



Country Report

Journalists in Bhutan

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Background Bhutan

Bhutan's media are young, and its democracy even younger. This small country of about 750,000 inhabitants, wedged between India and China, became a democracy in 2008 at the wishes of the king. Elections were first held in 2008 and again in 2013. The development of Bhutan's media is seen as cornerstone of establishing democracy, with private media permitted two years prior to the first elections. In 2013, prior to the second elections, eleven weekly or bi-weekly papers in English and three printed in the local language, Dzongkha, were published in addition to the state-owned daily newspaper Kuensel and state-run Bhutan Broadcasting Service. At the time, journalists were needed to fill newsrooms, and younger journalists educated to the responsibilities of a free media in a democratic system, notably at the Bhutan Media Foundation. This is the background against which this survey, conducted in late 2012 and the first half of 2013, has to be seen. The number of private media proved unsustainable, and the number of journalists subsequently declined.

Backgrounds of Journalists

The median age of journalists of 28 years (mean=27.89, s=3.95) reflects the fact that Bhutan's media are young. Of the 90 surveyed journalists, 45 were women, making it at 50.0 percent an even gender balance. The journalists were well educated, with 98.9 percent holding a degree, although only 23.0 percent specialized in communication or journalism.

Journalists in the Newsroom

Similarly, the years of professional experience with a median of 5 years (mean=4.57, s=2.30) are indication of the recent growth of Bhutan's media. 90.9 percent of journalists held permanent positions, with 82.8 percent working full-time, 11.5 percent part-time and only 5.7 percent as freelancers. Over three-quarters (77.5%) of journalists worked for only one newsroom, 7.0 percent for two and 14.1 percent for three newsrooms and only 5.0 percent held another job besides journalism. Also over three-quarters of the journalists were generalists (77.8%). Half of the journalists worked either for a daily paper (24.4%) or a weekly paper (25.6%). The other half worked for the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, with numbers evenly split between radio and television, especially as journalists worked on both platforms, and 5.6 percent also on the national broadcaster's online service. Less than a third (27.9%) were members of the Journalists' Union, reflecting the fact that the union had been in abeyance for several years before being revived.

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Journalistic Roles

Bhutanese journalists view their professional roles in very similar ways to Western journalists. The reason for this can partly be found in Bhutan’s effort to orientate its media on the media of Western democracies and therefore emphasize the “detached watchdog” role. “Report things as they are” (79.8%), “Be a detached observer” (73.3%) and “Provide analysis of current affairs” (73.0%) rank very highly amongst Bhutanese journalists. The “detached watchdog” role, however, is interspersed with a keen awareness of having to involve Bhutan’s population in the new form of democracy. “Let people express their views” (76.7%), “Educate the audience” (73.0%), “Provide information people need to make political decisions” (72.2%) and “Motivate people to participate in political activity” (66.7%) rank almost as highly as being an information provider.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very important”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	89	79.8	4.16	1.18
Let people express their views	90	76.7	4.23	.89
Be a detached observer	86	73.3	3.93	1.16
Educate the audience	89	73.0	4.08	1.11
Provide analysis of current affairs	89	73.0	4.04	1.10
Provide information people need to make political decisions	90	72.2	4.10	1.06
Motivate people to participate in political activity	90	66.7	3.78	1.16
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	89	66.3	3.87	.99
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	90	63.3	3.68	1.32
Monitor and scrutinize business	90	58.9	3.78	1.00
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	90	58.9	3.77	1.22
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	90	58.9	3.66	1.42
Tell stories about the world	90	57.8	3.56	1.25
Advocate for social change	90	53.3	3.44	1.29
Set the political agenda	89	49.4	3.40	1.16
Support national development	89	47.2	3.21	1.48
Provide entertainment and relaxation	90	46.7	3.30	1.32
Influence public opinion	88	42.0	3.35	1.05
Be an adversary of the government	90	34.4	3.04	1.35
Support government policy	90	34.4	2.96	1.31
Convey positive image of political leadership	88	33.0	2.91	1.40

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

Less than half of Bhutan’s journalists have an interest in setting the political agenda (49.4%), supporting national development (47.2%) or influencing public opinion (42.0%). In keeping with the „detached watchdog“ role, the journalists are least interested in supporting government policy (34.4%) or conveying a positive image of political leadership (33.0%).

