

# **Changing Channels:**

## **The Bhutanese Middle Path**

### **Approach to Television**

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## **Abstract:**

The experience of watching commercial television and the ideals that it promotes are incompatible with fundamental Buddhist teachings about consciousness, community and desire. However the Bhutanese, whose culture, traditions and worldview have a strong Buddhist foundation, have not rejected the medium, which was introduced in Bhutan in 1999. But they also have not fully embraced it. Instead, they follow the Middle Path, weighing its negative and positive aspects in a manner that seems influenced by the guiding principal of non-extremism in Buddhist philosophy, and a notion the Bhutanese have adopted as a developmental strategy to attain Gross National Happiness. By first examining television in the context of Buddhist beliefs and then analyzing Bhutanese discourse on television (and specifically the dialogue taking place in Thimphu) within that same Buddhist framework, this paper seeks to explore an interesting paradox: While not rejecting commercial television outright on the basis of their Buddhist beliefs, the Bhutanese are responding to it in a distinctly Buddhist way, neither embracing nor denying it in the way of the Middle Path.

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I also conducted a number of interviews with everyday people I met in restaurants, shops and internet cafes. Those people tended to be more reluctant (a reticence that I'm sure is due to the fact that they're less familiar with the interview process as such), but still eager to be of any service to me (and to serve me cup after cup of tea).

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-- I --

## Introduction to the Paper

For Tshewang Dendup, one of the most prominent players in Bhutan's burgeoning audio-visual industry, the challenge confronting modern Bhutan became apparent on an evening stroll through Thimphu a few days after television was introduced in June 1999.<sup>1</sup> "I was walking and I saw bright lights flashing from a darkened house," he remembers. "From the altar room, I saw the glow of the butter lamp, the offer of light that symbolizes Bhutan's Buddhist culture and tradition, and in the next room, I saw the flicker of television." The scene presented Dendup with a question: "Would you want the butter lamps to be the only light flickering in Bhutan, or would you want television to be the only light?" His answer follows the example of the Buddha's Middle Path of non-extremism, a course in between asceticism and overindulgence, and the model the Royal Government of Bhutan has adopted as its policy guide as it confronts modernization. "I don't think we have to choose," he says. "I want them both to flicker."

Dendup's wish, that Bhutan take the middle path between one extreme that involves banning television to preserve tradition and the other extreme that allows a televised monoculture to snuff out cultural distinction, seems prevalent among urban Bhutanese. They have taken a decidedly Middle Path approach to television, accepting with pragmatism the inevitability of change within a culture and recommending moderation as a strategy to minimize any negative affects. In this manner, they are following the example of Siddhartha Guatama, the Buddha-to-be who discovered that the

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<sup>1</sup> Note: All names are spelled phonetically, but the Dzongkha translation is included (in Tibetan script) in Appendix B.

path to awakening did not lie in the extremes of self-indulgence or self-mortification but in an of-this-world approach of moderation.

But even though the Bhutanese have adopted a Buddhist outlook to television, the fact remains that television, the way it operates and the ideals that it promotes, are inherently incompatible with core Buddhist ideas. By co-opting the viewer's awareness away from the present moment, television makes the Buddhist ideal of cultivating awareness more difficult to achieve. And by creating and manipulating desire, commercials work in a way contrary to the Buddha's Second Noble Truth, which states that suffering arises from desire. When commercial television is viewed from a Buddhist standpoint, it becomes clear that that medium and Buddhism represent two very different modes of consciousness. And yet Bhutanese, despite their awareness of television's potential incompatibilities with Buddhism, continue to watch, justifying their habits with language that suggests that they are approaching television with the Buddhist Middle Path of non-extremism. The Bhutanese approach to television, then, presents an interesting paradox: While not rejecting commercial television outright on the basis of their Buddhist beliefs, the Bhutanese are responding to it in a distinctly Buddhist way, even though the medium would appear in conflict with Buddhist beliefs.

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At the heart of this Middle Path approach to television is an understanding of both the good and the bad television has to offer, and a confidence that those can be balanced in a way that is productive to society as well as the individual. The issue of television's merits is a major part of contemporary Bhutanese discourse, and it has been taken up in every earnest examination of Bhutanese media. In Buddhist philosopher and researcher Phuntsho Rampten's recent *Journal for Bhutan Studies* article, "Mass Media: Its

Consumption and Impact on Residents of Thimphu and Rural Areas,” Rampten weighs the positive and negative effects of television:

The media has a tremendous impact in sustaining and weakening, if not eroding, the fabric of social life. It has enabled people to have access to different sources of information and entertainment. It has also facilitated the people to see different peoples of the world (especially prominent personalities), their diverse cultures and customs, religion, and their way of life, thus, creating better ideas and perceptions about the world. The media has also helped to document endangered species, vanishing cultural heritage and life styles and activities of the past. At the same time it has also influenced people to accept global culture and values. This has led to the undermining of indigenous culture and practices (Rampten 184).

The Bhutanese know that when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck officially lifted Bhutan’s ban on television in June 1999<sup>2</sup>, he did so in an effort to modernize the country and increase its citizens’ Gross National Happiness. They know that access to local and international news can broaden the viewer’s horizons and empower the population in its tentative advance toward the modern world. But the Bhutanese also know television’s potential harm, lessons many of them have learned personally in the nine years since television was introduced. They know that television promotes desire and Western-style conspicuous consumption, especially in the youth. And they know that satellite television, the content of which is largely decided by large Indian broadcasters, threatens Bhutan’s traditional community-based culture and values. Instead of rejecting television

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<sup>2</sup> Although television was first legalized in 1999, it existed in Bhutan for years before that. While the 1999 decree made it accessible to a larger section of the population, some families, especially those of high social rank and those living in Indian border towns, had been receiving signals through illegal satellite dishes for years prior.

outright, most propose that television be viewed in moderation and used carefully as a tool for opening people's minds.

