

From *Mani* Stones to Twitter: Bhutan Creates a Unique Media Matrix for a 21st-Century Democracy

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The small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is adopting digital media in culturally specific ways. For this traditionally oral culture with little interest in newspapers, digital media such as Facebook and Twitter sit comfortably alongside more traditional forms of media such as *mani* stones and lama dancing. In this article I use Benedict Anderson's theory of media for creating nationhood and an imagined political community as a prism to consider the media landscape that is developing in Bhutan. The unique media matrix that is emerging from all the modern media platforms available provides a fresh perspective from which to consider the baggage of print capitalism and to rethink notions of print literacy versus digital literacy.

Keywords: Bhutan, social media, Twitter, Facebook, Internet, mobile phones, digital literacy, oral culture

In July 2013, Bhutanese citizens voted out their government in an election so decisive that *The Times of India* called it a drubbing and a "storm to power" by the opposition ("Opposition Storms," 2013). It was only the country's second election since the king dissolved absolute monarchical power in 2006 in favor of a democratically elected government, and more than 80% of eligible Bhutanese cast their votes ("Bhutan PDP," 2013). Opposition leader Tshering Tobgay and his People's Democratic Party won 32 out of the 47 seats. The emphatic result demonstrated the people's confidence in exercising their new democratic rights and showed that Bhutan's nascent media industry had successfully played its role of enabling a working democracy (Joseph & Dahal, 2014). In just 15 years, Bhutan had leapfrogged over many of the technological phases experienced by developed nations to arrive at the same point: a 21st-century democracy served by modern media. But the media landscape the Bhutanese are creating reflects their oral traditions, and although newspapers have had limited success, digital media in particular are helping to create the new political culture. Facebook, blogs, and, to a lesser extent, Twitter are opening up a space for public discourse that is culturally compatible with Bhutan's traditional media, such as storytelling and lama dancing, which continue to evolve in a contemporary context, using modern media technologies to extend the unifying, cultural experience.

While the Western world grapples with the loss of the old newspaper business model to which these societies have been economically and emotionally attached, Bhutan's lack of print culture provides a fresh perspective to consider how Facebook and other digital media spaces can contribute to Benedict

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Anderson's "imagined political community," where citizens connect in "deep horizontal comradeship" with each other (2006, pp. 6–7), but without the baggage of print capitalism. Further, the dynamic public space that is opening up in Bhutan offers insights into the potentialities of digital literacy for nonliterate cultures.

Literature Review

Bhutan is in the development stage of nation building, and both media and scholarship are in their infancy there, so there is little analysis of its media. International media reporting about Bhutan is mostly simplistic and clichéd (Kaul, 2008). The most significant pieces of literature are three detailed media-impact studies published by the Ministry of Information and Communication, the first two in conjunction with Stanford University). These provide both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the way citizens are responding to the rapidly changing media environment (MoIC, 2003; MoIC, 2008; MoIC, 2013). These studies, conducted five years apart, roughly coincide with the introduction of a specific technology, providing a valuable snapshot of each while also charting its progress and effects in the community. Television was introduced in 1999, and the 2003 study shows community concerns about the potential for foreign influence, but 66.5% of the study participants (who were selected from rural and urban areas, small and large towns, as well as occupations that included media professionals, professionals, youth, homemakers and older people) considered its overall impact to have been positive. The study's findings disprove a claim by the *Guardian* newspaper in 2003 that the introduction of television had brought a wave of crime and sexual promiscuity to Bhutan (Scott-Clark & Levy, 2003). The 2008 study showed that Bhutanese preferred Bhutanese content in all their media and that as it increased, their consumption of foreign media declined (MoIC, 2008).

Mobile phones were introduced in 2006, and the 2008 study showed their rapid adoption, with 250,000 out of a population of 630,000 owning a mobile phone (MoIC, 2008, p. i). By 2013, this had increased to 560,000, or 92.8% of households (MoIC, 2013). Two independent newspapers were launched in 2006, followed by more independent newspapers, and by 2013 there were 11 privately owned titles. The 2013 study showed they had low circulations, with just 5% of respondents getting their news from newspapers, compared to 56% getting news from TV and 28% from radio. Even friends, at 6%, came in higher as a news source than newspapers (MoIC, 2013).

The government established the Centre for Bhutan Studies in 1999, which publishes the bi-annual *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, an international scholarly journal concerned with the social, cultural, and economic aspects of Bhutan. In 2006 it held a conference devoted to media and in 2007 published a collection titled *Media and Public Culture in Bhutan* that included papers about early forms of media (Ardussi; Pommaret); media and politics (Balasubramanian & Nidup; Mehta; Wangchuk); Buddhism and media (Phuntsho; Rinzin; Ura); advertising as a negative cultural influence (McDonald); and various aspects of sustainability (Bodt; Hershock).

In 2012 the Bhutan Media Foundation published its first *Media Baseline Study* (MBS), which concluded that the "mushrooming" of new newspaper titles is unsustainable and recommended that citizen journalism should be encouraged through the support of bloggers and online publishers (MBS, 2012).

