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The Media In Bhutan

By

Kinley Dorji
The Media in Bhutan

The Bhutanese media must be viewed in the light of the unique situation of the country itself, especially the kingdom’s very recent decision to launch itself into the development process. Bhutan maintained complete sovereignty throughout history by following a policy of isolation, and it was only as recent as the 1960s that the country opened its doors to the outside world.

In less than three decades since it began the process of modernisation, Bhutan has undergone dramatic changes in many areas of development, but it has done so on its own terms. Under the leadership of the late King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, and then His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the country has successfully entered the international arena with its rich cultural heritage and distinct identity intact.

But, with the initial development thrust aimed at building and strengthening the country’s infra-structure and basic services, Bhutanese society is still in the early stages of socio-economic and literary development. While Bhutan had its own traditional system of education, the literacy rate is still low and the communication facilities are just being established. And at this stage, all the raw materials and technical know-how are imported.

With these natural limitations, the Bhutanese media is still in its infancy. But the royal government has also initiated the professional development of the media by establishing sound bases for the audio-visual, broadcast and print media. Today, the Bhutanese media is already an integral part of the country’s development and, with the growth in literacy and increased interaction with the rest of the world, we expect the press to play a vital role in the country’s future.

The Bhutanese media comprises the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, the national newspaper, Kuensel, and the audio-visual organisation, the Development Support Communication Division. All three organisations were established and nurtured by the royal government which has a clearly outlined policy of encouraging their development into professional and effective services for the country.
BBS

The Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) was started as an amateur weekly broadcasting programme in 1973 by the National Youth Association of Bhutan. As the service began to grow, in response to the needs of the country, it was taken over by the Ministry of Communications and developed into a professional broadcasting service. In 1986, BBS had become a full-fledged radio station with daily broadcasts in Dzongkha (the national language), English, Nepali and Sharchhop (eastern Bhutanese language). In a country where the extremely rugged terrain is the main hurdle to development, BBS now provides the fastest communication service.

Today, BBS is on the threshold of a new era of development, having established a modern studio complex and a 50 KW transmission system with the latest high technology equipment. With ambitious plans to expand and professionalise the service, BBS should soon make its impact beyond the national borders as an effective regional service.

DSCD

In 1981, the Development Communication Division was set up in the capital, Thimphu. Fully equipped with audio-visual technology, including a comprehensive editing system, the organisation produces video programmes mainly for the largely rural population of Bhutan. Besides documenting the important cultural, religious and political events around the country, the DSCD teams dramatises development messages for the consumption of the Bhutanese people. These include health and educational programmes for the rural people.

Kuensel

In 1965, Kuensel began as an official gazette. This was stopped in 1986 and Kuensel (roughly meaning clarity) was published as a serious tabloid in the three languages: Dzongkha, English and Nepali. It is produced on a sophisticated computer system in all three languages and circulated throughout the country. Today, Kuensel reaches every literate Bhutanese and has a rapidly growing readership outside the country.
The newspaper stresses national news, especially from the remote districts, but also includes a wide range of international and national features and entertainment. The most popular section of the newspaper is the Letters To The Editor page which has become a forum for open discussions on any issue of interest to the Bhutanese readers. These have included objective views which sometimes question the most important policies adopted by the royal government. This page serves as a forum for the readers to raise doubts and questions on national issues and for the royal government to assess feedback from the people.

Kuensel is distributed around the country on the public transport system which is a network of buses. In the more remote places, it is carried by messengers and travellers. While the newspaper reaches most towns and valleys on the publication day, it sometimes takes about four days to reach some parts of the country because of the rugged terrain. But today, the newspaper is the most regular and popular information system for the country’s literate population.

The main problem faced by Bhutan’s print media is the economics of publication. Besides the difficulty in distribution, all the raw material and technical expertise is currently imported, resulting in very high production costs. As a result, Kuensel is completely subsidised by the royal government and several other publications folded for economic reasons.

Policy

Bhutanese society and values are traditionally very democratic, and the people are known for their open-ness and pragmatism. Although the country is still in the very early stages of its overall development, His Majesty the King of Bhutan has repeatedly told government officials, students and the rural population that the future of Bhutan lay in the hands of the Bhutanese people. In the planning process, education has received high priority and His Majesty the King has stressed that the Bhutanese people must be ready to take up the important responsibility of the country’s future.

Against this background, the main thrust of the country’s media policy is the development of a responsible press. The media organisations have emphasised the training of young Bhutanese in journalism and other areas of mass communications. The physical and technical groundwork being established includes the most modern professional equipment. It is felt that the media must play its rightful role in the evolution of a democratic society which has been initiated by the progressive leadership in the country.
Our press, even in its youth, has felt its role and responsibility to society. Kuensel, for example, has taken up several social issues like housing problems, crime, health hazards, alcohol and drug problems, often resulting in immediate and effective responses from our decision makers.

In keeping with the same policy, the Bhutanese press highlights the country's overall priorities and international concerns. The Environment, for example, is one of the most widely covered topics in Bhutan. Both the radio and newspaper carry regular stories on various aspects of environmental degradation and ecological balance. Similarly, editorial attention is given to the nationally relevant topics like education, health, and agriculture. The Bhutanese media supports all activities taken up in these areas as a part of its efforts to educate the public.

The paper also has a regular SAARC or South Asia page, carrying informative stories on the SAARC member countries. This is aimed at informing the SAARC population about the situation in other member countries other than the usual hard news items carried in the newspapers.

These are the tenets which will shape the growth of the Bhutanese press. I would like to point here that, like many other areas of development where Bhutan has learned from the successes and problems of other countries, the development of a press system, too, will be guided by the experience of other countries, especially its south Asian neighbours. We have the fortune of drawing from such experiences, like this seminar for example, while we stand poised to formulate our own national press system.