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New Zealand anthropologist Dr. Ross McDonald has published some of the most thoughtful scholarship on television and its incompatibilities with Buddhism in Bhutan, but unfortunately McDonald fails to acknowledge the substantial discussion among Bhutanese debating the merits of television. In his 2005 *Journal for Bhutan Studies* article, "Television, Materialism and Culture: An Exploration of Imported Media and its Implications for GNH," McDonald states (after spending two weeks in Thimphu) that among Bhutanese, "Cable television, dominated by Indian and American programming, was generally seen as a positive advance with the potential for educating, entertaining and symbolically connecting Bhutan to the modern world" (McDonald 1). McDonald says he encountered few contrary opinions, and that those exceptions came mainly from foreigners. "For them, the arrival of 45 channels of commercial television symbolized the beginning of the end for Bhutan's unique identity and culture," he says. McDonald's subsequent explanation of how the thing that television promotes (namely a consumer ethos marked by "dissatisfaction, social isolation and immunity to larger ethical sensibilities") is incompatible with Bhutanese ideals (like Gross National Happiness) is marvelously articulate but is cast in completely theoretical and Western terms (McDonald 2). Curiously in a paper about Bhutan, McDonald doesn't quote a single Bhutanese, even though he cites 14 reference books and articles in his bibliography. Consciously or not, McDonald portrays Western academics like himself as intellectuals looking shrewdly at a problem the naïve Bhutanese population has failed to even diagnose.



Like McDonald's previous work, this paper first seeks to look at television in the context of Buddhist beliefs. Next, it aims to analyze the omnipresent discourse on television taking place in contemporary Bhutan within that same Buddhist framework. Ultimately, it will show that the Bhutanese seem to approach television from a decidedly Buddhist standpoint, neither embracing or denying it in the way of the Middle Path, even though the way television operates and the things it promotes are contradictory to basic Buddhist beliefs.

**-- II --**

**An Examination of the Theoretical Incompatibilities of Television and Buddhism**

Bhutanese policy-makers, led by the example of the Fourth King, have taken a unique approach to modernization by refusing to subject their core values to foreign criteria. This means, for example, that instead of measuring the country's success by purely economic standards, Bhutan seeks a set of standards that assess its people's contentment, or Gross National Happiness. By critiquing the market culture (which values economic gain) from a Bhutanese posture (firmly rooted in the Buddhist tradition and ethics), Bhutan becomes conscious of the distance between the two. By using this awareness to guide policy, Bhutan has been able to resist much of the cultural imperialism of the globalized market culture. It is useful, then, to engage in a similar exercise with television, another product of the globalized market culture. In looking at commercial television as an ideological system from the view of traditional Bhutanese culture, we see that television operates in ways fundamentally different than the ways Bhutan has typically operated, in that it seeks to annex awareness and disconnect the

viewer from real life and community.<sup>3</sup> We also find that the ideals inherent in Bhutanese culture and Buddhism are in opposition to the themes put forth by television, especially desire.<sup>4</sup>

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When testing commercial television against Buddhist ideals, we see that the way television operates psychologically is incompatible with Buddhist notions of consciousness. The success of commercial television is measured by its ability to capture and maintain control over attention. This is, after all, how advertisers decide which programs to advertise on. Over the years television producers have engineered a bevy of tricks to capture the viewer's attention. This ranges from children's cartoons, whose constantly shifting colorful images are meant to hold a child's short attention span, to cable news channels, which, though they claim to be educational, embellish their content with scrolling text on the bottom of the screen and the hardly subtle pulsing of music in the background. These are small examples, but they have potentially huge consequences for the viewer. Contemporary cable television, which features programming that has been enhanced with a mass of mind-capturing mechanisms, captures the viewer's attention and directs it away from physical reality to a virtual, artificial one. This disconnection goes against fundamental Buddhist ideas about consciousness, which state that in order for a person to overcome suffering he or she must overcome the delusions of the mind by

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Of course there is a distinction between Buddhist doctrine and its ideals and the living, breathing Bhutanese culture. Bhutanese don't practice "pure Buddhism;" their lives are marked by a slew of other factors, from interactions with foreigners to lingering influences of the animistic Bon practices that prevailed before Buddhism entered Bhutan. Although Buddhism and Bhutanese culture are not one and the same, I think it is fair to say that Buddhism has an undeniable and foundational presence in much of Bhutanese culture.

cultivating awareness of the true, non-dual nature of reality. The historical Buddha said humans were caught up in samsara, a vicious cycle driven by afflicted desires and mistaken thoughts. They are so trapped in that cycle, grasping at fleeting pleasures, that they don't recognize the pervasiveness of suffering and the certainty of death. It is only by meditating on those things that one can realize the transitory nature of the world, shed one's ignorance, and escape that cyclic existence of suffering (Powers 224). Television diverts people away from that goal of realizing the true nature of reality by co-opting their awareness and redirecting it to a virtual, commercialized one.

Commercial television, which operates by creating and manipulating desire, is a primary example of what Buddhism says causes suffering. The vast majority of satellite television programming, and especially its inescapable commercials, promotes the adoption of Western-style conspicuous consumption. In order to do this, advertisements first create in the viewer desire and dissatisfaction. Take, for example, an advertisement for skin-whitening cream. By showing a woman unhappy with her complexion, the ad might make the viewer realize inadequacies she never knew she had. After creating that desire or feeling of emptiness, the ad then offers the "solution" to fill it. Thus, commercial television exploits (for a profit) the desire it itself created. This absolutely goes against Buddhist teachings, which encourages practitioners to reduce desire and dissatisfaction in order to attain liberation.<sup>5</sup> After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he put forth the Four Noble Truths to help guide his followers to nirvana. It is the Second Noble Truth that states that desire is the root of suffering and what fuels samsara, and the

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<sup>5</sup> This is true with the exception of the highest Tantric practitioners, who hold that the path toward extinction of desire doesn't necessarily require its suppression. They sometimes engage in practices that utilize desire (which they recognize as a powerful energy) in an effort to overcome it.

Buddha acknowledged that it is easy to remain in this trap. According to the interpretation put forth in *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, “The minds of ordinary beings run after transitory stimuli and are easily distracted by things that appear to promise happiness but which in the end turn out to be disappointing” (Powers 224). The Buddha said it was possible to escape this pattern (the Third Noble Truth) and gave a prescription to overcome it (the Fourth Noble Truth, or the Noble Eightfold Path). The Noble Eightfold Path says that practitioners should overcome the constraints of desire, ill-will and delusion and instead cultivate a generous manner of that allows the simultaneous satisfaction of both self and others. However television, which thrives on creating and directing desire for profit, serves as a formidable obstruction to realizing that path toward enlightenment.