Social researcher Gyambo Sithey (2013) analyzed the effect of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, on the 2013 election in his book *Drukyul Decides*, concluding that it played a significant role and was now a feature of the Bhutanese political landscape).

In 2014, the Worlds of Journalism Study found that Bhutanese journalists identify with the role of "detached watchdog" (Josephi & Dahal, 2014). A report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation investigated the state of private newspapers in Bhutan and concluded that they were unsustainable. It made a series of recommendations, including moving the newspapers online, redistributing government advertising equally, and introducing measures to encourage professional journalism (SDC, 2014).

The research for this article was undertaken during a series of field trips to Bhutan over 12 months from September 2008 to September 2009, three weeks in December 2011, and three weeks in July 2014. These trips included interviews with senior journalists, editors, bloggers, politicians who were early adopters of digital media, senior bureaucrats, and the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy.

Situating Bhutan

The way media develop in any society reflects its history and character. Bhutan is situated at the eastern end of the Himalayas and is about the size of Switzerland, covering about 46,500 square kilometers, although some borders with China remain under dispute ("China says," 2014). It is wedged between behemoths China and India, each with more than a billion people. Bhutan was closed for centuries, isolated both geographically and by deliberate policy, turning the country inward to develop its own distinctive culture and forms of communication. It is traditionally an oral culture comprising various ethnic groups with about 23 spoken languages, of which only one, Dzongkha, has a written form (Yeshi, 2012).

The kingdom comprises 20 *dzongkhags* (administrative and judicial districts), which can be further divided into 205 *gewogs* (groups of villages). The country is predominantly rural, with more than 60% of employed people working in agriculture, including farmers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The capital city, Thimphu, has a population around 100,000, of which 60% is below the age of 22 (Limbu, 2014).

The Internet, like TV, was introduced in 1999, and as of June 2014, 41% of people were Internet users (G. Dorji, 2014b). The government is building community centers with Internet facilities across the country. About 185 centers had been built and were operational by March 2015, with the rest due to be finished by the end of 2016 (G. Dorji, 2015). These centers are intended to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban dwellers, allowing rural people to do their banking, pay telephone bills, apply for business licenses, seek permits to cut timber, register births and deaths, and access BBSTV news, blogs, Wikipedia, Facebook, and each other. Access to the Internet is uneven across the country, and it is a government priority to provide affordable broadband connections to 90% of the rural population by 2020 (G. Dorji, 2014b).

Bhutan is the last Mahayana Buddhist kingdom, following the esoteric practices of Himalayan Buddhism, in which aspects of orality are considered sacred and privileged over print (Phuntsho, 2007). While the latest four-wheel drive Prados cruise the main street of Thimphu, with their drivers streaming radio on their iPhones, just a few minutes' drive away, yogis are undertaking solitary retreats and performing secret tantric rituals thousands of years old (Avieson, 2013a). These are the two faces of modern Bhutan, equally relevant to the culture and media out of which (and into which) it is emerging.

Early Media

The birth of Bhutan as a unified nation occurred in the 17th century under Shabdrung Rinpoche, a monk who fled Tibet and is considered the founding father of Bhutan (Fischer & Tashi, 2009). When he arrived, Bhutan was a loose internecine collection of violent warring tribes. Shabdrung Rinpoche used the mass media of the day to communicate to the people. At that time, Bhutan, like other Buddhist cultures of Mustang, Nepal, and Tibet, featured long, distinctive prayer walls at popular thoroughfares. They were built from piles of *mani* stones, which are rocks carved with Buddhist prayers or mantras. These long mani walls were constructed for the specific purpose of communicating messages to the greater citizenry and are what Himalayan historian John Ardussi called the first "medium of public communication" (2007, p.10).

Shabdrung Rinpoche chose this familiar medium to communicate the new laws of governance to the people. He wrote *The Golden Yoke of Legal Edicts*, a code of behavior for his ministers, and had it chiseled into stone panels and put on public display outside Punakha Dzong, a major fortress and center of power. While Benedict Anderson referred specifically to newspapers in his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, his insights can also be applied to the mani stones of Bhutan. The messages carved on these strategically placed walls helped to create a national consciousness able to transcend the immediate geographical boundaries of interaction that served to unify Bhutan and create a larger sense of shared nationhood, which Anderson referred to as the "imagined political community" (2006, p. 6). Shabdrung Rinpoche's edicts are still there today—set solidly in stone, vividly painted with gold lettering, serving to unify the citizenry of Bhutan across time and space. These carved stone communications are an example of what Harold Innis (1951) called "time-binding" media. They performed the function of communicating a single, unifying message in a form that was immovable and lasting. While few citizens would have been able to read the edicts for themselves, they were nevertheless a public declaration, a message to every citizen of the new rule of the land. They were as symbolic as they were informative.