Professional Ethics

Bhutan’s journalists present a conflicting picture with regard to ethics. While most journalists (96.7%) strongly or somewhat agree that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional conduct, regardless of situation and context, a very high percentage (83.7%) also strongly or somewhat agrees that what is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation.

Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional conduct, regardless of situation & context	90	96.7	4.72	.52
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	86	83.7	4.14	.92
It is acceptable to set side moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	87	48.3	3.43	1.24
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	88	43.2	3.35	1.21

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

A similarly inconsistent picture emerges from the answers to the reporting practices. Almost 70.0 percent of journalists, when adding the percentage of saying “always justified” and “justified on occasion” together, accept “paying people for confidential information”, “using hidden microphones or cameras” and “using confidential business or government documents without authorization.” While the last is seen as acceptable in many countries, the first only has a lower non-approval rate in neighbouring China. One reason for the inconsistent picture could be that journalism culture is only just establishing itself in Bhutan and guiding ethical principles are not yet ingrained.

Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

	N	Percentage saying “always justified”	Percentage saying “justified on occasion”
Paying people for confidential information	88	30.7	40.9
Using hidden microphones or cameras	87	11.5	58.6
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	88	29.5	39.8
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	88	17.0	44.3
Getting employed in an organization to gain inside information	89	16.9	39.3
Altering photographs	84	34.5	20.2
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	87	10.3	41.4
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	88	17.0	34.1
Claiming to be somebody else	87	14.9	34.5
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	83	22.9	20.5
Accepting money from sources	84	20.2	21.4
Publishing stories of unverified content	88	9.1	29.5

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

Although ranked second last, Bhutan also has one of the highest approval rates for accepting money from sources. Publishing stories of unverified content is seen as least acceptable. These answers would need to be tested as to whether they are a

sign of a young and inexperienced working cohort who had little training in ethics, or whether they are an indication that the answers given to their understanding of professional roles were strongly shaped by Western normative assumptions.

Professional Autonomy and Influences

Journalists in Bhutan view their autonomy as relatively restricted. Only 57.5 percent said that they had complete freedom or a great deal of freedom in selecting stories, and only just over half (50.6%) said that they participate always or very often in editorial decisions. Even less autonomy was perceived in the aspects of a story emphasized, where only 43.2 percent of the journalists said that they had complete freedom or a great deal of freedom. This may be again the result of a young cohort that is either given or expects a great deal of guidance.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Information access	90	82.2	4.20	.89
Feedback from the audience	90	73.3	4.10	.98
Personal values and beliefs	88	72.7	4.03	1.00
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	90	68.9	3.92	1.06
Censorship	90	67.8	3.77	1.13
Competing news organizations	90	67.8	3.76	1.07
Friends, acquaintances and family	90	63.3	3.58	1.46
Media laws and regulations	90	62.2	3.67	1.25
Colleagues in other media	89	60.7	3.62	1.22
The managers of news organizations	88	60.2	3.59	1.19
Peers on the staff	90	60.0	3.69	1.10
Editorial policy	90	58.9	3.58	1.13
Time limits	88	58.0	3.35	1.52
Government officials	87	54.0	3.49	1.24
Religious considerations	86	53.5	3.62	1.32
Journalism ethics	88	53.4	3.49	1.51
The owners of news organizations	86	51.2	3.35	1.27
Availability of news-gathering resources	87	50.6	3.36	1.33
The military, police and state security	90	50.0	3.41	1.41
Advertising considerations	88	50.0	3.20	1.21
Relationship with news sources	88	47.7	3.45	1.24
Politicians	90	45.6	3.24	1.19
Audience research and data	89	43.8	3.19	1.30
Public relations	87	40.2	3.20	1.27
Profit expectations	85	40.0	3.18	1.24
Pressure groups	89	37.1	3.09	1.15
Business people	90	32.2	2.89	1.10

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.

