

# DIMINUTIVE PROGRESS



APFA-BHUTAN

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Annual Press Freedom Report 2009-10

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## Forward

In four years of our closer inspection with media in Bhutan, year 2009-10 seems to have not frustrated us. We know, these are not to satisfaction and adequate to the need of a democracy and free country. The government has gradually changed to not worst as in past while journalists have started questioning the government and the politicians, bureaucrats not an exception.

Two years of practice in democracy has left enough rooms for the leaders and bureaucrats to learn. They have accepted only a few of the democratic cultures related to media.

After the first year of opening media for private investment, this year saw a rapid expansion of media outlets, at least the prints. Their sustainability might be questioned but economics has taught us that products automatically get the market. Like what has been expressed serious by the media owners that larger number of media may face difficulties to live owing to small market, the situation does not look so saddening.

The businesses are yet to learn the effect of advertisement in their business. It is the responsibility of the media to teach smaller business holders to go for advertisement. As alternatives for advertisement

increase, competition rises and as a result advertisement rates lower helping even smaller business owners to advertise their sale. That will be beneficial to middle class people, to which the very essence of gross national targets.

The government advertisement policy, drafted and now circulated to media houses is the issue of concern for now. The media practitioners should strongly raise objection to the proposal that public advertisement is given on competition basis. In many countries, government issues public service ads in all media, irrespective of the reach and type. In drafting the new advertisement policy, it is in the best interest of the media owners to bargain for public service advertisement from the government for all media.

Managerial interference into editorial department is another serious issue observed this year. The first national weekly Bhutan Times and the first national daily Bhutan Today have gone through this test and we cannot expect the story will not repeat in other houses as well.

## **Introduction**

Media in Bhutan have grown as the country has progressed further along the pathway towards democracy. Yet there remain significant challenges to meet to ensure media autonomy and freedom. These stem from the uncertain economics of the media as an industry in Bhutan and the relatively unformed regulatory framework.

Some of the difficulties arising from an undefined regulatory framework were evident in the mass resignation of journalists from the weekly Bhutan Times, the country's first privately owned newspaper. This was provoked by what the journalists described as management "interference" in editorial functions.

A second issue that has caused some concern among Bhutan's media community is a government proposal to tie its placement of public advertising to the content of particular media platforms. There have been suggestions from official circles that only media that cover issues in accordance with the country's official philosophy of "gross national happiness" will get government advertisement and that those dealing with entertainment will be left out.

## **Royal Initiatives**

Coinciding with his 30th birthday anniversary, King Jigme Khesar issued a royal kasho (charter) formally establishing the Bhutan Media Foundation on February 20, 2010 with the aim to support for development of mass media, so that it can carry out its roles and responsibilities in the interest of democracy.

The foundation is expected to support the media in enhancing skills through scholarships, internships and training, strengthening media executive management and leadership skills. It also plans to support for sustainability and growth of newspapers and broadcast stations, journalists associations and press clubs and invest in the future readership of the print media by striving to provide subscription grants of all newspapers to schools and colleges besides helping for promotion of national language in the media and civic education programs in the media.

It was the in fact not a government decision, formally taken by the cabinet. The declaration though seems favorable for media development, the king has overstepped the constitutional role defined by the constitution. Had the declaration come after cabinet decision, the foundation would have positive impact on development of free media for open democracy. King's

direct involvement means a step to keep royal influence in the media.

Initially, the foundation has the grant of Nu 15 m from king and will grow up to Nu 100.00 million by the end of the year<sup>1</sup>.

The charter however is just the beginning. Media houses will now have to get-together and draw up mechanisms to administer the foundation. And this is expected to be very tricky given that the media houses are very different from each other in terms of size, reach, ownership, operation cost, and frequency of publications or airing, among others<sup>2</sup>.

On April 30, 2009, the King announced the institution of Royal Office for Media which aimed to ease media on getting itinerary of the royal entourage or other activities that royal family carries out.

Called Gyalpoi Dapoen Yigtsang in national language, the office led by Dorji Wangchuk will help better media coverage of the royal events and enhance public relations<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Rinzin Wangchuk, Kuensel, February 21, 2010

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bhutantoday.bt/?p=2951>

<sup>3</sup> Apfanews.com, May 01, 2009

## **Government policies**

The government is preparing its first draft of the advertisement policy which will act as guideline for the government agencies to choose appropriate media for advertisement and announcement. It has been circulated to the media houses for elaborate discussion and feedback before being adopted<sup>4</sup>. The ad policy will largely be based on the findings of a circulation audit, to be conducted by Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) based in Mumbai, India.

The government proposed for circulation audits of newspapers, radio and the only TV station in the country. Auditors from India were to be invited by mid 2010 to audit the circulation figures and reach of the six newspapers, four radio stations and one television station in the country.

According to secretary of information and communication ministry Kinley Dorji, the auditors would not only audit the reach of the newspapers, radio stations and TV, but also examine the print run, sale and distribution figures of newspapers.

The sole purpose of the government was to choose media for advertisement. The government stated that public

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<sup>4</sup> Phuntscho Wangdi, Kuensel, April 16, 2010

advertisement would be given based on the reaches and the circulation. It would also help private sector to determine the kind of media they would be choosing to reach out to their targeted population. The idea is copied from India where Audit Bureau of Circulations audits circulations and media reaches.

On the other hand, government also said it was compelled to choose only few media for advertisement based on the experiences of the current fiscal year. The fund allocated for public advertisement in the current fiscal year could not afford to all six newspapers, four radios and a TV station. The government ran out of budget in the middle of the year<sup>5</sup>.

After the circulation audit, media would have to compete for advertisements and possibilities are in sight that media with lesser reach will die out in shorter time<sup>6</sup>.

Private newspapers say that a circulation audit will see them losing out to old players in the market in terms of government ads.

Additionally, the government targets to make media the advocator of the government's exaggeratedly talked gross national happiness. Newspapers with more contents of GNH and other national priorities will get more public advertisements than those who run posters of Hollywood

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<sup>5</sup> Sonam Pelden, Business Bhutan, January 23, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel 31, 2009

actors. Kinley Dorji even termed the entertainment news as “rubbish” news.