Tibetologist Françoise Pommaret (2007) cited Bhutanese traditional masked dances as another early form of media for the culturally and politically unifying messages they imparted to mass audiences. Shabdrung Rinpoche choreographed elaborate dances telling stories of Buddhist heroes for the monks and lamas to perform at annual *tsechus* (religious festivals). Whole communities would gather from nearby valleys for the shared experience, thus creating what Pommaret called an early "media event" (2007, p. 2).

The tsechu is still part of Bhutan's modern media landscape, not as a historic spectacle or performance for tourists but as a contemporary media event that still serves to unify the citizenry, as

relevant now as in the 1600s. For example, in December 2011 the queen grandmother commissioned the creation of a new tsechu. New monk dances were choreographed to tell the inspiring story of 11th-century Buddhist yogi Milarepa. Aspects of Asian opera were included along with African drums. The king wrote one of the songs, and the army performed a re-creation of a famous Bhutanese battle. Thousands of Bhutanese turned out, braving temperatures below zero, to enjoy the daylong event held at Dochula, a misty pass an hour outside of Thimphu. Some spectators filmed the tsechu on mobile phones and sent the videos to relatives in their villages (Avieson, 2013b). Some tweeted about it, including Opposition Leader Tshering Tobgay (2011a), who also posted an account on his blog (2011b) and on Facebook (Tobgay, 2011c). The event was broadcast live on BBS, watched by workers in Thimphu offices and in villages across the kingdom, and streamed on the BBS website, available to Bhutanese studying abroad. Televisions ran all day for customers in the post office, Bank of Bhutan, restaurants, and shops. Herders high in remote hilltops were able to follow it on BBS radio, streamed live on their mobile phones (Avieson, 2013b). The Dochula Tsechu is now an annual festival, telling the culturally unifying story of an ancient saint using the traditional mass medium of the shabdrung's lama dancing while also incorporating international art forms of Chinese opera and African drumming and presented as a media event on a multitude of modern platforms. The Dochula Tsechu demonstrates how, in Bhutan's contemporary media landscape, newer media technologies sit comfortably alongside older forms, amplifying and extending them beyond the geographical and temporal, providing greater inclusion.

Bhutan's Ministry of Information and Communication (MoIC) defines a modern information society as "the converged fields of media, broader information technology, and culture—culture being interpreted here as the visual and performing arts and literary creations" (n.d., p. 4). The ministry explicitly recognizes the importance of Bhutan's oral heritage, putting it first in list of the eight media that form part of its responsibility: "oral, television, radio, Internet, film, publishing, gaming and mobile phone" (n.d, p. 6). Of oral media, it said: "This Bhutanese tradition must be preserved. The oral tradition ranges from the legacy of storytelling that kept history and culture alive for generations to the rumours and gossip that have their own impact on society" (MoIC, n.d., p. 6).

Bhutanese folktales are another form of cultural media, traditionally shared in the evenings in rural villages across the country. Families and neighbors would gather together around the fire to hear *Apa* (Grandfather) recount ancient tales of heroism and tragedy. According to Bhutanese scholar Chandra Shekhar Sharma, the folktales are not so much "told" or "narrated" as they are "released" or "untied" (2007, p. 84). This suggests they dwell in the collective unconscious, owned by everybody, a common heritage. There is no notion of individual authorship or copyright. Handed on from one generation to the next, they serve as an important tool of communication between generations. "Each folktale is a medium of communication, and also a process of communication in itself" (Sharma, 2007, p. 87).

The continued significance of cultural forms of media reflects the importance in modern Bhutan of its oral traditions. *Druk Super Star* is the country's re-appropriation of *American Idol*. In the Bhutanese version, contestants sing "fading" traditional songs as a means of cultural preservation, using the modern medium of television to broadcast a popular American format adapted for Bhutanese sensibilities and to inspire youth to learn about their own cultural heritage as a bulwark against foreign culture coming

through television (Nessman, 2011). The program, which is popular across all age groups and among both rural and urban viewers, is helping to revive traditional forms of singing and dancing (MBS, 2012).

Modern Media

In Europe and elsewhere, the revolutions of print then electronic and digital media occurred over centuries, and so did the political and social transformations they facilitated. In Bhutan, these revolutions are occurring simultaneously. In the same decade that a newspaper industry has been launched in the country, television and digital communications technologies, including mobile telephones, have also been launched.

Newspapers are still largely a new and untried phenomenon for the majority in this traditionally oral culture. In 2003, print literacy was estimated at 53%; in 2008, at 56%; and in 2012, at 63% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Although literacy tests measure specific skills, they do not measure how far print literacy has permeated into the culture—that is, how relevant reading and writing are to citizens' daily lives and how frequently the people practice those skills. "Reading and writing in Bhutan is still largely associated with office and school 'work' and the concept of reading as recreation is new" (MoIC, 2003, p. 15.). Journalist Sonam Ongmo wrote in *Kuensel*, "If you want to keep a secret, write it in a book, no-one will read it" (2009, p. 5). Research in 2013 found that "reading habits" had not improved (MoIC, 2013, p. 36).