Because the desire that television propagates caters to the individual consumer, the way television operates is also in opposition to a central tenet of Buddhist doctrine: that in an interdependent universe there is no fixed “self.” Commercial television is simultaneously a product and a force of Western capitalism. Its primary purpose, in the eyes of the people and corporations that control it, is to make a profit. Both the capitalist system and the television that evolves from it promote a character type that is praised for acting in exclusionary self-interest (McDonald 6).<sup>6</sup> This reification of the idea of “self” contradicts and subverts Buddhist doctrine, which says that our attachment to an individual self is both delusional and the ultimate cause of our suffering. Buddhism promotes a non-dual worldview, saying that on a fundamental level there is no such thing

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<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this, primarily news and educational programming. I am referring rather to commercials, cartoons, serials and other programming that market to the “individual” and promote selfish tendencies.

as “individual” and “other.” It says that we are all the same stuff, which, in the everyday sense, means that every sentient being influences the other. It follows from this that we should be compassionate toward others, but there is little space for this attitude in the dog-eat-dog world of commercial television. Aside from the kinds of ideals its content promulgates, the sheer act of watching television can harm a person’s practice because it disconnects the individual from the community. By capturing attention, television distances the self from the tangible physical and social surroundings as well as all immediate others. This erodes the idea of community that is especially important in Bhutanese (or Tibetan) Buddhism. Holidays like Losar (the lunar New Year) and religious festivals like Setchus depend on community involvement and also serve to reinvigorate commitment to Buddhist beliefs. Television is a tangible example of the collision of community-oriented society with individual-oriented Western capitalism, and its introduction into Bhutan could mean a decrease in people’s participation in the community.

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The pervasive effects of television on any society, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, are grave indeed. But Bhutan is especially at risk, because Buddhism isn’t just the state religion but integral to all realms of each citizen’s life and the foundation of its rich culture. Of biggest concern is the way commercial television works psychologically, and how the values it promotes are in fundamental contradiction to the things Buddhism seeks to minimize. Television clearly threatens the Buddhist world view that has for so long prevailed in Bhutan, but it doesn’t seem to have yet caused irreparable damage. This is evident because, as will become apparent in the rest of this

paper, the Bhutanese Middle Path response to television appears to have evolved out of that same Buddhist perspective.

### -- III --

## **Analysis of Bhutanese Approach to Television**

In the years since television was introduced the question of its merit has been an animated debate, taken up by scholars, school teachers and the editorial board of *Kuensel*, Bhutan's national newspaper. As the following section will show, many Bhutanese are aware of the incompatibilities of television and Buddhism, as well as other problems television could levy against Bhutanese society, but the majority are reluctant to reject television outright. But the Bhutanese have also not accepted television with open arms, as Ross McDonald has implied, and tend to look at television with a kind of cheerful suspicion. The following section looks at patterns in contemporary Bhutanese thought about television, dividing the debate among arguments about the negative consequences of television and the positive, useful ones.

### **Bhutanese Concerns with Television**

Bhutanese concerns about television fall into four categories. People are worried about the ways television promotes desire and consumption, as well as the adoption of a Western way of life. There is also anxiety among Bhutanese that television could cause the erosion of traditional culture and values and lead to the corruption of youth.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I wish to note that my conclusions are based on what I gleaned from numerous essays and a series of interviews during a one-month span in Thimphu. Because Thimphu, as an urban center, is host to many (repetition from earlier footnote) factors associated with modernization and urbanization not associated with television, Thimphu residents cannot, then, be said to represent all of Bhutan.

Many Bhutanese I spoke to expressed concern over the way television promotes both physical and material desire. One retired monk says the excessive sexuality on television is an impediment to attaining enlightenment. “It is not good to watch, because the Buddha has taught the Eight-fold path, and the moment you see the TV you see a lot of sexuality and pleasure and it diverts your mind,” says Kunga Yonten.<sup>8</sup> “Buddha said you must not divert your mind because to gain enlightenment you must direct your mind toward one thing.” Yonten admits, however, that he likes to watch action movies on television because it feels like a transcendent experience. “The picture itself seems a reality to me,” he says. But he, like many Bhutanese I spoke to, complained that the advertising on television was virtue-less. Many expressed frustration not with the television programming per se but with the commercials that accompany it. According to Kinley Wangdi, a civil servant with the Ministry of Labor and Human Resources who wrote a short book about television in Bhutan, commercials have nothing to offer the country. “The impact of television advertisements on Bhutanese is nothing other than creating materialistic hunger,” he says (Wangdi 34).

Kezang Wanchu, the head of health, education and technology programming at Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), says he has seen a deep-seated dissatisfaction arise in Thimphu’s population since the introduction of commercial television. “Television can propagate so much wanting, I think this is developing in Thimphu,” he says. “Some people are glued. They want a new cell phone every few weeks.” Wanchu and others acknowledge that the Western model of conspicuous consumption is not compatible with Bhutanese Buddhist traditions, and that television and Buddhism promote ideals that are

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<sup>8</sup> Note: This interview took place with the help of a Dzongkha translator, as Yonten spoke no English.

fundamentally at odds. According to Dorji Wangchuck, a filmmaker and journalist, “Buddhism teaches you to shed away your pride, shed away your arrogance, it promotes compassion, altruism, and your happiness rests on sharing and practicing your compassion, whereas the television promotes exactly the opposite.” Wangchuck says television also threatens the very structure of Bhutanese society, which was traditionally community-based. Television, he says, “promotes independence and promotes desire,” which is in marked contrast to Bhutan’s traditional model of a mutually dependent population.

Some Bhutanese, especially scholars, complain that commercial television is not just incompatible with Bhutanese culture but that it is acting as a force of cultural imperialism. Phuntso Rampten, in his 2001 report, says television is powerful enough to undermine any Bhutanese aspirations for it. “While the aim is to reap the benefits of mass media, its excessive influence threatens to undermine indigenous culture and value-systems,” he says. “Mass media and information technology are increasingly becoming powerful instruments for the penetration of global culture and the values of a global market into Bhutan” (Rampten 1). Bhutan is a nation whose guarded relations with other countries have ensured that it hasn’t become a pawn of its strong neighbors or a colony of far-away powers. But some say that the introduction of television threatens Bhutan with another kind of imperialism – the cultural imperialism that accompanies globalization. Although globalization can result in some degree of cultural diffusion, its media (and especially commercial television) tend to transmit a monoculture that eliminates cultural distinction. According to Kinley Wangdi, “Local culture is eroding from the mass broadcasting of foreign television, and distant advanced countries through TV are



indirectly forcing developing countries of the African and Asian continents to accept the Western culture in the name of globalization” (Wangdi 95). The majority of Bhutanese seem aware of the influence of globalization when it appears in obvious ways, like in the changes in dress or diet of Thimphu residents, but academics have noted that it also operates on a more subtle level. According to Sudhir Vyas, the Indian Ambassador in Bhutan who wrote the introduction to the Media and Public Culture Forum held by the Center for Bhutan Studies in 2006, globalized media threatens “public culture.”<sup>9</sup> He defines public culture as a “system of values and norms that comprise the cultural component of national identity in the way in which the citizens of a nation, individually and collectively, think, perceive and express themselves, the way we educate our children, and the instruments we employ for this purpose.”<sup>10</sup> He says public culture, “pervades and defines our politics, society and rhetoric, and in that sense is a source of identity” (Vyas 1). Bhutanese recognize that television doesn’t only result in surface changes in a culture, but can also make sly and slow-moving -- but ultimately pervasive - - changes to society.