Ads are the main source of revenue for the media and 80 percent of the ads in the market today come from the government. With media organizations complaining about sustainability in the past, the government had issued a circular to distribute all government ads equally to all the media<sup>7</sup>.

It is likely that new players in the market will lose out of the older players like BBS and Kuensel, both receiving heavy government subsidy. The opposition leader, Tshering Tobgay, in his blog said, the government “should also consider the amount of subsidies that have already been given to Kuensel and BBS<sup>8</sup>.” Private newspapers have opposed the government proposal.

The media persons have also raised objections against the proposed Civil Service Bill, 2009, that had already been passed by the National Assembly.

Some of the media practitioners say that two clauses in Chapter 4 of the Bill are in variance directly with the Article 7 of the Constitution (Fundamental Rights). National Council is yet to pass the bill. The bill received only simple majority in the National Assembly.

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<sup>7</sup> Sonam Pelden, Business Bhutan, January 23, 2010

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tsheringtobgay.com/media/2010/media-wars.html>



Two particular clauses under Chapter 4, 'Duties and Rights of Civil Servants' in section K says that the Civil Servants should "maintain confidentiality of all facts and information discovered in the course of the duty, both while in service and after separation from service." Similarly, section L of the bill dictates the civil servants "to refrain from expressing any adverse opinions against the Royal Government".

Even government secretaries are against the provision saying restricting the civil servants from freedom of speech is certainly not a wise thing to do.

About 90 percent of the information that media get is from the government employees. Upon implementation of this bill, it would further bottleneck necessary information for media.

The Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) in January released the new rules of content for media. Many things that are not allowed are perfectly legal and even accepted in other countries.

Raising eyebrows on risqué content is different from naming certain things illegal, however. There is a need for the government to look seriously into the issue of freedom of expression, and there is a need for it to include it in this discussion, prominent journalists of Bhutan, at the very least, newspaper editorials read.

The question is also the motive behind the regulation on media content. If the motive is protecting the audience, then BICMA is attempting the feat of a caveman fighting the mammoth single handed, with stone-age weapons<sup>9</sup>.

According to the rules, involving a minor, below 18 years, in any form of Bhutanese media without the consent of the parent or guardian will be an offence. Animated content for children should not portray violence as its central theme and should not invite dangerous imitation.

Portrayal of violence would be allowed in the media only with appropriate editorial judgment. The rules state that viewers must be cautioned before showing scenes of extraordinary violence, or graphic reporting on delicate subject matters with appropriate warnings.

Suicide stories are usually left to the editorial guidelines of individual media houses. The rule, however, says that detailed description of the means or method of suicide must be avoided. Suicide should be handled with discretion and care, and not be glamorized. Indecent content, such as explicit nudity and sex, should not be shown under any circumstances, unless approved by the authorized authority. The content should not encourage or in any way lead to discrimination against any section of the community on account of gender, age, disability or occupational status.

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<sup>9</sup> Bhutan Today editorial, January 9, 2010

Promotion of alcohol, tobacco, drugs and other intoxicating materials through media advertisements is prohibited. There should not be any advertisements of food substitutes, such as milk formulas and processed foods for children under-five years of age. Use of offensive words, blasphemy and depiction of explicit sexual activity are also prohibited. Contents that might incite religious, ethnic, regional or communal conflicts are also not allowed. The content rules also state that extreme caution should be exercised in handling themes or scenes, which depict sex and violence, including rape or other sexual assaults<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel, January 06, 2008

## **Bhutan Times**

Citing interference by the management the editor, chief report and five other reporters of 'Bhutan Times' (BT) walked out of the company on October 22<sup>11</sup>. Wangcha Sangey, the CEO and newly appointed chairman of BT alleged the resigning staff of plotting conspiracy to bankrupt the company.

The resigning staffs' complaints about interference into editorial matters seem to be genuine considering the past events in the BT management. Throughout 2009, the BT management had in board meetings accused the journalists of not providing enough space for their businesses. Since most of the investors come from business background, the board had pressurized the editorial team to highlight the businesses they run while writings news. However, the call was ignored by the editorial team and the then CEO Tenzin Rigden, who was terminated from his position by the management board when he was on a leave.

On the same day journalists filed resignation, the new CEO hired team from K4 media to ensure the paper is published. Hiring of a new private firm to take over the editorial department irked the media regulator Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) who on October 23 sought details of the new

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<sup>11</sup>APFAnews.com, October 23, 2009

editorial team. It asked for a reply on or before the noon of October 30<sup>12</sup>.



*Editor Acharya with other reporters after resigning from Bhutan Times. Photo: Business Bhutan*

The dispute turned nasty when the new CEO Wangcha Sangey, who is also the chairman of the paper's board of directors, published a letter addressed to the director of BICMA in the October 25 issue of his paper blaming the director for attempting to kill the paper. Sangey said BICMA is a ruthless and dictator<sup>13</sup>. The BT management failed to turn up to the BICMA call. The agency again sent a letter to the paper on December 26 asking to submit details of the new editorial team.

The second letter basically dealt with three main issues: to submit details of the new editorial team; a bond signed

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<sup>12</sup> Apfanews.com, November 07, 2009

<sup>13</sup> Bhutan Times, October 25, 2009

by a professional editor; and the management's stand on editorial independence. The letter has asked BT to reply before January 15. If the BT reply was not satisfactory, BICMA warned it may suspend the paper's license for a period of time; revoke the license; or levy a fine on the paper. The BT management said it had received letter from the agency and refuted submitting any details. BICMA did not take any action.

In early October amidst deepening financial crisis in the company, its managing director Tenzin Rigden and deputy managing director resigned and Wangcha Sangey, who comes from law background, was named new MD<sup>14</sup>. Rigden had submitted a six-month leave a month earlier but an emergency board meeting relieved him from the job on October 1.

Rigden was nearly terminated from the position in April. After much speculation, the board of directors had decided that CEO Rigden will continue in the same position<sup>15</sup>.

