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Continuing Evolution Of The Broadcasting Media In Bhutan:
The Case Of Bhutan Broadcasting Service

By

Sonam Tshong
Summary.

Radio broadcasting is still an evolving field in Bhutan. In its short history, it has witnessed many changes both in the technology used, the management and programme orientation. Each incremental change has been positive and augurs well for the station's future. If the trend continues, radio broadcasting in Bhutan can definitely shoulder its responsibility of being a catalyst for socio-economic improvement of its citizens and as an autonomous media organisation further enrich the pluralistic features of the Bhutanese society.

Introduction.

It is with much pleasure and deep interest that I have the opportunity to participate in this timely and relevant seminar on media and pluralism in South Asia. Though much has been written and talked about the relationship between media and pluralism, I believe a discussion on a regional basis on this important issue have been far and few. And, once again it is AMIC that is providing the initiative for enabling us the media people of South Asia to get together and share our views and experiences. I believe such dialogues are conducive to professional growth and promotes better understanding of each other.

In this spirit, I would now like to take the opportunity to apprise the distinguished gathering about the state of the broadcasting media in Bhutan and how it is attempting to promote pluralism in its own way. To understand contemporary Bhutan especially the dynamics of its modern institutions such as the media sector, it is useful to have some knowledge about the conditions under which Bhutan itself attempted to transform its centuries old traditional agrarian society into a western inspired modern society - almost overnight in the early 1960's, before I dwell further on the topic of the seminar.

Until the early 1960s Bhutan was a closed society with little interaction with the outside world. Even though communication within the country was seasonal in nature and influenced by the rugged terrain, thanks to the absence of colonial influences in Bhutan, the Bhutanese as a nation developed a common set of politics, laws, administration, development strategies, trading systems, culture, traditions and customs based on the principles of Mahayana Buddhism, which even to this day helps to define and symbolizes national unity and identity of Bhutan as a people and a nation.

By late 1950s, Bhutan found that it could no longer depend on its policy of self-imposed isolation to guarantee its sovereignty in the aftermath of the second world war and the beginning of the cold war period. The only option was to open its doors and quickly join the comity of nations to ensure its future well-being. As a result almost overnight, Bhutan had to forget about its traditions, culture and way of life when it embarked on the process of modernisation with the launching of the first five-year development plan (1961 - 1966) in 1961. Under planned development, many previously unknown and never seen activities were undertaken in the Kingdom such as construction and opening of motor roads, schools, hospitals, wireless services and other infrastructures of modernisation. To plan, coordinate and implement these activities, external expertise was brought in setting in motion the development of the government bureaucracy as we understand it today. To service the modernisation process, shops,
restaurants, cinema halls, etc began to be established at the focal locations of the activities, giving rise to the growth of urbanisation in Bhutan. All these activities happened simultaneously within a span of a year of the decision to seek external help.

In a way, the embracing of the modernisation process had met its objectives. Bhutan has not only safeguarded its independence but has also become an active member of the international community. Within the country, tremendous socio-economic progress has been made. Today the Bhutanese are better educated, healthier and many facilities exist to promote the socio-economic well being of the Bhutanese people, the media institutions being one of them. Unfortunately, even after 32 many Bhutanese people have yet to understand the role and functions of these modern institutions. The introduction of the forces of modernisation and the inability of many to adjust traditional values and lifestyles to this new force has created a paradox in Bhutanese society, the impact of which we are only beginning to really feel. There is a gradual decline of the traditional way of life without a complementary development of an alternate lifestyle. Today people often feel confused, inadequate and generally feel a loss of direction and stability. Such are the pitfalls of modernisation and rapid development especially if its pace, direction and scope are not in harmony with the existing socio-economic and psychological structures of a nation as in the case of Bhutan.

In short for Bhutan modernisation was not a gradual process that gave people the time to absorb, understand and respond to the externally driven forces of change in a manner that adjustment and harmony between the past and the present were maintained. Rather it was a quantum leap from a near medieval like period to the 20th century in matter of few years. Naturally the people of Bhutan are still adjusting to the new process and institutions. This scenario is true even in the media sector.

Development of Radio Broadcasting in Bhutan.

The period 1972 to 1992 is a significant in the history of broadcasting in Bhutan. It was in 1972 that Bhutan had its first radio station called Radio NYAB. This station did not have its own broadcasting equipments (it depended on the civil wireless department’s 400W transmitter which was not on official use on Sundays!) and was operated and managed by a group of young volunteers. Though it was an amateur weekly radio station and its transmission limited to the Capital and surrounding areas, it was extremely popular. By 1979, with increasing popularity and climbing expectation of its listeners but no funds, Radio NYAB as it was called, found itself unable to operate on a voluntary basis and requested the government to manage the station. Radio NYAB then became a full fledged wing of the government’s Department of Information and Broadcasting and personnel’s were recruited on permanent basis for the station. It was not until 1986 when UNESCO provided a 10 KW SW transmitter that the whole country could receive the transmission. That year to reflect the national character of the station, the name of the station was also changed to the Bhutan Broadcasting Service or BBS as it is popularly known. Perhaps the culmination of the gradual transition from an amateur to a fully professional broadcasting station came in March 1991 when a brand new 50 KW SW broadcasting complex was established and commissioned.