For many Bhutanese, a special concern for children takes precedence over all other worries and manifests in an apprehension over the way it is distancing the younger generation from family and from Bhutanese society. A young Thimphu woman was quoted in a recent *New York Times* article complaining about how television has changed the physical family dynamic in her home. “Before we would sit together at home and eat dinner,” she said. “Now everyone is watching television” (Sengupta 1). Some even

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<sup>9</sup> The Center for Bhutan Studies is a government-financed organization that reflects on issues of culture and publishes the *Journal for Bhutan Studies* at least once annually.

<sup>10</sup> Because Vyas was writing for the Center for Bhutan Studies, he can be considered a part of Bhutanese discourse on television.

grumble that the question of who has control of the television remote is causing conflict among family members. “Television is an inanimate object,” says Tshewang Dendup. “The moment it starts to share space in a family it’s a problem.” Most Bhutanese are drawn to television, but they say the youth are most vulnerable to television’s harms. “When they’re young, their minds are inquisitive and also more susceptible,” says Tenzin Dorgi, who works in the audiovisual department of Bhutan Times. “It’s sad when they watch TV and know the name of a wrestler, his hometown and weight, but not their own prime minister’s name.” In the years after the introduction of television there were a number of accounts of children injuring themselves while imitating wrestlers from television programs like the World Wrestling Federation. In 2005 Bhutan banned all such programming, along with several other channels deemed harmful to society.

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The Bhutanese seem generally aware of how television operates and how it affects its viewers, especially youth. Pelden Dorgi, a film director and cameraman, says children often imitate what they see on screen because the lives and people on television tend to be more glamorous than real life. “The generation gap has very much increased,” he says. “The younger generation wants to copy what they see on the screen, whereas the older generation sticks to tradition.” The reason for this, according to Siok Sian Pek, who led an exhaustive media impact study in 2003, is a perception that modernization is inherently opposite to tradition. “The real issue is that modernization can be seen as a contradiction to culture and tradition,” she says (Sian Pek 76). “The underlying risk here is that if tradition is seen as opposing modernization, the youth can reject tradition.” Kinley Wangdi complains that youth don’t understand that the most useful tenet of

modernization is economic development, not cultural change. “For (kids) modernization means wearing expensive clothes, playing (with) sophisticated toys, making tattoos on body, adopting Western pop music and talking English language,” he says (Wangdi 92). It makes sense that Bhutanese are weary of the changes television might have on individuals and especially youth. After all, they are people who one day will be key decision-makers in democratic Bhutan.

### **The Bhutanese Defense of Television**

And yet the Bhutanese, aware of television’s many drawbacks, keep watching. According to a recent survey conducted by BBS, almost 97% of urban Bhutan likes to watch television.<sup>11</sup> That translates to about 161,000 people from all sections of society and all age groups.<sup>12</sup> Why are they tuning in? Because Bhutanese, following the Buddhist example of the Middle Path, simultaneously acknowledge television’s positive and negative aspects. While Bhutanese are willing to criticize the parts of television that promote desire and consumption, the adoption of a Western way of life, the erosion of traditional values and the corruption of youth, they are also quick to articulate the ways that it is useful. Television is good entertainment, they say, and it can be a powerful tool for enabling political agency, development and education. The majority of people that I interviewed say that television in Bhutan is an inevitability, and that Bhutan can use it in a powerful way to increase people’s perspectives. “It sort of expands the horizon,” says Tshewang Dendup. “Suddenly the mountains are no barriers, you can see beyond.”

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<sup>11</sup> The survey itself (along with the exact data) is included in Appendix D.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that not everyone who likes television has access to it. Only 88% (or about 146,000 people) of the urban population has access to television.

One of television's most important roles in shaping the developing Bhutanese society is in giving the population alternative options to gaining information. According to Phuntso Rampten, "The media in Bhutan have progressively enhanced individual awareness by widening the scope of information transmission beyond the traditional face-to-face oral interaction to literacy-oriented communication and now to an electronic media" (Rampten 172). Rampten says that in a mostly-rural country like Bhutan, television could serve as a powerful democratizing force by leveling the playing field and giving everyone access to the same information. "The television has further enabled people to see beyond their traditional borders, peoples and culture of the world and, therefore, broaden their perceptions and ideas," he says (Rampten 192). It also puts Bhutan on par with other countries around the world. With access to international information, Bhutan has a better shot at competitive development. According to Kezang Wangchu, the type of education television gives -- one marketed toward the individual -- is necessary for Bhutan to advance toward modernization. "This is a positive side of television. It teaches you an individualistic outlook," he says. "Without that sort of free thinking we will always be behind." This outlook that Wangchu says television promotes is necessary for Bhutan's move toward democracy, a political system where national success depends on the enlightened decisions of individuals. It can also affect changes in the way education is carried out in Bhutan. According to Gopilal Acharya, editor of *Bhutan Times*, education in Bhutan is "compulsory learning, not free-thinking." He says the idea of the individual is necessary for improvements in education and the creation of an enterprising class. Tenzin Dorgi says he's already seeing the difference. "Since we got the television there's been major changes in the younger generation," he says. "They've

become more bold, more individuals, more daring.” This of course, can have unwanted effects on society. It means that some people, especially youth, seek to differentiate themselves from their community, something not traditionally valued in a country like Bhutan that in many ways values conformity.

Many Bhutanese also told me that they see television as a powerful educational tool. “You get to learn about different people, religions and cultures that we don’t get to see,” says Namgay Choden, a young woman currently unemployed who says she likes to watch the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. There has been an effort, publicized by several editorials in *Kuensel*, to encourage parents to watch educational programs like the ones offered on the Discovery Channel with their children, instead of other programming. Cable news channels like the BBC and CNN also give Bhutanese crucial information about the world, information that some say make Bhutanese wary about modernization. “When we see so much violence, stupidity, and extremism around the world we think, ‘We better be careful,’” says Tshewang Dendup. In this way, some say television allows Bhutanese to learn from the mistakes made by others and consequently employ safeguards to protect themselves from the pitfalls of modernization.