The BT company has suffered a loss of Nu 5.39m in the first half of 2009. The DPT owes Nu 1.579m and PDP owes Nu 1.74m to the paper. A notice published by the company said, three organizers of the Citizens Initiative for Coronation and Centenary Celebrations (CICCC),

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<sup>14</sup> APFAnews.com, October 11, 2009

<sup>15</sup> Refer APFA-Bhutan's Annual Press Freedom Report 2008-09 for detail

Tenzin Rigden, Dorji Wangchuk and Tshering Gyeltshen, have not paid it Nu 4.53m “after they made full and liberal use of all the resources of BT including bank overdraft facility, establishment facilities, manpower, transport, materials and printing resources<sup>16</sup>.” The two parties in the country also owe some Nu 3 millions to the company.

The company still has an uncollected amount of about Nu 15m while the total payable is about Nu 7m to 8m. Interestingly, the company had declared a dividend of 20 percent worth a total of Nu 8m in 2008. After the distribution of dividend, the company failed to create a working capital and started operating on overdraft facilities. BT had 288 shareholders as of 2008 end. Major shareholders hold 82.26 percent of shares and individual investors the remaining 17.74 percent. The latest trading was in February 2009 with 300 shares traded at Nu 105 a share.

The disputes within the management of the Bhutan Times continue to plague the survival of the paper. Chheki Wangchuk, also a relative of former managing director Tenzin Rigden, who resigned under pressure, was sidelined with the new management claiming he has resigned<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Apfanews.com, October 10, 2009

<sup>17</sup> Business Bhutan, January 03, 2010

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said it is alarmed to learn the mass resignation of journalists from the Bhutan Times, after sharp disagreements on editorial process and content with a newly appointed chief executive.

“The IFJ wishes the Bhutan Times well and would greatly appreciate any strategy that helps it overcome its current financial difficulties and establish it as a viable news platform working in the public interest,” IFJ Asia-Pacific Director Jacqueline Park said.

“No successful newspaper can be run by assaulting the professional morale of journalists and questioning the basic premises on which they conduct their daily tasks<sup>18</sup>.”

Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA) – Bhutan also expressed its concern over the unexpected event.

Rigden, who was terminated from his position, has been named media advisor to the government in February 2010. His appointment in the position followed a tricky turn in Bhutan Today, the first daily newspaper of the country. Most of the government statements were published in the daily without a change in letter, but with different byline. Shortly after that, many journalists working with Bhutan Today left the paper including its editor K. B. Lama and reporter Dipika Chhetri. Lama in his

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<sup>18</sup> Apfanews.com, October 29, 2009



interview with Business Bhutan weekly after resigning from the paper also hinted that the cause of his walk out was managerial interference into editorial matters thus reflecting the media culture that is growing in the country.

## **New media outlets**

Bhutan got five new print media outlets during the year, despite smaller market and constraints already faced by the existing newspapers. Some of them are specialized on subject they cover.

Two weeklies – The Journalists and Business Bhutan – appeared in the market. Similarly, a monthly magazine Drukpa, tri-annual Druk Trowa and biannual Yeewong also made their debut. Business Bhutan covers economy, Druk Trowa specializes in entertainment and Yeewong chose its beat as women.

On December 17, 102<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Wangchuk dynasty in the country, Drukpa was launched.

Brought out by K4 Media, it is edited by Tashi P Wangdi, the founder editor the Bhutan Times, with Jurmi Chhowing, Kunga T Dorji, Phuntshok Rapten and Mitra Raj Dhittal in the newsroom. According to the owners, every issue of Drukpa magazine is based on a theme.

“We saw that the private sector’s view of the government- the government’s view of the private sector- and the views of the general populace vis-à-vis the government and the bureaucracy were all, in one way or another, stereotypically biased. That, in a nutshell, provided the



*The front cover of the first issue of Drukpa*

inspiration for what we felt was the need of the times, a news magazine that covers issues in-depth and provides a much-needed platform for all Bhutanese without sounding cliched at all,” one of the staffs with the magazine said<sup>19</sup>.

In its effort to cover specific themes on each issue, the first edition was focused on ‘Youth’. The magazine’s first issue of 101 pages had comprehensive coverage on a number of issues affecting youth including education system, unemployment, rape, women, youth-based NGOs, drug addiction, fashion, entertainment, blogs and Bhutan bikers club and also

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<sup>19</sup> Apfanews.com, December 14, 2009

looks at what ails Bhutanese youth, their desperation, anger, hopes and dreams and the youth experience in a democratic context.

The Drukpa team is made up of writers, who have manned or contributed to most of the national newspapers including freelance contributors like NC MP Karma Y Raydi, seasoned journalist Roger Beaumont and teacher Liz Warren.

The publisher and main investor of the magazine, Jigme Tshulthim, was actually pursuing a mining license when an encounter with the editors changed his mind to start the magazine.

The disgruntled team of seven journalists who left Bhutan Times produced their own newspaper The Journalist, launched on December 20, with its lead story on corruption. The Journalist is the first of its kind in the country – managed and published by journalists themselves<sup>20</sup>. Each journalist has 10 percent share in the 24-page paper. Sonam Gyaltshen, who heads Bhutan Media Services (BMS), a publicity firm, has put in the initial investment to start the paper. The editor and chief executive officer, Gopilal Acharya, expects to return Gyaltshen's investment as soon as the paper starts generating money. The paper comes every Sunday<sup>21</sup>. The

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<sup>20</sup> Apfanews.com, December 14, 2009

<sup>21</sup> 13th issue, Business Bhutan

paper has four-page Dzongkha edition as an insert like in government-owned newspaper Kuensel daily.

The paper is seeking for an editorial advisor board comprising members from corporate agencies, government office or private companies, who would not interfere in editorial matters.

The paper, expecting help from a funding agency that gives interest-free loans to new entrepreneurs, is being printed at Galing Printers in Bjemina, 20 kilometers south of the capital.

The country's first film and entertainment magazine, Druk Trowa, hit the market on Monday, November 9. Druk Trowa's first issue introduced those in the glamour industry through comprehensive one-to-one interviews and profiles. Edited by Yagchen Dukpa, the magazine's chief executive officer is Wisdom Pictures' Yeshey Tshering<sup>22</sup>.