As well as an undeveloped reading culture, Bhutan has little newspaper culture. Bhutanese children don't grow up seeing newspapers being sold on street corners or piled on shop counters (Avieson, 2013a). Many of the small all-purpose grocery shops dotted along the main street of Thimphu and throughout the smaller towns don't see the point in stocking newspapers, which take up space and provide a profit of just Nu1 (16 U.S. cents) per copy. Among those that do stock newspapers, few understand the news aspect of their sale. The latest edition is often mixed in with a pile from last week (Avieson, 2013a). Newspapers mostly communicate government matters for the political elite, making print media a space for elite discourse (Josephi & Dahal, 2014). The number of independent titles has mushroomed in the past 10 years, from 1 in 2003 to 4 in 2008 to 12 in 2013 (MoIC, 2013). Discussion that originates in the pages of the newspapers circulates beyond through word of mouth and other media.

The dominant newspaper continues to be *Kuensel*, which, loosely translated, means *Clarity*. It started as a government gazette in 1965, growing and developing into a national newspaper over the next two decades. By 1988 it was a weekly publication with a circulation of 12,500, published in English, Dzongkha, and Nepali (MBS, 2012). In 1992 it was made an autonomous corporation, and in 2006, a public company with the government retaining 51% of shares. Despite the new entrants to the market, it retains its status as market leader, dominating sales with an audited circulation of 7,159 (G. Dorji, 2014a).

In 2006, when the fourth king announced his intention to hand over absolute power to a democratically elected government, he explained that his vision for democracy included independent

newspapers that would provide alternatives to what was published in *Kuensel*. Princess Sonam Dechen Wangchuck expressed the views of her father, the fourth king, in 2006:

It is His Majesty's initiative and desire to open up the media to the private sector to provide a forum for alternate views and perspectives that concern the people and the Kingdom of Bhutan . . . not only providing objective information to the public, but also spearheading the strengthening of civil society in our nation. We look forward to a wealth of information, discourses, and individual expressions from various cross-sections of society. (Avieson, 2013a, p. 108)

A third newspaper, *Bhutan Today*, launched in 2008, and since then, others have entered the market, including *The Bhutanese*, *Journalist*, *Business Bhutan*, and three Dzongkha-only newspapers, and semiregular magazine titles have joined them. With almost no private-sector advertising, this crowded market relies heavily on government advertising, of which nearly half goes to *Kuensel* while the rest is divided between the others (MoIC, 2008). With each new entrant seeking to further share the limited government budget, all of the independent newspapers are struggling (MoIC, 2013, p. 19; see also *Bhutan Observer*, August 27, 2012, editorial; Dahal, 2012). Both *Bhutan Times* and *Bhutan Observer* have been forced to close their rural bureaus and to forgo national distribution, leaving *Kuensel* as the only national newspaper. It has printing presses in the east, making distribution possible across Bhutan's mountainous terrain. *Bhutan Observer* ceased print production in 2013, becoming an online publication only. Staff at some independent newspapers claim they have received almost no salary for two years (Pokhrel, 2014).

Bhutan's low engagement with newspapers is not reflected in its approaches to other new media technologies. Radio, television, mobile phones, and the Internet have been far more readily adopted. The mobile phone is the biggest success story.

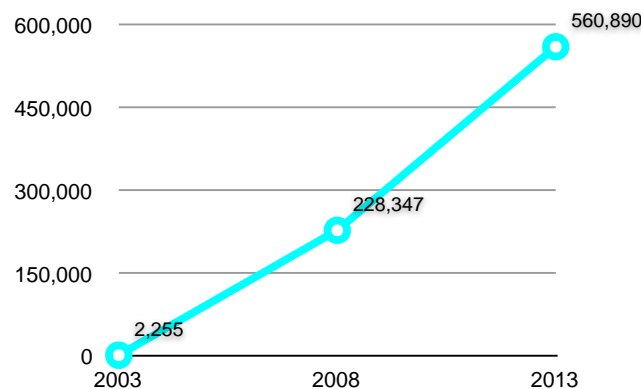


Figure 1. Mobile phone subscribers in Bhutan over the past decade.

(Source: MoIC, 2013, p. 31)

When the technology became available in Bhutan in December 2003, the country had just 23,657 landline telephones. Within two years, the mobile phone had overtaken them.

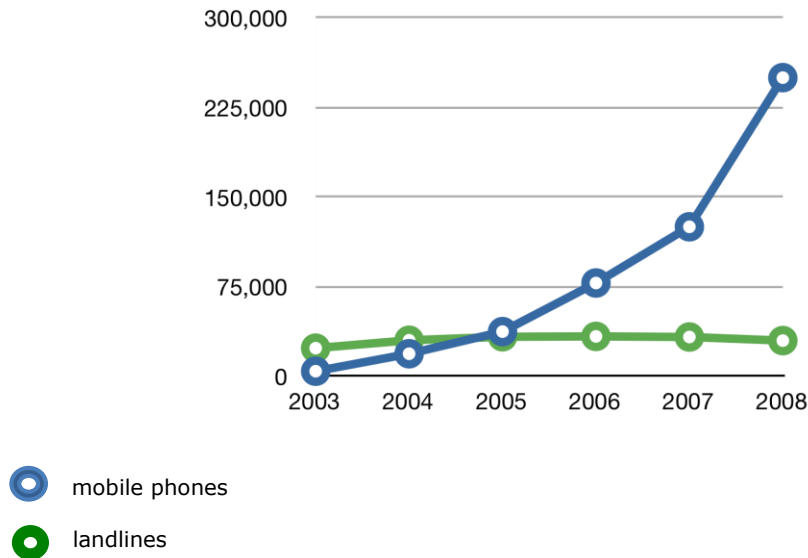


Figure 2. Mobile phones have been readily adopted, while landlines have remained relatively stable. (Source: Kezang & Whalley, 2011, p. 377)

