disagreement from many members, on the use of direct- to-home (DTH) TV. This sparked a debate on how many channels should really be available for Bhutanese viewers and which are the ones best suited for them. While the government has a stated policy of granting licences freely, it at times restricts particular TV channels on charges that they are airing content that might erode Bhutanese culture and heritage.

It was for the very same reason that the popular Ten Sports channel was removed temporarily even on cable service in 2006. It was restored following public outcry over the move. It is also apparent that although law never allowed dish, dish TV was widely used in places like Thimphu as far back as 2004. In September 2011, the Prime Minister in a meeting with media said the government would not ban dish TV considering the right to entertainment of the citizens.

A BICMA official was quoted in a newspaper as saying that DTH television has been regularised since November 2008 and that they were working on the modalities regarding the contents to have uniformity between cable and dish TV. However, in the same year, the first and the only seizure of three dish TVs took place in August. Two dish TVs were seized in Samdrup Jongkhar and one in Gelephu. Since then, the number of dish TV users has only multiplied.

In recent years, DTH TV has gone to remote areas where cable transmission is unavailable and there has been an entertainment famine.

In January 2012, the government decided to streamline the media outlet licensing procedures. Owners of media houses and entertainment business will have to pay just one license fee now on. Earlier, cable operators, discotheques, printing houses and publishers including media entities were subjected to double license fee as they had to pay an annual fee to both BICMA and the Department of Trade. Starting this year, all licence fees would be routed through the BICMA.

Before the system came in place, a private newspaper firm had to pay annually Nu (ngultrum) 10,000 (just under USD 200) as license fee to BICMA and Nu 3,000 as trade fee to the Department of Trade. The rate for local cable operators was approximately Nu 95,000 to be paid to BICMA and Nu 1,500 to trade department. There was also a one percent tax from every consumer to BICMA. Similarly, discotheques paid Nu 25,000 annually to BICMA and about Nu 5,000 to the trade department.

The two newsrooms of radio and television of Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) might converge in the near future should the management approve the idea.

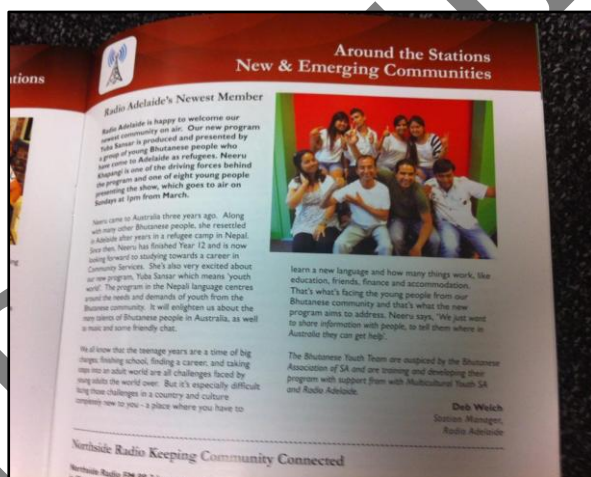
The rationale behind the possible move is that since BBS is running on public fund, maintaining two different departments is costing the government a lot. Therefore, extensive discussions are underway.

More than 350 staff run the BBS radio and TV. While the radio is on air for 14 hours a day, TV does it for 11 hours.

A team from both TV and radio departments went to Singapore a few months ago to study the situation of media industry there. They came back with feedback, mostly negative, given the small broadcast media scenario in Bhutan.

Only one incident of an attack on a media person was reported over the year. In July 2011, a Kuensel intern was attacked on the staircase of the building where she lived in Thimphu, the country's capital. She was on her way home from office. The attackers, two of them, tried to throttle her and snatch the laptop computer she was carrying in her backpack. She was able to successfully ward off the attack using her martial arts skills. The incident was illustration of how good self-defence skills can be of use in emergency situations. The media did not give the incident very much coverage, except for Kuensel, which focused on the overall security situation in Thimphu rather than the issue of media safety.

Media in exile



Story of Yuba Sansar published in the journal named 'The Ethnic Broadcasters' published by National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, autumn edition.

The quality of media in exile has drastically reduced. The only radio program run by Bhutan Media Society from a radio station in Nepalese capital Kathmandu and one in Dharan, eastern Nepal has been closed. The Radio Bhutan Online and APFAnews are no more operational. [Bhutan News Service](#) merely serves few news a week and most team members have now prioritised their livelihood in resettled countries. There has also been confusion about this once 'leading' media group in exile as they use two separate names – Bhutan Media Society and Bhutan News Service. It has almost turned into one-man handled organisation.

Other radio programs have emerged when Bhutanese resettled in western countries. Bhutanese literature.com, operated by Literature Council of Bhutan, runs literary radio podcast called '[Radio Srijana](#)'. The podcast contains only

recitation on literary articles. Bhutanese resettled in Australia run three separate radio programs. Two of them are being run in Adelaide and the other in Cairns. The Voice of Shangrila weekly radio programs aired from Radio Adelaide, the leading radio station in South Australia, is joint initiative of Bhutanese and Nepalese communities. The program is run by [Indra Adhikari](#) (popularly called I. P. Adhikari) and Sanjay Puri. The other program has been initiated recently by Bhutanese youths. The team members of this 'Yuba Sansar' radio program include Indra Adhikari, Devi Pokhrel, Lok Safal Poudel, Seeta Dulal, Ganga Adhikari, Neeru Khapangi, Puskar Dhakal and Unisha Samal. Both the programs are run on Sundays and are available to listen at convenient time at www.ipajournal.com.

The young people in Cairns also run weekly program from Cairns FM. The team members include Reyon and Paricxit Dahal.

[Bhutanese Australian Association of South Australia](#) (BAASA) also publishes a tri-monthly newsletter [Namaste](#) from Adelaide, edited by Indra Adhikari. There has been initiative to publish newspapers in camp as well. Panchaoti English School coordinates the publication of [The Refugee Herald](#). The newsletter publishes not on regular intervals.

There are no symptoms of any existence of three media organisations in exile - Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA) Bhutan, Bhutan Press Union (BPU) and Third World Media Network (TWMN) Bhutan Chapter. Media Network Bhutan, operated by Monarath Pokhrel from Jhapa Nepal is running few activities like media training.