The country's first magazine exclusively on feminine content "Yeewong" adding glamour and color to Bhutanese society, hit the newsstand on September 30. The first issue of 126-page glossy paper comes with crown of first Miss Bhutan



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<sup>22</sup> Apfanews.com, November 06, 2009

and the publishers said the issue is dedicated to July 2008 Miss Bhutan beauty pageant. The bi-annual colorful magazine gives the visualization of fashion magazine. Its target readers are girls and women between 12 and 50 years. Edited by 22-year young Pema Choden Tenzin, the magazine aims to present itself as a platform for Bhutanese women, to celebrate womanhood and every aspect that makes women unique. The magazine will hit the market on every July and December and is published by MPC Bhutan Entertainment headed by Karma Tshering<sup>23</sup>.

The first news magazine of the country ever since the closure of Druk Losel in early 1980s hit the Bhutanese market on September 26. Called Business Bhutan, this 40-paged magazine of tabloid size priced at Nu 15 reaches readers every Saturday. It is edited by Tashi Dorji and has combined edition for both English (32 pages) and Dzongkha (8 pages). The magazine is owned by two women – Chhimi Norbhu, the managing director of Rabsel tours, and Chimi Yangden, a housewife. It has eight reporters all based in Thimphu.

Magazine's editor Tashi Dorji on its launch ceremony alleged other mainstream media of not providing enough space for business and economy.

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<sup>23</sup> Apfanews.com, October 02, 2009

The market leader government-owned Kuensel started publishing six days a week, from April end 2009. The paper killed its Nepali (Lhotsam) version and promoted 12-page English and Dzongkha editions combined in a single issue. Its Saturday supplement magazine called K2 is available only in Thimphu, Paro, and Phuentsholing<sup>24</sup>.

The country got the first online radio in May 2009. One of the private radio stations in Thimphu joined hands with a Swiss citizen to start a 24-hour live streaming online. The country's first streaming internet radio station, [www.cafebhutan.com](http://www.cafebhutan.com), webcasts from the capital. The station, opened by a visiting Swiss consultant, Hans J Keller, and run in conjunction with Radio Valley, webcasts Buddhist teachings and Bhutanese music<sup>25</sup>. The internet radio station "will be the first to promote Bhutan's culture and many of the causes associated with its spiritual roots and sense of human justice and dignity."

To integrate the national data into one gateway, Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) launched [BhutanInfo.gov.bt](http://BhutanInfo.gov.bt), both in desktop and online version, as the first comprehensive information centre for Bhutan's socio economic development goals at various levels. BhutanInfo increases the accessibility to data information, helping those who are in search of multi-sectoral data<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Apfanews.com, April 28, 2009

<sup>25</sup> Apfanews.com, May 19, 2009

<sup>26</sup> Sonam Pelden, Kuensel, December 04, 2009

A newspaper like bulletin named Druk advertisement was appeared in Thimphu market, which shopkeepers give for free when one buys newspapers.

Druk Advertisement, which started a free circulation of an advertisement magazine in February, suspended circulation after the trade department, on the recommendation of BICMA, asked the firm to “immediately suspend its circulation”.

The advertising firm, Druk Advertisement, then sued the six newspaper companies and BICMA in Thimphu District Court for allegedly colluding against the firm. Court was yet to give its final verdict when this report was filed.

The issue sparked off in March, after the newspapers wrote to BICMA expressing their shock over the ad magazine’s license and seeking intervention.

They informed BICMA that the advertising firm was allegedly telling their clients that they were an ad agent for the newspapers. The letter to BICMA also stated that the “proprietor had come to the media houses saying he ran a publicity firm and would be collecting advertisements from his clients. He even signed legal contracts to book space for 52 inserts a year. However, after a month, advertisement magazine came on the market”.

BICMA then issued a notification in all media, stating that they had not licensed Druk Advertisement and that its



services should be suspended, as the firm failed to follow rules and regulations.

The firm filed the case saying it did not violate any rules since the activities were purely commercial has received a commercial license from ministry. The firm also charged that BICMA Act, in no way, covers advertising, but only monitoring of news and media content<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel, April 12, 2010

## **Professionalizing journalism**

A three-day workshop on media ethics was organized for Bhutanese media professionals ending January 2. Dr Venkat Iyer, barrister and lecturer at the University of Ulster, on the last day of the workshop spoke about the journalistic ethics of reporting on vulnerable individuals and groups in society.

The workshop covered the pros and cons of prejudicial references to an individual's race, color, gender, religion and many others aspects of reportage. Participants were briefed too about the regulation of ethics. Particular attention was paid to self-regulatory mechanisms such as media councils and codes of conduct policed by professional organization. Some of the main values of ethical codes taught to the participants were fairness and accuracy, truth, correction and apology, where mistakes are made, protection of confidentiality of sources and respect for privacy of individuals<sup>28</sup>.

The workshop was organized by Bhutan Broadcasting Service in collaboration with Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcast Development (AIBD). Around 30 people from the media industry and representatives from the Royal Court of Justice and BICMA attended the workshop<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Sonam Palden, Kuensel, January 1, 2010

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Gurung, Bhutan Today, January 2, 2010

The workshop dealt the issue of public interest, which is one of the driving factors that help determine the journalists' decision to tell stories.

Participants learnt that public interest includes detecting or exposing crime or serious impropriety, protecting public health and safety, and preventing the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organization.

A Bhutan Observer journalist had said all journalists working with Bhutanese media inside the country have very little or no information about professional journalism and its ethics<sup>30</sup>. The workshop in ethics held in Thimphu was expected to heal the sore.

The government for the first time awarded journalists based on their performance in the field, as an encouragement to promote media.

Kuensel's reporter Phuntsho Choden won award for best investigative reporting. Choden's reporting on the short supply and poor quality of school textbooks was termed the best investigative reporting.

Kuensel won three more awards: The *Dark Side of Night Hunting*, a feature by Tashi Dema, was recognized as the most prominent social issue and Tenzin Dorji was given the best photographer.