In Bhutan’s young democracy, bureaucrats – unlike politicians – are not yet accustomed to be questioned by a watchful media and are less than forthcoming with information. Information access is therefore seen as extremely or very influential in news production. Since the English speaking press in fact is largely read by Bhutan’s urban elite who mostly works in government jobs, feedback from the audience has to be seen as mostly coming from that small sector of society in the capital Thimphu. Censorship, ranked above media laws and regulations in influence, is therefore largely not direct censorship. Only topics relating to the king and the royal family cannot be written about. Censorship in the Bhutanese context has to be seen as pervasive self-censorship due to being journalists in a small,

tight-knit society with strong Buddhist values, which avoids the direct confrontation typical for the Western adversarial press.

In line with many journalists’ tentative grasp of journalism ethics, journalistic ethics is rated below religious considerations. As Bhutan has a small private and business sector, public relations, profit expectations, pressure groups, and business people are ranked last.

Journalism in Transition

Among Bhutan’s young journalists, only 50 of those surveyed had worked more than five years and were available to rate the changes in journalism. Many of these were journalists in the years when the press consisted only of one state-owned daily paper and the state-run radio and television. It is therefore not surprising that, apart from longer working hours (76.0%), 72.0 percent (mean=3.90, s=0.79) noted freedom to make editorial decisions as the most important aspect of change. Unsurprisingly, the aspects connected with technical and digital changes were noted as having increased. Surprisingly, the advent of a more diverse and private media was not seen as increasing much the relevance of journalism for society or the credibility of journalism. However, it has to be taken into account that these respondents had worked, as it were, under the old regime and were most likely not inclined to discredit their earlier work.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has “increased”	Percentage saying has “decreased”
Average working hours of journalists	50	76.0	.0
Journalists freedom to make editorial decisions	50	72.0	4.0
Importance of technical skills	50	64.0	4.0
The use of search engines	50	64.0	12.0
Having a university degree	50	62.0	16.0
The relevance of journalism for society	50	60.0	22.0
Having a degree in journalism or related field	49	57.1	16.3
The credibility of journalism	49	55.1	20.4
Time available for researching stories	50	48.0	4.0
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	50	46.0	10.0

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in [country]. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

Equally surprisingly, given the results of the ethical survey questions, a strengthening of ethical standards was seen as the most important change (83.7%), together with the influence of journalism education (79.6%). Interestingly, this was not necessarily perceived as an increase in Western ways of reporting. While competition had strengthened with the advent of private media, the pressure to sensationalize stories had not, with this being rated last (56.3%). Social media and audience involvement only played a small role as yet.

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "strengthened"	Percentage saying has "weakened"
Ethical standards	49	83.7	2.0
Journalism education	49	79.6	2.0
Competition	49	73.5	.0
Advertising considerations	49	67.3	10.2
Audience research	49	65.3	10.2
Public relations	49	65.3	10.2
Audience feedback	49	63.3	18.4
Profit making pressures	48	62.5	4.2
Western ways of practicing journalism	48	60.4	27.1
User-generated contents, such as blogs	49	59.2	16.3
Audience involvement in news production	49	59.2	24.5
Social media	49	55.1	14.3
Pressure towards sensational news	48	56.3	16.7

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in [country]. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.

Journalistic Trust

Bhutan's journalists are immensely proud of their new democracy, which is reflected in their ratings of trust of their parliament (63.3%, mean=3.78, s=1.01) and government (61.1%, mean=3.77, s=0.87) being amongst the highest in the world. They also trust their own newly created news media (56.7%, mean=3.56, s=1.27). This trust, however, does not extend to politicians in general (42.2%, mean=3.32, s=1.08). The military and the police, who are less accessible to journalists, rate low, as do trade unions, which play a marginal role in Bhutan.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying "complete" and "a great deal of trust"	Mean	Standard Deviation
The parliament	90	63.3	3.78	1.01
The government	90	61.1	3.77	.87
The news media	90	56.7	3.56	1.27
Religious leaders	89	48.3	3.39	1.28
The judiciary/ the courts	90	43.3	3.21	1.12
Politicians in general	90	42.2	3.32	1.08
The military	86	41.9	3.10	1.18
Political parties	89	40.4	3.39	1.01
The police	89	38.2	3.12	1.20
Trade Unions	86	25.6	2.87	1.21

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.

Methodological Information

<i>Size of the population:</i>	114 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	all 114 journalist were contacted
<i>Sample size:</i>	90 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	face-to-face
<i>Response rate:</i>	84%