The mobile phone has overtaken the radio as the most widely owned asset in both urban and rural Bhutanese households. In 2007 the most widely owned asset was the radio (62%), followed by the mobile phone (39.3%) and then television (37.7%). In 2012 the number of households who owned a mobile telephone reached near saturation, at 92.8% (MoIC, 2013).

The mobile phone connects citizens to each other and to a range of other news media platforms. They use it stream radio, check Facebook, post on Twitter, record and watch videos (MoIC, 2013).

The mobile phone suits Bhutan's isolating geography, strong community networks, and traditionally oral culture. It has become an adjunct and extension to the way Bhutanese go about the business of living. BBS TV news on October 25, 2008, broadcast a story about a farmer in a remote area who had a mobile phone but no electricity. His phone battery lasted for four days, and then he would walk for three hours to the office of the local *gup* (mayor) to recharge the battery. The local *gup* told BBS TV that this was not unusual. People visited him from miles around to recharge their mobile phones (Avieson, 2013b). Farmers can stream BBS radio and talk to each other—an extraordinary change from their previous situation, in which many could go months without contact beyond their own properties. The media office at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests provides weekly vegetable prices at markets across

the country in four languages on a recorded, toll-free number. Farmers then can choose which market to drive to with their produce. The service receives more than 30,000 callers a month (K. Tshering, personal communication, July 3, 2014). All 205 gewogs have mobile-phone coverage.

According to the Ministry of International Communications:

The mobile has become a popular multi-purpose tool and is the best example of media convergence. It shows how technology is enabling communication devices to become media for sharing of information, engaging in media, as radios and computers, and for SMS voting. (2008, p. x)

In Bhutan, mobile phones are used for the following purposes:

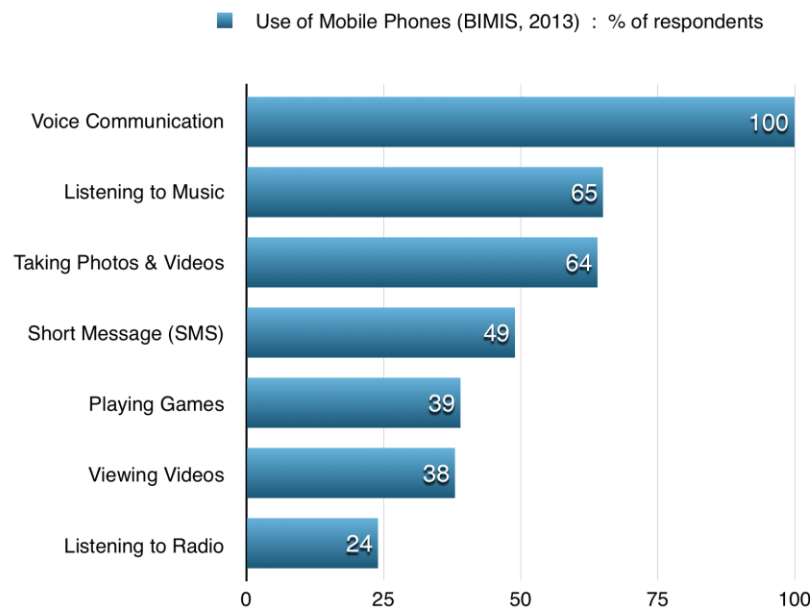


Figure 3. The mobile phone is a multipurpose tool.

(Source: MoIC, 2013, p. 31)

Facebook has also been a dramatic success, even with the nation's limited connectivity. It is a forum for public issues in addition to social interaction. Bhutanese scholar and author Gyambo Sithey describes Facebook page Amend the Tobacco Act as "a gamechanger" that led to "unbridled" use of social networking sites for political purposes (2013, p. 231). The page was started by two journalists in 2011 to oppose a parliament act that could jail people up to three years for smuggling tobacco into Bhutan, the world's only country where selling tobacco is illegal. Sithey explained, "For the first time ever, people came onto the page to support the movement, not anonymously, but as themselves, thus pushing Facebook into the realm of mainstream political activity" (2013, p. 231).