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<sup>30</sup> For details, see *Right to Information* section

For opinion pieces, all three papers (since Bhutan Today daily was not included in the contest) were awarded: Kuensel's deputy editor Kencho Wangdi's *Making Our Religion Relevant*, Bhutan Times' sub-editor Mitra Raj's *First Breach*, and Bhutan Observer's reporter Needrup Zangpo's *Demolish the Wall*.

Observer's Dzongkha editorial team won the best Dzongkha edition of the year while its cartoonist Chimmi R Namgyel received best newspaper cartoon award for *Zero Tolerance*.

Bhutan Times got three more awards, including the Best Newspaper Design. Its editor Gopilal Acharya was awarded for best business report for his article, *Heartbreak House*. Karma Singye Dorji from the same paper, who happened to be one of the three judges, received best political report for his article *One Year of Democracy*.

Radio Valley (RV)'s *Suja Show*, by Ugyen Wangmo, was declared the most entertaining program while *Mang Ghi Damkha* (Music on Demand)'s Pema Wangchuk was the best radio host of the year. Two other radio stations, Centennial Radio and Kuzoo FM were knocked out of the scene.

Government owned Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) took three: Dawa as the best TV anchor and Damcho Wangchuk as most informative radio program for his

coverage of the police-youth partnership program. And Neten Dorjee's documentary on King Jigme Wangchuck was awarded the best television program of the year.

Temzing Lamsang, who was more critical of the government policies and corruptions in public offices, was given not a single award despite his few well written articles.

Two other judges were secretary of the ministry of information and communications and former Kuensel editor Kinley Dorji and a former journalist with Los Angeles Times Kay Kirby Dorji<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> APFAnews.com, May 5, 2009

## Constraints

The BICMA again cut off over a dozen foreign television channels from Bhutanese cable lines in third week of December, lowering down the number of channels for public view to 40. The restricted channels include a number of sports and a few movie channels.

The government had banned the channels last year as well but the efforts came to be ineffective.

A team entrusted for media impact study had earlier suggested government to block TV channels that are categorized as 'too violent' or 'showing too much skin'. However, the ban became ineffective and last year, government permitted some of the blocked channels to air. But more violent programs popped up, making a mockery of the earlier ban.

The repeated blockade on their favorite TV channels compelled viewers to switch to direct to home (DTH) TV, which is superior to cable in terms of viewing clarity and offers up to 200 channels. Though the government has so far not taken steps to block vulgar and pornographic contents in internet, where thousands of young and old people enter, TV channels have been the target of government actions for years<sup>32</sup>. By the end of the year, failing to stop the interest of people to those already

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<sup>32</sup> Apfanews.com, December 29, 2009

blocked channels the government has started working out on introducing Dish TV or the DTH, which will end the government ceiling of 40 channels for Bhutanese to see.

With the government looking for licensing direct to home (DTH) TV operators in the country, cable operators are worried that they might go under if authorities do not create a level playing field. Most are concerned that, if DTH comes in formally without a proper legal mechanism and content restriction, which they face, it would kill cable business. Cable operators say that more than 800 homes in Thimphu alone have DTH.

There were 52 cable TV operators in the country as of 2008 and were among the top ten highest revenue contributors to the government in terms of entertainment tax. Out of every Nu 300 collected from a cable subscriber, Nu 69 is paid to the government as tax. Cable TV operators pay at least Nu 1.5 to Nu 1.6 m a month to the government. On the other hand, people have to pay only Nu 200 for DTH and have all channels of their interests<sup>33</sup>.

Since December, Bhutan Observer's Dzongkha edition, Druk Nelug, has been reduced drastically to four pages from 10. The management decided to downsize the paper after failing to get ears from government to help the national language edition. Yet, the publication is

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<sup>33</sup> Phuntsho Choden in Kuensel on December 30, 2009

separate, not as an insert like the Kuensel. In the first nine month of publication, Druk Nelug got only four advertisement materials from government but had recruited 15 staffs. In the span of three-and-a-half-year in market, the paper failed to get enough ads for its survival and adequate readership as well. During these years, the paper spent more than Nu 7.09 million on publication while it hardly generated Nu 1.2 million in return.

This is all because of poor readership and total lack of advertisement revenue.

Despite poor readership and total lack of advertisement revenue, the government policy requires every newspaper to publish its Dzongkha edition. In its editorial, the paper said, “While we wholeheartedly acknowledge the policy that seeks to promote our national language, putting a fledgling newspaper to a survival test through an imposition is anything but reasonable.”

Bhutan Observer in hand with other newspapers repeatedly appealed to the government in numerous fora to support its Dzongkha edition. Every time, the government acknowledged the appeals and assured its support, both verbally and in black and white. At the end of the tunnel, there wasn't any light.

Druk Nelug's suspension after nine months of starting publishing of financially crippling operation provoked



strong reactions from the government. With the threat of revoking license if the publication was not resumed, the government assured that it was ‘taking stock of all the problems and issues faced by the private newspapers.’ That was in March 2007. Since then, many appeals and assurances have been exchanged<sup>34</sup>.

The Dzongkha language editors of five newspapers demanded government subsidy to run their national language edition or else give permission to shut. During a meeting with government officials in November first week, the journalists complained that government has been biased in providing trainings and other skill development opportunity. They discussed with government of forming a full-fledged editorial team for Dzongkha editions as well, if the government provides some subsidy<sup>35</sup>. The government turned deaf ear to their calls.

The other serious setback was for the national TV broadcaster BBS. The National Assembly restricted it for live telecast of the parliament proceedings of the third and fourth session except question hours which were held every Tuesday and Thursday mornings. However, the TV was permitted for live telecast of opening and closing days, when the ceremonies were attended by the King. In the first two sessions, the TV was given permission for live

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<sup>34</sup> Editorial, Bhutan Observer, December 11, 2009

<sup>35</sup> Apfanews.com, November 15, 2009

cast. The media persons were also restricted from entering into the House gallery to see the debate in person. Instead, they were provided with press release daily. However, the National Council permitted the TV channel for live cast for all sessions so far<sup>36</sup>.