Many Bhutanese also insist that television as a form of entertainment isn’t all bad, especially when the viewer realizes that it isn’t reality. “It’s a material to kill time, its something for when I’m idle,” says Namgay Choden. “I know it’s all fake.” Choden says she is too smart to be deluded by television programs or advertisements. “I’m not the kind of person to get manipulated,” she says. Penjor Lhamo, a 40-year-old man who runs a mechanic shop and a toy store, expressed similar sentiments.<sup>13</sup> “I see TV just to pass

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<sup>13</sup> This is a pseudonym. The interviewee requested his identity be concealed.

my time, I have not much interest in it,” he says, noting that he watches about ten hours of television each day. Lhamo says he thinks he is less susceptible to television’s harmful effects because he is aware of them. “I know it’s bad, knowingly I view it,” he says.

Lhamo insists that television should be used as a tool for self-improvement, something he says he does by watching educational shows like the ones on Animal Planet. “You learn, you see and you realize things you haven’t realized,” he says. “I get really thrilled.” One important Bhutanese religious figure insists that humans don’t have to deny themselves visual media, so long as they recognize that it is in fact artifice. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, the unconventional Bhutanese filmmaker who directs movies with an underlying Buddhist message, shared an interesting analogy that compared film to un-awakened, samsaric existence in a 2003 *Shambhala Sun* article:

Just suppose that we have been born in a cinema hall. We don’t know that what is going on in front of us is just a projection. We don’t know that it is just a film, just a movie, and that the events in the movie aren’t real, that they have no true existence. Everything we see on that screen – love, hate, violence, suspense, thrills – is in fact just the effect of light projected through celluloid. But no one has ever told us this, so we just sit there watching, fixated on the film. If somebody tries to attract our attention, we say, “Shut up!” We are completely engrossed and blind to the fact that this projection is completely futile. Now suppose that there is someone in the seat next to us who says: “Look, this is just a film. It’s not real. This is not really happening. It’s really just a projection.” There’s a chance we too might understand that what we are seeing is in fact a movie, that is unreal and essenceless.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche goes on to describe the ideal Vajrayana approach to this situation, first explaining how the other schools of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, would approach it:<sup>14</sup>

From the point of view of Theravada Buddhism, we get up and leave the movie hall, or we close our eyes, so we are not carried away by the movie. We put an end to suffering that way. On the Mahayana level, we reduce our suffering through understanding that the movie is unreal, that it is all a projection and empty. We don't stop watching the movie but we see that it has no inherent existence. Moreover, we are concerned about others in the cinema. Finally, in the Vajrayana, we know that it is just a movie, we are not fooled, and we just enjoy the show. The more emotion the movie evokes in us, the more we appreciate the brilliance of the production. We share our insights with fellow viewers, who, we trust, are also able to appreciate what we see. (Rinpoche 37).

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, then, says that people don't necessarily need to remove themselves from their delusions (both cyclic, fabricated life and commercial television) in order to escape them. In a manner that is very much rooted in the Vajrayana school of Buddhism, he implies that denying visual media like television would be overly austere, but overindulgence in it would be similarly harmful. He says the key comes in realizing the true nature of the illusion, and that with this knowledge, "We know that it is just a movie, we are not fooled, and we just enjoy the show." Television in moderation, then, so long as it is accompanied by an awareness of the true nature (and true illusion) of the medium, can actually be useful.

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<sup>14</sup> Note: Bhutanese Buddhists are of the Vajrayana school or the Vajra vehicle. This system of practice, originally formulated in approximately the seventh century C.E., is based on texts called Tantras, which emphasizes the practice of deity Yoga.

\* \* \*

In this way Bhutanese seek to take the good things from television and resist the bad. The Bhutanese say they have embraced television for its educational and mind-opening potential, and rejected the parts of television – like advertisements – that especially cause delusion. By trying to avoid television’s extremes, Bhutanese have adopted an approach and a rhetoric that is similar to the Buddhist concept of the Middle Path, a notion that has also been adopted in Bhutanese politics.

#### **-- IV --**

### **The Middle Path in Buddhism and Bhutanese Discourse**

Before we can begin discussing in-depth the ways Bhutanese thoughts about television follow the pattern of the Middle Path, we must first define the notion of the Middle Path, both in its original Buddhist context as well as in the context of Bhutanese politics.

The Middle Path (often referred to as the Middle Way) in Buddhism is the primary guiding principal of the religion. According to most accounts, the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Guatama, discovered the Middle Path prior to his enlightenment while meditating as an ascetic, denying his body all sustenance except for one grain of rice a day. Guatama Buddha’s first step toward the Middle Path occurred when he abandoned the lifestyle of asceticism and realized that starving the body actually encourages obsession with the “self” and distracts from complete mental absorption. The Buddha strayed from the dominant teachings of his time by insisting that awakening would follow a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-



mortification. In many ways, the Middle Path exemplifies the pragmatism that has come to be associated with Buddhist thought (especially Theravada). By saying that the path toward enlightenment may be pursued without committing to extreme deprivation and without over-indulgence, the Buddha laid out a path that is very much “of this world.” This notion of non-extremism is an important aspect of almost all lay practice in every school of Buddhism.

Some Bhutanese policy makers and academics writing about the subject have adopted this notion of the Middle Path to explain Bhutan’s development strategy to attain Gross National Happiness. Bhutan’s approach to development is, like the Buddha’s Middle Path, realistic. “Bhutan adopts a ‘pragmatic’ approach to development,” says Siok Sian Pek. “It draws on international experience to tailor its own policy,” she says (Sian Pek 32). According to Sean Boyd Frye Hargens, who published an article in the *Journal for Bhutan Studies* called “Integral Development: Taking ‘The Middle Path’ Towards Gross National Happiness,” the notion of a “Middle Path” approach to development originated in 1990 when a group of senior government officials gathered to begin to formulate the broad criteria of Bhutan’s developmental agenda (Frye Hargens 23). They emerged with the concept of the Middle Path, indicating the Royal Government of Bhutan’s wish “to find a balance between the spiritual and material aspects of life, between *gakid* (happiness and peace) and *peljor gongphel* (economic development)” (Frye Hargens 23). Bhutan, then, seeks to walk the line between material overindulgence and healthy cultural, spiritual and educational development. This philosophy means adopting certain mediums of development for its own uses, while rejecting the aspects of modernization that might hurt society.