In December 2012, *Kuensel*, the 30-year-old national newspaper, had an audited circulation of just 6,530 ("Audit Shines Light," 2012), whereas Facebook, available only in major cities, had more than 76,000 users ("Social Media," 2012). It is reasonable to expect that number to increase as more Bhutanese further avail themselves of relatively inexpensive smartphones from India and China and as the U.S.\$11.4 million rollout of national broadband, funded by India, continues further into rural areas. "The popularity of social media, such as Facebook and twitter [*sic*] in the country and also the evolution of smart phones are attributed to the increase in mobile internet users" (T. Dorji, 2014, p. 3).

Facebook provides a major contribution to the dissemination of news within the society. In 2014 Bhutan's most popular blogger was Passing Tshering, a teacher of high school computer applications. He likened Facebook to a modern tsechu because of the huge numbers that gather. He set up B-Bay, a Facebook page to sell second-hand goods, which he said is like "setting up a tea stall at a tsechu." Tshering talks in terms of "before and after Facebook," explaining that while the Internet arrived in Bhutan in 1999, it took the explosion of Facebook in the country in 2007 for "the Internet to really take off" (P. Tshering, personal communication, July 2, 2014). Government figures support his claim. Internet subscribers rose from 5,726 in 2008 to 251,441 in 2013 (MoIC, 2014) and then to 349,116 in 2014 (G. Dorji, 2015). Tshering is educated and politically engaged, writing about issues on his blog, but says he seldom reads newspapers. "Anything important will appear in my Facebook feed" (P. Tshering, personal communication, July 2, 2014).

Twitter started slowly in Bhutan, but by 2011, it had become a lively space for the political elite. Opposition Leader Tshering Tobgay was one of the first to recognize the potential of the microblogging site, joining in May 2009. He traveled the country tweeting local news. When the country suffered a devastating earthquake in 2009, Tobgay travelled to affected areas, posting photographs to Twitter taken on his Apple smartphone showing villagers and the damage to their homes. In the lead-up to the 2013 election that he so successfully won, he sent 3,676 tweets. The government sent just 615 tweets, and the prime minister conceded that his party had not used the site as effectively (Sithey, 2013). At the time of the election, Twitter was mostly limited to a few educated urbanites, but their influence was "immense," as their families back in the villages relied on them for political advice. Discussions began on Twitter and Facebook and then extended throughout the community by word of mouth (Sithey, 2013).

New Definitions of Literacy

The way that Bhutan is using media technologies is informed by its oral traditions and provides a fresh perspective from which to view current notions about literacy. In developed countries, digital technology often is portrayed as a threat to literacy. Before the Internet, Neil Postman (1985) feared that with the introduction of electronic media (i.e., television), our ability to reason with rigor and self-discipline was being eroded as fewer people read systematically. He argued then that "modern media" reduced overall literacy. Nicholas Carr asked in 2010, "Is Google making us stupid?" Most media theories make certain assumptions about how societies move from orality to literacy. "Media history moves from oral culture, to chirographic or manuscript culture, and then to print or typographic culture, and on to electronic culture" (Grosswiler, 2001, p. 22). This print bias in defining literacy is common within certain fields, including sociology, cultural studies, and media studies, but considered too narrow in others,

including anthropology. Eric Michaels (1994) investigated the Warlpiri people, an oral culture from central Australia, who “read” their landscape in a method that is not available to non-indigenous people. Michaels described a video production made by the Walpiri called *Coniston Story* as comprising shaky pans and seemingly random zooms across an empty landscape. While this may appear meaningless to non-indigenous people, for the Walpiri, it is rich with ancestral and historical significance. They are able to follow the camera as it “tracks across a scene laden with meaning” (Deger, 2006, p. 40). In a semiotic sense, the Walpiri exhibit a different kind of literacy, able to read meaning in their landscape although they are unable to decode print. Conversely, print-literate non-indigenous people are unable to access the symbols of the landscape, the “media” of this ancient people.

Northern Canadian science journalist James Hrynshyn worked with Inuit tribes adopting the Internet and said that it was ideally suited to the oral storytelling traditions of Inuit communities and enabled them to transcend the print medium (Zellen, 1998).

Media theorist Walter Ong (2002) determined that the two modes of discourse—oral and literate—are so systemically disparate that once people become print literate, their thought processes have been changed to such a degree that it is no longer possible for them to return to a pre-literate mode of thinking. Writing requires such different semiotic processes to orality that once an individual has interiorized writing, Ong said, even their oral expression reflects literate thought patterns:

Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (Ong, 2002, p. 77)

How much print literacy is needed to engage with modern digital media? A higher level would be required for reading a book or newspaper article than for watching YouTube or uploading photographs to Facebook. Non-print literate Bhutanese farmers are proficient with mobile phones, able to use voice apps such as Wechat, stream radio, and swap video and photos via Bluetooth, all with just an elementary knowledge of signifiers (Dema, 2014). Editor-in-chief of *Bhutan Observer* Needrup Zangpo lives and works in Thimphu but keeps in touch with friends from his childhood village of Mongar, a few days’ travel away, via Facebook on his mobile phone. Some of these people left school after grade 2 or 3 and speak only the local dialect of Chocha Ngacha, which has no written form. “They know one English word, ‘Hi,’ but they communicate with me on Facebook using English script to write our language. We manage to communicate” (N. Zangpo, personal communication, July 10, 2014).