The National Assembly speaker Jigme Tshultrim took the formal decision ahead of the starting of the parliament session to avoid controversy. The media has been informed about the decision on November 17. The decision to stop live telecast of parliament proceedings created a huge debate in the media and public forums. BBS filed an application at the ministry of information and communications (MoIC) seeking permission to telecast live. The ministry remained mum over the issue.

Finance minister Wangdi Norbu on June 17 thrashed a Kuensel reporter while he tried getting details of the pay rise hike. The Cabinet on June 16 had decided on the new corporate pay hike that would affect the lives of about 10,000 corporate employees, kept in the dark for more than five months after the pay raise for civil service employees.

Wangdi Norbu lost his cool. He walked towards the reporter, pointing his index finger at the reporter, and said: “Why do I have to give you information? I won’t give

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<sup>36</sup> Apfanews.com, November 19, 2009 and June 27, 2009

you information. You can get lost.” The incident was witnessed by several DPT MPs. “Do you think I’m at anyone’s beck and call? Why are you disturbing me?” Wangdi Norbu berated the reporter for more than two minutes in full view of the MPs<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Kuensel, June 19, 009

## **Right to Information**

Freedom of media is constitutionally guaranteed but there have been instances when the media has been under fire or suffered covert violations of rights which go into making the media truly the fourth state<sup>38</sup>. The government has not yet introduced the Right to Information bill. Still the government is making efforts to, at least, look open in its attitude towards the media. In early January, the government formed a media cell under the information ministry. The government plans to appoint a spokesperson in all ministries so that regular press conferences and discussions are organized even in the absence of ministers or secretaries.

To continue with the situation, radio has still been the only source of information for locals in rural areas. Additionally, the private radio stations have not been able to penetrate into rural listeners. For the Layaps, BBS radio is their only connection with the rest of Bhutan. And this connection is often broken when there's a disturbance in the signal. Laya is located 4,000 meters above the sea level. Lack of communication facilities cuts off the people of Laya from the rest of the country. The Layaps keep themselves abreast with the happenings in and around the country through the BBS radio<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Peki Samal, Bhutan Today, February 23, 2010

<sup>39</sup> BBS, November 27, 2009

Possibly for the first time in Bhutanese history that government initiated debate on freedom of expression, independence and pluralism on which media thrives, in September in Thimphu.

The gathering sponsored by UNESCO was called by the Ministry of Information and Communication where representatives from the sponsoring UN agency, government and media outlets attended, primarily was called to identify key characteristics of the media environment in the new democracy.

Speakers advised government for more media freedom that will help bridge government-media link, thus keeping government in touch with people. However, owing to the small size population, it was also opined that extensive studies are required to assess the impacts of the free media.

The gathering was a warm up session for developing an assessment strategy and action plan for media promotion in the country, draw a memorandum of understanding between the Department of Information and Media (DoIM), UNESCO, UNDP and SEAPA, and report key achievements and concept for implementation.

The attendees cited the General Conference Resolution of UNESCO which encourages the free flow of information,

at international as well as national levels, to promote the wider and better dissemination of information, without any obstacle to freedom of expression, and to strengthen communication capacities in the developing countries in order to increase their participation in the communication process<sup>40</sup>.

A Bhutanese journalist working with Bhutan Observer said it would be too early to say that Bhutan has press freedom even after the country adopted constitution and changed its politics from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy.

In his presentation made at the regional conference in Kathmandu organized jointly by Panos South Asia, UNESCO and Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) on May 3, 2009, Needrup Zangpo outlined the difficulties Bhutanese media have been facing for sustenance.

Zangpo said the politicians and bureaucracy have not changed their behavior with media despite change in political system which he cited as lack of knowledge regarding the importance of media on national development. He said they have been questioned 'why', whenever journalists write opinion pieces in newspapers. "Bureaucrats are not used to in accepting critical stories," he said.

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<sup>40</sup> Apfanews.com, September 30, 2009

He criticized the code conduct prepared by the government, saying it has been imposed without consent of the journalists. The code was prepared by the previous non-democratic government and has not been reviewed since then<sup>41</sup>.

The situation of unchanged mentality of the political leadership is reflected in the latest instance of minister for information and communication. In the third week of February, 2010, the information and communication minister Nanda Lal Rai, said it pains to see the local media going the wrong direction.

He was sharing his thoughts with the media at a brief consultative meeting called by the ministry in regard to the 16th SAARC Summit.

He criticized the dwindling quality of media content, adding the media is becoming increasingly opinionated, biased in its content and is promoting gossip with misplaced sense of priority demeaning situations and arousing wrong sensitivities.

He expressed dissatisfaction that media has not sufficiently covered government's good activities.

Yoserling Higher Secondary School and Business Bhutan jointly organized media sensitization class for students of the school in March aimed at encouraging media literacy.

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<sup>41</sup> Apfanews.com, May 3, 2009

35 students attended the class. The students got a feel of news gathering and writing as a bunch of journalists shared stories.

Business Bhutan, since its inception, has an insert for schools called School Bhutan where a group of students from different schools participate to produce every week. It helps students to research, observe, and write on events happening in and around their school in a news article style. A whole broad-sheet color page is devoted to each school, where students conduct survey analysis, take photographs, interview people and write editorials and news stories<sup>42</sup>.

Similarly, to create awareness and educate people on the media, Ministry of Information and Communications (MoIC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE), has developed a curriculum framework for schools and programs for the public.

The media literacy curriculum and teacher's guide, which were developed in 2009 by MoIC, MoE, Royal University of Bhutan and other relevant stakeholders after several rounds of consultative meetings, will be implemented in five pilot schools in 2010.

Students of Khasarabchu MSS, Phuenstholing MSS, Yebilaptsa MSS, Mongar HSS and Trashigang MSS will be

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<sup>42</sup> Saraswati, Business Bhutan, March 27, 2010



introduced to the new curriculum in first phase. The media literacy programs are expected to enable students and public to understand the media and prepare them for life in an information-based society<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Namgay Tshering, Bhutan Observer March 16, 2010

## Miscellaneous

A former executive editor of the Bhutan Observer weekly, the second private newspaper of the country, Sonam Kinga was elected as the vice chairman of the upper house National Council.