\* \* \*

Bhutanese approach television the way Bhutanese policy makers approach development: they realize that it is inevitable and set out to maximize its benefits and minimize its drawbacks. “If there is something good that we can get from other cultures, we should take it,” says Tshewang Dendup. “You should accept the medicine even if it’s from your enemy and reject the poison even if it’s from your mother.” This notion seems to rest on an acknowledgement of the shifting nature of the world, an idea that is also the roots of the Buddhist concept of non-attachment. Bhutanese seem to realize that Bhutan’s culture, though it has been relatively fixed for so long, is actually a changing, evolving part of a global society. According to Sudhir Vyas, “Public culture is not a given, static entity, but a developing, living set of values that allows us to respond to our environment meaningfully” (Sudhir Vyas 1). Kezang Wanchu shares a similar sentiment. “We are at the moment living in a misty mountain atmosphere,” he says. “And with modernization and developments that mist has to clear.”

-- V --

### **Conclusion**

While a look at television from a Buddhist perspective suggests that Bhutanese should reject television because the things it promotes are in contradiction to the things Buddhism seeks to minimize, a look at Bhutanese discourse on television from a Buddhist point of view shows that different aspects of Buddhist thought might actually validate their approach. As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche’s film analogy suggests, Vajra practitioners don’t necessarily need to deny visual media like television, they simply need to understand that it is not reality. This approach, of neither denying television nor

embracing it as reality, is very similar to the Middle Path in Buddhist doctrine as well as the Middle Path as a Bhutanese policy-guider.

Inherent to any Middle Path approach must be an understanding of the extremes, and the Bhutanese appear to be acutely aware of the extremes television presents. They know that life without television would put Bhutan at a disadvantage in terms of development and would mean its citizens had little understanding of the world outside. But they are simultaneously aware that life with an excess of television causes people to withdraw from their communities, lose their traditions and culture, and become agents of conspicuous consumption. Most Bhutanese don't think they have to choose whether or not to watch television, because they say they can control the positive effects and mitigate the bad ones, although some observations about the changes in youth raised in the TV age might cast doubt on how effectively that can be achieved." "It's moderation and choice," says Tshewang Dendup. "It's as simple as that."

The Middle Path approach is an important philosophical tenet that influences many realms of Bhutanese life, both the religious and the political, as well as in everyday, real life. Important Buddhist precepts like the Middle Path, then, appear to play a major role in the way Bhutanese make decisions about television, even if a surface comparison of Buddhism and television would suggest that all Buddhists ought to rebuff commercial television on the basis of its incompatibilities with some major aspects of Buddhism.

-- VI --

## Discussion of Research Methodology

*Anthropologists are probably best prepared to study what in media studies is narrowly called "reception." But how can we get more than a fragmentary sense of the everyday lives, social connections, and concerns of the people interviewed, or of the diversity of viewing communities? What we often have is only the anecdote or the fragmentary quotation of a decontextualized television watcher. How can we get more than a partial sense of the everyday lives, social connections, concerns, and complexities of the people quoted, not to mention of the much larger group who consume the cultural forms and share the country or community? With television programs, one is forced to talk not so much about cultures-as-texts as about discrete cultural texts that are produced, circulated, and consumed. Thick description of television therefore requires a multi-sited ethnography.*

-Lila Abu-Lughod, *The Interpretation of Culture(s) after Television*

The argument I have put forth in this paper is in no way a multi-sited ethnography. Geographical and language constraints meant that I couldn't look in -depth at the ways television is affecting people psychologically. And time constraints meant that I couldn't fully contextualize the quotes I gleaned from interviews and from research. Instead of considering in-depth all of the things that might contribute to a person's point of view (both their domestic and national spaces, for example), I was forced to look only the things they said as such. Luckily I found that the way people articulate ideas is sometimes as telling as the ideas themselves, and it was this realization that led to an important part of my thesis, that Bhutanese discourse about television follows the pattern of the Middle Path.

The bulk of my research consisted of a series of interviews conducted in Thimphu over a one-month period. Thus it is important to stress that my paper is based only on the opinions that I encountered in Thimphu, and is not representative of all of Bhutan. I interviewed people in the audio-visual industry, including reporters and programmers from BBS, independent filmmakers and directors, and government officials from the Information and Media Commission. I also interviewed regular people not involved in the industry to ensure that I was getting more than just getting the defense of the industry by the people whose livelihoods depend on it. Finally, I interviewed a number of “cultural critics,” a philosopher and academic from the Center for Bhutan Studies and several reporters at the newspaper *Bhutan Times*.

My research also entailed a thorough review on past research on the subject of media in Bhutan. The *Journal for Bhutan Studies* was a veritable gold mine of information about media in modern Bhutan, and I consulted several articles from that Journal that proved very helpful while writing my paper. Because I knew I needed a solid understanding of Buddhist thought on consciousness, desire and the Middle Path, I also did quite a bit of reading on Buddhist philosophy.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Photos**

**(Note: I took the photos out of the document to make it smaller and easier to send)**





**Appendix B: Documentation of Interviews  
(with Dzongkha translation of names)**

**(Note: The Translations are available in the hard copy)**

**Kezang Wanchu**, Head of Health, Education, Technology at Bhutan Broadcasting Services. Interviewed 4.12.2007:

**Tenzin Dorgi**, Head of Audio Visual Department, Bhutan Times. Interviewed 4.14.2007:

**Pelden Dorgi**, Filmmaker. Interviewed 4.14.2007:

**Gopilal Acharya**, Editor of Bhutan Times. Interviewed 4.14.2007:

**Wangay Dorji**, Bhutan Information Commission. Interviewed 4.16.2007:

**Dorji Wangchuck**, Filmmaker, Journalist. Interviewed 4.18.2007:

**Thukten Yesiti**, Researcher for BBS. Interviewed 4.18.2007:

**Sangay Choden**, Planning Officer for BBS. Interviewed 4.18.2007:

**Kinley Dem**, Student. Interviewed 4.18.2008:

**Raju Rai**, works in an Internet café. Interviewed 4.17.2007:

**Kungay Yonten**, former monk. Interviewed 4.17.2007:

**Tshewang Dendup**, reporter for BBS. Interviewed 4.23.2007, 5.3.2007:

**Authors Reviewed (with Dzongkha translation of names):**

**Phuntsho Rampten:**

**Kunga Yonten:**

**Kinley Wangdi:**

**Namgay Choden:**

**Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche:**

**Appendix C: Glossary of Terms<sup>15</sup>**

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<sup>15</sup> Note: Many of these definitions were taken from John Power's "Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism."

