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Bhutan Country Paper

by

Sanam Tshong
SUMMARY

The media in Bhutan is represented by three agencies, Kuensel the weekly print newspaper, DCC (Development Communication Corporation) the audio-visual unit and Bhutan Broadcasting Service the radio station. In addition to these three national level agencies, there is a growing media related industry in the form of private video production units and extension magazines of government development agencies.

Until 1992, the media was considered an integral part of the government's development strategies and as such the main objectives of the media till then were to act as catalyst for development programmes. This the media performed by disseminating information on national and sectoral policies and programmes, provided extension education for farmers, promoted improved health and hygiene practices and organised feedback to development activities from the farmers. Even after the media in Bhutan was delinked from the government in 1992, the role of media as a catalyst for development of the country continues to be a very important function of the sector.

Regarding legal and regulatory aspects of satellite broadcasting, this is a new issue in Bhutan and there are no legislation to the effect as yet. However with the tremendous increase of satellite broadcasting in the region, it would be naive not to be concerned by it and some form of legal and regulatory measures would certainly have to be studied.

DEVELOPMENT OF BROADCASTING.

Until the early 1960s Bhutan was a closed society with little interaction with the outside world. Within the country, uniquely Bhutanese traditions and customs free from the western colonial influences thrived even until the 1960s as Bhutan was never occupied by colonial powers in its history. All this was subject to change when Bhutan decided to embark on the path of modernisation in 1961, coinciding with the launching of the First Five-year development plan (1961 - 1966) of the country. This background is highlighted to show that for Bhutan modernisation was not a gradual
process that gave local people time to absorb, understand and respond to the externally driven modernising forces. Rather it was a quantum leap from a near medieval like period to the twentieth century in a matter of few years. Naturally the people of Bhutan are still adjusting to the new process and institutions including the modern media sector. Thus, it is a good idea to keep this historical background in mind when assessing the state of the media in Bhutan. The media agencies like other modern Bhutanese institutions were established at the initiative of the government as an integral component of the modernisation process and the first media agency to be established was Kuensel, then a weekly gazette paper in 1965. Therefore to truly appreciate and understand Bhutan and its emerging modern institutions, a clear knowledge of its past is essential.

It was only in 1972 that radio broadcasting in started in Bhutan. That year a group of young volunteers started broadcasting a weekly Sunday radio programme using the civil wireless department's 400 W transmitter. This amateur station was called Radio NYAB and its transmission reach was confined to the Capital and surrounding areas. By 1979, Radio NYAB 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. It was only in 1986 when a UNESCO provided 10KW SW transmitter was installed that the whole country could receive the transmission of BBS. Perhaps the culmination of the gradual transition from an amateur to a fully professional broadcasting station came in March 1991 when the Government of India assisted 50KW SW broadcasting complex was commissioned by the staff of BBS. During the period 1971 to 1991, the thrust of activities has been towards consolidation of the basic broadcasting infrastructure, including land and building, procurement of transmitter and studio equipments, recruitment and imparting of basic technical and broadcasting skills etc.

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 delinked with effect from October 1, 1992 from the Ministry of Communication through a Royal Edict (Kasho) issued on September 18, 1992, and given the status of a full autonomous corporation. Immediately thereafter, the Ministry of Communication issued
an Office Order on 5th October, 1992 formally delinking Kuensel and BBS from the Ministry and further advised the heads of the two organisations to take necessary actions to transform their organisations into autonomous corporations: In explaining the move to delink the media from the government, the edict states: it is the aim of the government to facilitate and encourage the professional growth of the media in all areas of national development, in line with the national decentralisation policy - which aims to involve all sections of the Bhutanese society in the socio-economic and political development of the Kingdom. 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 Bhutan.

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 National Editorial Board with a Chairman and members comprising of representatives from the government, media professionals, scholars and eminent citizens. Of the 7 board members, only the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Finance is the sole representative from the government.

ii. its staff are no longer deemed members of the civil service and BBS has to formulate its own set of management, personnel and financial rules and regulations.

iii. it has been taken out from the list of normal government organisations enjoying budgetary support and instead placed in the list of commercial enterprises that may be only negotiate for either a fixed budgetary grant or a soft term loan to fund its operations. In principle, corporations are expected to generate revenues and at least meet its operating costs.

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.
In Bhutan, almost all policy statements regarding the socio-economic aspects of the country are normally listed in the 'Five-Year Plan' documents which help in the implementation of the five-year development plans of the country. Bhutan currently is in the midst of its Seventh Five-Year Plan period (1992 to 1997). Though the general objective of radio broadcasting in Bhutan was always to 'educate, inform and entertain', the Seventh Five-Year Plan document states that given the low literacy rate, mountainous terrain and the widely dispersed pattern of habitation considers the development of all forms of communication 'a most vital aspect of development'. The Seventh Plan document further notes that the primary focus of the nationalised media will continue to be 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 air feedback from the public.

However, with the government decision to delink the mass 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 currently under review to reflect the changed status of the station as an autonomous corporation. It is already clear that while public service functions will continue to enjoy the highest priority, more stress will be laid to

LEGAL AND REGULATORY MEASURES REGARDING EXTERNAL SATELLITE BROADCASTING.

At present there are no explicit legal or regulatory measure relating to either the foreign or local print or electronic media in Bhutan. However, 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. Though the concern is real, we have as yet to work out an appropriate response.

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

Sonam Tshong
Bhutan