The former journalist elected as lawmaker from Trashigang district in the east, Kinga was elected to take up the new job through votes. The NC members voted for yes or no for this lone candidate. He is also the chairman of the good governance parliamentary committee of the upper house.

Kinga replaced Karma Ura, the executive director of the Center for Bhutan Studies, as the NC vice chairman. King appointee Ura, failing to get elected as chairman of the council as expected, resigned from this post and subsequently as member of the National Council in July<sup>44</sup>.

The state-owned Bhutan Broadcasting Services (BBS) Corporation has now shifted its television unit to a new building in Thimphu constructed at the cost of Nu 194 million.

With new building inaugurated, BBS management hopes to enhance the quality of its content and transmission.

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<sup>44</sup> Apfanews.com, November 06, 2009

The three-storied building built in four years' time is equipped with latest technology worth Nu 91 million. Construction was funded by government of India. This is the biggest expansion of BBS TV since it started telecasting a decade ago with one-hour evening program accessible only in the capital city<sup>45</sup>.

The eleventh congress of the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) was held in Paro in May 2009. The congress is held every two years. The congress discussed the technical, economical and other kinds of constraints and challenges faced by the broadcasting companies across the world and measures to be taken to ease the situation. However, the ABU discussed nothing about the situation of press freedom in Bhutan<sup>46</sup>.

The Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB), formed in 2007, has been building up its capacity and its skills in dealing with the many challenges that Bhutan's democratic transition presents. Among the possible campaign strategies being considered are adopting a collective stand on behalf of reporters who suffer threat or harassment, public advocacy against practices that abuse media freedom, and in cases where it is warranted, even litigation.

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<sup>45</sup> Apfanews.com, June 03, 2009

<sup>46</sup> Apfanews.com, May 06, 2009

With the formation of BMF, the need and importance of media organizations and club has emerged. The other organization of the journalists in the country is Bhutan chapter of SAFMA, which has remained almost mum since its inception. The organizations are likely to come into floor, new or old, as BMF assures financial support for them.

## **SAARC, SAFMA and journalists in Thimphu**

At the sidelines of the 16<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit, the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) held its fifth conference in Paro, Bhutan. Over 120 journalists attended the conference that started on April 26.

Addressing the inaugural session, Prime Minister Jigmi Y Thinley urged the media to play a responsible role in helping society to promote the right values that contribute to the happiness and well being of society.

“The media must help construct cultures that will build creative nations, so that cultural diversity doesn’t become painful differences,” said he<sup>47</sup>.

PM tried drawing attention of the attending journalists towards the country’s much talked philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

For the Bhutanese media that is generally given to skepticism when it comes to GNH, having to hear of it so often but see a lot less of it on the ground, the way the (media) veterans from the region responded did bring a smile to the face<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel, April 27, 2010

<sup>48</sup> Kuensel, Editorial, April 20, 2010

The SAFMA gathering was themed ‘Environment and South Asia’. The highest number of delegates for the conference was from Pakistan, with 24 media personnel, followed by 18 from India. Bangladesh and Nepal had 14 each, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka 10 each and seven from Maldives. More than 30 media officials and journalists from Bhutan attended the conference.

The two-day summit discussed the “looming” threat of climate change for the SAARC countries, formation of South Asian Women Media Forum and the South Asian Media Commission. The Bhutan declaration also calls for “lobbying to make advanced developing countries like India and China meet mandatory mitigation targets as well”. Media participants, in their declaration, also urge India and Pakistan to resolve their conflict over Siachen<sup>49</sup>.

The journalists were taken around with five government guides, assisted by other six volunteers. This is regular culture in Bhutan that journalists from other countries are not entitled to roam around in person, they are always guided by government officials<sup>50</sup>.

The SAARC summit drew more than 300 journalists in Thimphu posing challenge for logistic arrangement. There are only 106 seats in the media gallery at the National Assembly where the summit was held. 20 seats

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<sup>49</sup> Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel, April 29, 2010

<sup>50</sup> Sonam Pelden & Phuntsho Choden, Kuensel, April 26, 2010

were booked for SAFMA only and another 20 to 25 for media coming on their own.

Photographers and cameramen were allowed at the hall only when their leader addressed the summit. About 74 journalists, including photographers and cameramen, arrived with the SAARC delegates. Pakistan and India fielded the biggest contingent, with 31 and 43 journalists respectively. About 60 journalists from the observer countries reached Thimphu<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Ugyen Penjore, Kuensel, April 26, 2010

# In Exile

The enthusiasm for joining media fraternity among young generation in exiled Bhutanese community continues to expand even after the resettlement process. There were several trainings being organized by various groups<sup>52</sup>.

The APFA/BNS team shows its presence in social service this year as well. Bhutan News Service (BNS) in close coordination with the Camp Management Committee (CMC) in Beldangi-I camp distributed relief package to fire victims in the camp on February 19.

BNS distributed cash donation to fire victims in presence of representatives from the UNHCR, LWF and Armed Police Force. The donation package ranged from NRs 1300 to 7000 based on family size.

Through online 'call for support', BNS had collected NRs 156,339.33 from resettled Bhutanese in various parts of the world. CMC distributed NRs 32,000 cash collected from various camps while the Netherlands-based GHRD and Bhutanese community in the Netherlands extended NRs 28,844 to the fire victims, through representatives of BNS and CMC<sup>53</sup>.

A fire that started from candle light in Beldangi-I camp had destroyed almost 100 huts. 60 huts were completely

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<sup>52</sup> Bhutan News Service, October 1, 2009

<sup>53</sup> Arjun Pradhan in Bhutan News Service, February 20, 2010



burnt down and some 40 huts were vandalized to protect fire.

The financial constraints continue to hunt the media in exile. There were efforts to train young people in media fraternity and new media groups emerging up but absence of monetary assistance and market shattered the dreams of many young refugee cobs.

Media Network Bhutan sought help from international community for its programs but failed to receive any response. The group currently runs a site [www.mnbconnect.com](http://www.mnbconnect.com).