**Four Noble Truths:** Among the truths Gautama Buddha realized during his experience of enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths are a formulation of his understanding of the nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the escape from suffering, and the efforts a person can take to attain happiness.

**Gross National Happiness:** A term first coined by the Fourth King in 1972, Gross National Happiness (or GNH) is an attempt to define quality of life in more holistic and psychological terms than Gross National Product. While most development models stress economic growth as the ultimate objective, the concept of GNH is based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other. The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance.

**Middle Path (Buddhism):** The primary guiding principal in Buddhism, the Middle Path toward enlightenment may be pursued without committing to extreme deprivation and without over-indulgence.

**Middle Path (Bhutanese policy):** A phrase first coined in 1990, it refers to Bhutan's "pragmatic" approach to development. Policy makers seek a middle path in between the spiritual and material aspects of life in their development strategy to attain Gross National Happiness.

**Noble Eightfold Path:** This Noble Eightfold Path forms the fourth part of the Four Noble Truths and is seen as the path that, when followed, leads to the end of suffering. It is a practical guide that calls for ethical and meditative discipline.

**Samsara:** In Buddhist teaching, the cyclical world of rebirth.

**Vajra:** Bhutanese Buddhists are of the Vajrayana school or the Vajra ("diamond") vehicle. This system of practice, originating in approximately the seventh

century C.E., is based on texts called Tantras, which emphasizes the practice of deity Yoga.

## **Appendix D: Extract from National Survey on Television Viewing Habits (Compiled in part by BBS researcher Thukten Yesiti)**

### ***Section 5.1 Television Viewing Habits***

Television is very popular among the urban population of Bhutan. About 97%, which is roughly about 161,000, people from all sections of the society and age-groups in urban Bhutan like to watch television. There are even more students in the age group of 8-14, who enjoy watching television.

About 5000 people, which make about 3% of the urban population, do not like to watch television. These are mostly dependent and business people or people in the age group of 50+. Most of them have only Dzongkha education or no formal education at all.

Not everyone who likes to watch television has access to it. Only 88% (=146,000) of the urban population have access to television. With the average family size of 4.6 the number of television sets in the urban Bhutan stands at about 32,000 according to this survey<sup>16</sup>..

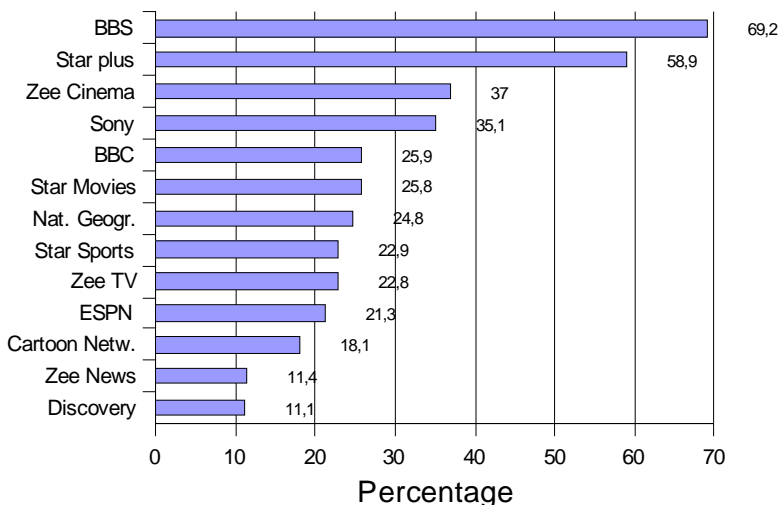
*Qu. 1: Is there a TV set in your household?*

*Qu. 2: Do you like to watch television?*

	Total		Age groups					
	All		8-14 years	15-24 years	25-34 years	35-49 years	50+	
	Count	Column %	Column n %	Column n %	Column %	Column %	Column %	
TV set in household	Yes	4316	87,7%	90,6%	86,4%	88,3%	88,5%	83,7%
	yes but broken	25	,5%	,0%	,5%	,4%	,8%	1,5%
	No	579	11,8%	9,4%	13,2%	11,3%	10,7%	14,8%
like to watch TV	Yes	4233	97,4%	98,1%	97,6%	97,7%	96,7%	95,2%
	No	114	2,6%	1,9%	2,4%	2,3%	3,3%	4,8%

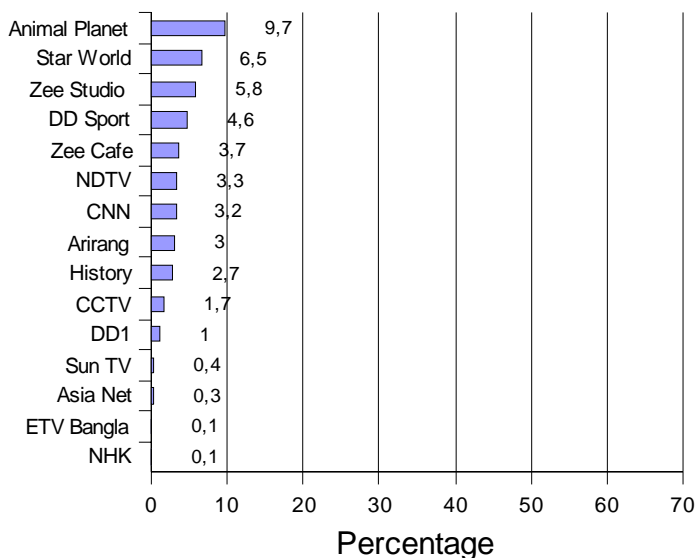
*Qu. 3: Which TV channels do you watch? I will read the names of TV channels to you and you should tell me for each channel whether you watch it regularly and how much you like the channel.*

### Regularly watched channels - Top end



<sup>16</sup> The national Census 2008

## Regularly watched channels - Bottom end



BBS TV is the most watched channel. Before going deeper into the BBS viewership, the foreign channels shall be analyzed.

For analysis purpose channels which received high ratings are broadly categorized. BBC, CNN, Zee News, and NDTV are grouped as news channels, Star Plus, Zee TV, Sony, Star World, and Zee Café as soap channels, ESPN, Star Sports, and DD Sport as sports channels, Star Movies, Zee Cinema, and Zee Studio as movie channels and National Geography, History, Discovery and Animal Planet as education channels.