Until 1992, BBS was an integral part of the government and the station was run as a part of the Department of Information and Broadcasting with its employees being a part of the civil service. During those days, the role of the media was basically to disseminate national government policies and objectives and to act as catalyst for development programmes.
DECLARATION OF BBS AS AN AUTONOMOUS CORPORATION.

In a far-reaching decision for the media in Bhutan, BBS and Kuensel the two government media agencies were formally de-linked from the government and declared as autonomous corporate bodies with effect from October 1, 1992. In explaining the move giving an autonomous and corporate status to the two organisation, the government stated that with improving socio-economic conditions and political development, growing literacy, employment of more educated and qualified people and improvements in the communication systems, the role of the media in information gathering and dissemination was even more critical than in the past. The government further noted that with it’s commitment to the decentralisation policy - which seeks to involve all sections of Bhutanese society in the socio-economic and political development of the country, it is essential that as a part of this process, more autonomy and encouragement be given for the professional growth of the media in Bhutan. In the media circles in Bhutan, this is clearly seen as an signal for the profession to play a more active, open and responsible role in the socio-economic and political development of the country. It is noteworthy that as with the establishment of many of the modern Bhutanese institutions, the initiative for a gradual transformation and broadening of the role for the media in Bhutan also came from the King.

IMPLICATIONS OF BECOMING AN AUTONOMOUS CORPORATION.

Being declared an autonomous corporation has meant the following to BBS:

i. As an autonomous corporation, the organisation is governed and responsible to a 7-member National Editorial Board headed by a Chairman. Of the 7 members only the Chairman who is also the Secretary to the Ministry of Finance is a civil servant. Other members comprise of representatives of the media, scholars, business sector, the religious institutions and eminent citizens.

ii. Its staff are no longer members of the civil service and BBS has formulated its own service management and financial rules and regulations.

iii. As an autonomous corporation, BBS has complete control of how funds are spent and is expected to maintain its account on a commercial basis. In turn it is expected to fund its activities from its own income generating commercial activities. With no financial viability foreseen at BBS for the near future, the government provides a budgetary grant and this in fact constitutes the station’s core link with the state.

iv. On the broadcasting side, a number of activities that will guide the station’s future orientation are being formulated. These include a station broadcasting policy statement and a code of ethics.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION.

Recognizing the vital role that the radio can play in a country like Bhutan where literacy is still low, many international agencies have been assisting BBS. At the bilateral level, the assistance received from India in the form of a complete 50KW SW broadcasting complex in 1991 has been most significant in making BBS a truly national radio station. At the multilateral level, UNESCO motivated by their commitment to promoting pluralism and the growth of a healthy and independent media in its member states has been assisting in various capacities since the late 1970s. Without support from such partners, broadcasting in Bhutan would not have achieved the level of development and professionalism that it has reached today.
REVIEW OF COMMUNICATION POLICIES.

The general objective of broadcasting in Bhutan has always been to 'educate, inform and entertain'. Given the low literacy rate, mountainous terrain and the widely dispersed pattern of habitation, the Royal Government had always considered the radio as a catalyst to assist in the development process by disseminating national policies and programmes, facilitate the flow of communication among all sections of the society and to channel feedback from the public.

However with the government decision to de-link the media in Bhutan from the government in 1992, the status of the media including the objectives of radio broadcasting as outlined in the Seventh Plan policy document is no longer considered binding. The change in status of BBS has led to a complete review of the station's management, orientation and future direction. It already clear that while BBS will continue to have development themes as one of its major priority areas, as an autonomous media organisation, other social, political and economic news and issues will increasingly become equally important. This we believe is also the direction that the government has in mind in granting an autonomous status to the media in Bhutan.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY MEASURES

At present there are no explicit legal or regulatory measures relating to either the foreign or local print or electronic media in Bhutan. This is not surprising given the recent history of broadcasting. Until 1992, the major media agencies in Bhutan was a part of the government and as such no reason for separate legal or regulatory measures were felt. In South Asia, even in countries who have a much longer history of media still have no real legal measures. Having said this, Bhutan cannot be complacent on the issue, especially with the rapid expansion of the number of satellite broadcasting channels over the region. Many in Bhutan are concerned with its possible impact especially as most of these channels are not even originating from the region itself. Such concerns will definitely merit a discussion on the legal and regulatory measures for the media as a first step. As it is, the advent of satellite broadcasting has made most of the national legal and regulatory measures in the subcontinent dated with even graver consequences for the future.

ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY.

As a media agency, it is the policy of the station to cover news and events on a factual basis without bias or favour. We strive to cover events from every nook and corner of Bhutanese society. We feel responsible for our broadcast and would like to believe that we play a useful role in Bhutanese society. We want professionalism and credibility - a force to be reckoned with. Reality of course puts all kinds of obstacles in our path. Most of the professional employees have barely completed their high school. Few international agencies are willing to fund degree level courses though they complain sometimes of the poor quality of our journalism. Though a small state, Bhutan has about 4 major languages and at least 17 main dialects. Most of our producers and newsmen seldom speak in more than 3 languages. Even less can write fluently in no more than 2 languages. Yet we broadcast in 4 languages daily. We strive for equitable coverage of local, regional, national and international news. Sadly we have no funds to post correspondents around the country and even less hard currency to subscribe to wire services. Only when these type of challenges are tackled will the ability of a media organisation to play its rightful role be possible.

Note: The views expressed here are the personal views of the author only and do not reflect the views of either BBS Corporation or any other individual or organisations.

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