The MNB grew out of the work being carried out by a small group of Bhutanese journalists living in the refugee camps in Nepal. It was formally launched in the Beldangi camp in January 2009.

The group in several instances shared the basic skills of news reporting with young refugee talents. The MNB then partnered with the Youth Friendly Center (YFC), a youth program funded by the UNHCR (the United Nations refugee agency), in setting up a writing course attracting 100 existing and budding journalists.

Bhutan Media Society, a product of the APFA/BNS team, restarted relaying its Kathmandu valley-based weekly radio program to eastern Nepal that is heard in all camps, some districts of India and Bhutan's border. The program

being aired from Nepal FM in Kathmandu since last four years was extended to Jhapa last year but was stopped after four months due to fund constraints. It resumed from October 18.

Each episode of Saranarhi Sarokar arid from Nepal FM Network, Kathmandu, is linked to Ganatantra FM, Dharan, via satellite exchange. BMS decided to air programs from eastern Nepal to inform the camp residents on current affairs, history, and governance, role of media, new democracy and post-resettlement issues among others. The six months projected was sponsored by Ganga Neupane resettled in Arizona<sup>54</sup>.

Journalists in exile continue to expand their presence in various media outlets, the latest being Online Radio. Called Radio Bhutan Online, it started streaming from 10 a.m. on October 18.

Launched with an aim of connecting the Bhutanese worldwide, radiobhutanonline.com has Saranarhi Sarokar, Radio Talks, Taja Events and some other segments. The radio plans to include programs in Dzongkha, English and Tsangla in future<sup>55</sup>.

Similarly, resettled Bhutanese in Georgia started broadcasting a two-hour long radio program entitled Bhutani Awaj (*voice of Bhutanese*) from Sagal Radio

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<sup>54</sup> Bhutan News Service, October 30, 2009

<sup>55</sup> Bhutan News Service, October 18, 2009

Services-Voice of New Americans, 1420 AM ([www.sagalradio.org](http://www.sagalradio.org)) in Atlanta city in Georgia from August 21<sup>56</sup>.

According to Mahendra Dahal, the coordinator, the program was started in coordination with the Radio Services with contents relating on Bhutanese community.

The other host, D. J. Khaling said the radio program came into shape after continual talks and lobbies with the community in the city, the immigrants and in particular with the Community Program of Emory University since early 2009.

The program, aired every Friday from 6 to 8 PM Eastern Standard Time, includes four segments namely *dharmik karyakram* (religious program), *yuba prativha* (youth talent), *Bhutani sandesh* (Bhutanese message) and the news section that covers the current events.

The program can also be listened in a cell phone in USA dialing 712 432 7228.

Shortly after the murder of former camp secretary K. B. Khadka, a never-before known group called Druk Leopard threatened to take life of journalist Bhakta Ghimire, former chief editor of Sandesh weekly<sup>57</sup>. The threat was condemned by media groups.

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<sup>56</sup> Bhutan News Service, September 25, 2009

<sup>57</sup> Bhutan News Service, September 15, 2009

The resettlement has been boon to Bhutanese in terms of access to internet. Many social activities have come to be carried out online including Bhanu Jayanti<sup>58</sup> in Norway where more than 150 Bhutanese participated. Many participated in poem recitation and singing program via Skype.

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<sup>58</sup> Bhutan News Service, July 25, 2009

## **Annex**

### Press Release by APFA-Bhutan after mass resignation in Bhutan Times

Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA) condemns the acts of Bhutan Times management for imposing its interest on editorial team due to which journalists have to leave the paper in group on October 22.

According to the journalists, including editor Gopilal Acharya, without even a rudimentary editorial capability or journalistic background, the new CEO of the paper Mr. Sangey Wangcha demanded that the editorial meetings be held in his presence, and that a hard copy of all the stories being written during the course of the week be submitted to him before they went for print.

In the course of preparing the first issue with him as the CEO on October 4, Mr Sangey sat beside the editor and tried to impose his idea of how a story should be edited.

On October 12, Sangey questioned the editorial 'A drunken nation, are we' humiliating the sub-editor. He alleged that the editorial had slurred the nation. This demotivated the reporters so much that they didn't want to work under him. During the same editorial meeting, he also complained bitterly about an opinion piece filed in by a contributor.

He accused reporters of plagiarism and reminded the editor of his 'social' standing.

As the CEO, he assumed the role of de facto editor-in-chief by centralizing the newsroom around him. To do so he took the following decisions:

- He directed the receptionist to pass all incoming calls to him including those per-taining to the news-room.
- He directed the marketing section (where the company's fax ma-chine is installed) to collect all the fax messages and bring them directly to him including those addressed to the editor for news coverage.
- He made it clear that all the reporters directly report to him.
- He wanted the reporters to divulge their sources and file in all their information in a cabinet in his chamber.
- He called some of the reporters to his office and used fear tactic to be grateful to him for not throwing them out.

He intimidated reporters and gradually the reporters started self-censoring their news. He himself started writing news and opinions (see October 25 issue of the paper).

He ran an ad (see October 25 issue) asking readers for their comments: "Please convey your comments, views, opinion and even news, information tips to Bhutan Times at email: [btimesmd@gmail.com](mailto:btimesmd@gmail.com) or call 17116384," (which is his personal mobile number).

As a gesture of promoting independent journalism and live on the ethics of media practitioner, the seven journalists walked out of the company. APFA appreciates their step and term it as a milestone to media freedom in the new democracy. The political and business leaders in Bhutan for long suppressed the media in protecting their interest. Following the publication of Bhutan Times as the first private newspaper in Bhutan, many unreported but unethical activities of the business and political leaders have come to the surface. Not been able to feel this burnt, the management used all its force to compel the journalists work for their interest. However, the seven journalists took a bold step to defy the management orders and censorship.

APFA urges for independent press in this new democracy. For the democracy to flourish, media has important role to play. Subduing media is directly or indirectly linked to subduing budding democracy.

Not to let this pioneer media die, already hit by financial crisis, the management must create environment whereby these journalists can return to their newsroom

and work independently, without any force or fear. Let journalists decides what goes in news and editorials.

I. P. Adhikari

President, APFA- Bhutan