Individuals lacking print literacy could be completely connected to Bhutan’s public space with a range of digital or Web-based media. Paul Gilster said that digital literacy involved “mastering ideas, not keystrokes” (1997, p. 1). Knobel and Lankshear (2008) sought a broader definition of literacy to suit the digital age. They describe someone who “freezes” language in a digital file and uploads it to the Internet and someone who photoshops an image, whether or not it includes a written text component, as “engaging in literacy,” explaining that “texts evoke interpretation on all kinds of levels that may only partially be ‘tappable’ or ‘accessible’ linguistically” (p. 257). David Buckingham called for a

reconceptualization of our definition of literacy: "The increasing convergence of contemporary media means that we need to be addressing the skills and competencies—the multiple literacies— that are required by the whole range of contemporary forms of communication" (2008, p. 88). Sonia Livingstone (2004) defined media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts. *Bhutan Observer* journalist Jigme Wangchuk (2012) identified its importance to modern Bhutan:

Literacy today depends on understanding the multiple media that make up the high-tech reality and developing the skills to use them effectively. As Bhutan is becoming increasingly media-saturated, being just literate in the traditional sense of the term is not enough. (para. 1)

The digital technology that is sometimes seen as a threat to literacy in developed countries may, paradoxically, result in a more print-literate outcome for Bhutan. In Bhutan, print literacy may be co-emergent with digital media literacy, or that 21st-century multimedia literacy that Wangchuk envisaged. According to McMahan and Chesebro:

If a nation-state "leaps" from an oral to an electronic culture, the "leap" may ultimately promote the development of literacy. Consequently, for some nation-states, the historical and temporal formula may evolve from orality to electronic to literacy. (2003, p. 135)

History shows that teaching people to read and write has been the first step in leading them out of poverty, and there are still millions for whom such a basic human right is unachievable. Historically, newspapers brought about both intellectual and economic self-expansion. Printing in 15th-century Europe created new professions and businesses, such as paper suppliers, printers, publishers, booksellers, typesetters, proofreaders, and authors. Such roles conferred special social status within communities and contributed to diversifying economies. But that has not been Bhutan's trajectory. Instead, Bhutan's journey from feudal tribalism to modern media-literate state has been rapid, arriving at the same technological endpoint as developed economies, having bypassed a few stages of evolutionary development, including the stage of print capitalism. This has produced some specific consequences.

The Baggage of Print Capitalism: Consumerism and Power

Advertising is a significant force in modern democracies, both culturally and economically. It is visually pervasive, saturating commercial media and streetscapes and even appearing in the sky. In Bhutan, consumer advertising is almost nonexistent. In 2005 billboards and shop fronts were officially banned from carrying advertising messages (McDonald, 2007). In newspapers, consumer advertising is in its infancy, and instead a distinctly Bhutanese form of advertising has developed. Few businesses buy space to advertise their services or products; instead they buy a page, half page, or quarter page to send felicitations to the king and former king on special occasions like birthdays and coronation anniversaries. The government advertises tenders and sponsors editorial specials based around international days such as World Tuberculosis Day and Global Handwashing Day, imparting messages for societal benefit. MP

Sangay Khandu described the newspapers as bulletin boards for the government (personal communication, July 12, 2014).

Consumer advertising dominates Western media, reflecting the capitalist orientation of the society. In Bhutan, the forms of advertising that have developed reflect the country's culture and values. The business model of commercial advertising supporting newspapers is not part of Bhutan's experience, where private enterprise is still underdeveloped (MoIC, 2013). Bhutanese television advertising is mostly non-consumer, dominated instead by public notices and government tenders (MoIC, 2013). Cable television broadcast from India carries consumer advertising, but as it shows products or services not available in Bhutan, it is regarded mostly as irrelevant (MoIC, 2008). Ross McDonald (2007) recommended an outright ban on consumer advertising on television, arguing it was incompatible with Bhutan's own Buddhist values: "Advertising on television aims to undo the pull of Buddhist aspiration and entrap populations within a delusional and harmful materialism" (p. 188).

Bhutan's media views its audience in non-economic terms—that is, not as consumers but as members of the community—and sees its role as serving its audience. This is reflected in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, adopted in 2008, which addresses citizens' communication rights.

Right to Communicate

In 1969 Jean d'Arcy, from the UN Office of Public Information, challenged Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers. (1948, para. 1)

He argued that the freedoms described did not protect man's inalienable right to communicate. While the intent was there, in practice, the rights were inaccessible. The mass media, which had developed from Gutenberg's invention, did not allow for two-way communication. Every man had the right to speak, but not every man had a microphone or a newspaper column, and therefore the information flow went mostly one way. The power of communication rested with the owners of the media technology. He argued for the establishment of a "right to communicate" (D'Arcy, 1974).