Soap channels are by far the most regularly *watched* channels. Movie channels, sports channels, news channels, and education channels follow the rank in descending order in terms of the number of viewers.

**Soap channels are** regularly watched mostly by women (almost double in number to that of men) with no formal education or lower educational qualification. Viewers in this group are mostly housewives and are in the age group of 8-34. There is a good percentage of students and business people watching these channels. Other soap channels like Zee Café and Star World are watched by few men or people with higher educational qualification.

	Total		Gender	
	all		male	Female
	Count	Column	Column	Column



watch	yes	1561	35,9%	42,5%	38,4%	33,8%	29,7%	29,3%
Zee	no	2783	64,1%	57,5%	61,6%	66,2%	70,3%	70,7%
Cinema								

**Sports channels** have an exclusive group of regular viewers. They are men, who are mostly office employees and students in the age group of 15-34. Women account for less than one-fifth in this group.

		Total		Gender	
		All		male	female
		Count	Column %	Column %	Column %
watch	Yes	899	20,7%	34,2%	4,9%
ESPN	No	3446	79,3%	65,8%	95,1%
watch	Yes	967	22,3%	34,8%	7,5%
Star	No	3377	77,7%	65,2%	92,5%
Sports					
watch	Yes	194	4,5%	7,0%	1,5%
DD Spt.	No	4148	95,5%	93,0%	98,5%



**Education channels** attract more office employees, business people and students above the age of 25 years.

	Total		Age groups					
	All		8-14 years	15-24 years	25-34 years	35-49 years	50+	
	Count	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	
watch National Geography	yes	1048	24,1%	15,4%	24,9%	28,2%	27,1%	23,3%
	no	3296	75,9%	84,6%	75,1%	71,8%	72,9%	76,7%
watch History	yes	113	2,6%	,9%	3,2%	2,6%	3,3%	2,5%
	no	4228	97,4%	99,1%	96,8%	97,4%	96,7%	97,5%
watch Discovery	yes	470	10,8%	5,7%	10,7%	14,0%	11,5%	12,8%
	no	3874	89,2%	94,3%	89,3%	86,0%	88,5%	87,2%
watch Animal Planet	yes	410	9,4%	8,7%	8,8%	9,7%	8,8%	14,3%
	no	3933	90,6%	91,3%	91,2%	90,3%	91,2%	85,7%

**News channels** are regularly watched more by men (almost double in number to that of women) in the almost exclusive age group of 35-49. This group of viewers has higher educational qualification and consists mostly of office-goers and business people.

	Total		Gender		
	All		male	Female	
	Count	Column %	Column %	Column %	
watch BBC	Yes	1095	25,2%	33,7%	15,3%
	no	3253	74,8%	66,3%	84,7%
watch CNN	yes	134	3,1%	4,5%	1,5%
	no	4209	96,9%	95,5%	98,5%
watch Zee News	yes	480	11,0%	13,6%	8,0%
	no	3863	89,0%	86,4%	92,0%
watch NDTV	yes	140	3,2%	4,6%	1,7%
	no	4201	96,8%	95,4%	98,3%

	Total		Age groups				
	All		8-14 years	15-24 years	25-34 years	35-49 years	50+
	Count	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %
watch yes	1095	25,2%	8,1%	23,0%	34,3%	36,7%	22,7%
BBC no	3253	74,8%	91,9%	77,0%	65,7%	63,3%	77,3%
watch yes	134	3,1%	,0%	1,9%	5,5%	5,3%	3,4%
CNN no	4209	96,9%	100,0%	98,1%	94,5%	94,7%	96,6%
watch yes	480	11,0%	2,9%	10,0%	16,0%	15,5%	10,5%
Zee no	3863	89,0%	97,1%	90,0%	84,0%	84,5%	89,5%
News watch yes	140	3,2%	,0%	2,5%	5,6%	5,1%	3,2%
NDTV no	4201	96,8%	100,0%	97,5%	94,4%	94,9%	96,8%

**Cartoon Network** has its group of regular viewers, mostly students in primary and junior high schools.

	Total		Education					
	All		pry	Junior	high	universi ty	Dzong kha	none
	Count	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %	Column n %	Column %
watch yes Cartoon Network	765	17,6%	42,3%	20,5%	10,9%	9,1%	3,6%	5,8%
no	3577	82,4%	57,7%	79,5%	89,1%	90,9%	96,4%	94,2%

## **Appendix E: Biography of Advisor**

Françoise Pommaret, PhD, is an ethno-historian with a long history of academic work in Bhutan, and she is considered one of the foremost scholars on the country. She has been associated with Bhutan in different capacities since 1979 and has published numerous scholarly articles and books on a wide range of topics relating to the country. She lives in Thimphu, and is now the advisor for History and Anthropology at the Institute of Language and Culture at the Royal University of Bhutan.

Pommaret is also the Director of Research at the National Centre for Scientific Research, Ministry of Research and Higher Education in Paris as well as a lecturer at the National Institute of Oriental and African Studies (INALCO) in Paris. She has also lectured in numerous academic institutions around the world and has been guest-curator for several exhibitions on Bhutan.

She has published several books, including “Bhutan, a Cultural Guidebook,” “Tibet, Turning the Wheel of Life,” and “Tibet, an Enduring Civilization.” She was the co-editor and co-author of “Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods,” and the editor of “Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century.”

## **Appendix F: Suggestions for Future Research**

I think the question of how television is affecting Bhutanese psychologically is a fascinating one, and a particularly interesting way to frame it is by looking at people's perceptions of self and community. Bhutan is traditionally a community-based society, and the global culture propagated by television is one that values the individual. I think this question deserves to be examined further, and I think it could be answered in the five weeks SIT allots for Independent Study Projects if it were approached more from an anthropological angle than from a research paper angle. In order to really see how television is affecting individualism, I think it would be necessary for a student to look closely at two Bhutanese communities, one with access to television and one without, comparing the ways people in each place view themselves and their role in both the local and global communities. If the student spent the vast majority of his or her time doing field research rather than reading about past work on the subject, he or she might have a shot at getting to the bottom of this crucial question.

Examining whether contemporary Bhutanese about self are more in line with those of "traditional" Bhutanese culture or those of the culture of the "world society"--that inevitable byproduct of globalization, would shed light on the larger cultural and psychological consequences of the introduction of television into Bhutanese society.