In the 1980s, the international community recognized the inequalities brought about by print capitalism, and a publication of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems known as the MacBride Report redefined democratization in terms of communications, making specific reference to a new era of social rights (MacBride, 1980). The Internet has undoubtedly been an effective means of giving those rights to citizens, putting into many hands that microphone and keyboard. Futurist Paul Saffo said that the Web "mediates human interaction better than any other medium" (Levy, 1995, para. 8). Bhutan's access to digital technologies is uneven, dependent on geography, socioeconomic factors, and levels of literacy. The government's U.S.\$11.4 million rollout of broadband and its cyber

community centers will go some way toward reducing this unevenness, as will the increasing availability of affordable smartphones.

Bhutan did not experience centuries of domination by print capitalism, with its associated communication and power inequalities. Under Article 7 of the Bhutanese constitution, citizens are granted "the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression" and "the right to information." It also provides for "freedom of the press, radio and television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic" (Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008). It doesn't specify a right to communicate, but then it doesn't have to. Bhutan has become a democracy in an era of digital communications technology when such concerns are less relevant.

It could be argued that the Leveson Inquiry in Britain shows the consequences of print capitalism taken to an extreme. Previously, Bhutan's print culture has been confined to the monastic body, with monks reading religious texts, and the political elite. The rapid adoption of digital platforms, particularly the mobile phone, has the potential to include more people in the developing public space where identity is constructed, citizens are informed, nations are imagined, and cultural practices are pursued. Blogger Tshering Dorji is known in Bhutan for writing about corruption in public bodies. He said he had grown up being taught to bow to authority: "In my generation . . . we couldn't speak up about our opinions. We didn't know you could write books. Now we can all have a voice" (T. Dorji, personal communication, July 2, 2014).

Conclusion

Bhutan's journey from feudal oral society to modern media state has been rapid, bypassing a few stages of evolutionary development previously undertaken by other nation-states to create a unique matrix of ancient and modern communication platforms. As McLuhan (1964) taught and Bhutan exemplifies, each successful medium does not so much replace as complicate those that came before. The media landscape that is developing in Bhutan will continue to reflect its oral traditions, its history, and Buddhist culture and the privileging of oral over print. The newer media technologies sit comfortably alongside the older forms, in many cases reinvigorating them as in the cases of the Dochula Tsechu and *Druk Super Star*. All the media that the Bhutanese use—from folktales to mobile phones and the Internet—contribute to the public space, where notions of nation are reflected and reinforced and a political community is created. The media landscape as it stands presents Bhutan with two challenges: (a) not all citizens have access to this expanding public space, and (b) it is less successful at meeting another function of media in a democracy: the role of watchdog provided by independent journalism. Independent newspapers are financially unsustainable, and neither Bhutan's state-run television nor its radio performs that investigative role.

The problem of uneven access appears to be a matter of time, as it is clearly a government priority. Pippa Norris (2001) suggested that the spread of the Internet follows a normalization pattern, where an initial period for adapting to the new technologies has the potential to widen social inequalities, but eventually the temporary gap should close. Bhutan is at the beginning of this pattern. Its educated, city-based populations have better access to the Internet than rural communities, but this is changing as

the government rolls out broadband to all the gewogs, connecting rural people to a range of government-to-citizen programs and developing digital literacy, which contributes to overall literacy. The popularity and affordability of mobile telephones coming from China and India are further extending access to online spaces.

Finding new funding models for journalism is less easily solved. A report of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2014) recommended moving journalism online, which has some merit. Although independent newspapers have achieved low penetration, they provide independent journalism that is then disseminated throughout society by other forms of media. Online blogs, some by former newspaper-trained journalists, have been successful in exposing corruption (T. Dorji, 2013) and initiating conversations about civic issues (Subba, 2014). And where newspapers have failed to penetrate beyond the political elite, online media spaces—what Passing Tshering called “the modern day *tsechu*”—are proving more culturally accessible. The “Amend the Tobacco Act” Facebook page created by two journalists demonstrates new possibilities for political activism.

It is nearly a decade since Ross McDonald (2007) recommended banning advertising on television in Bhutan, and since then, the media landscape has evolved beyond television in unexpected ways. There are advantages to Bhutan’s lack of consumer advertising, most notably the positioning of the audience as a community to be served rather than consumers to be reached. It also means Bhutan is approaching its emerging media space from a different standpoint from the developed world, which views the loss of advertising-funding newspaper journalism from a print-capitalist perspective.

I recommend future research to investigate whether the nonconsumer advertising that has been culturally acceptable in Bhutan—such as felicitations and NGO health campaigns—could be applied to online media spaces to fund professional journalism. Also, while investigative journalism is both underdeveloped and underfunded, Bhutan’s Anti-Corruption Commission is a strong force for exposing corruption within the new democracy. Further research could identify ways that modern online media platforms could strengthen the commission’s capacity for investigation and reporting, including avenues for whistle-blowing. Finally, the way that Bhutanese citizens of varying literacies communicate on Facebook using a range of oral-only languages offers insights into literacies in the digital age and is worthy of cross-disciplinary research involving linguistics and communications scholars.

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