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# Upload Complete Syncing the Thunder Dragon: An Analysis of Bhutanese Media and its Influences on a Changing Culture

Brian McQueen  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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S YNCING

THE THUNDER DRAGON

AN ANALYSIS OF BHUTANESE MEDIA

AND ITS INFLUENCES ON A CHANGING CULTURE

WRITTEN BY

BRIAN MCQUEEN

AD: Isabelle Onians

Senior Faculty Advisor: Hubert Decler

Project Advisor: Barbara Stewart

Saint Michael's College: Journalism, Digital Arts, and Media Studies

Asia, Bhutan, Thimphu

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and Himalayan Peoples, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2013



## **ABSTRACT:**

Almost 14 years ago Bhutan was officially “hooked up” to the outside world. With access to Internet and television increasing rapidly in Bhutan new thoughts are entering the country, replacing previous views. The effect of media on the lifestyle and culture of the people of Bhutan is significant due to the speed at which the change occurred.

For my research I split my time between the capital city, Thimphu and Sherubtse College, which is located in the rural village of Kanglung. By conducting interviews with people involved in the media scene of Bhutan and consumers of media, I have begun to look at the changes that have been occurring. What I have pieced together is a collection of shifts in lifestyle and culture, some big and some small. Then at Sherubtse College I spent time working with the media department, sitting in on classes as well as helping work with students. Doing so allowed me a unique perspective of what kind of media education is being delivered and what the future of media in Bhutan will look like.

The goal of this research is to make people think more critically about the way they consume and realizing the impact media has on everyday life. The opinions I offer are based on interviews conducted and the discussions had with others in Bhutan.

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## INTRODUCTION

June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999 families tuned into the first official television broadcast in Bhutan. The 4<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, ushered in a new era for the Himalayan kingdom. This marked the beginning of Bhutan gaining greater connectivity to the outside world.

*Initiating syncing...*

As media began to develop more and people began consuming more foreign media something started occurring in Bhutan: change. The impact of the foreign music and movies people had been consuming translated into new ideas. The entrance of new media into Bhutanese society had changed the way life was being lived. In 2006 with the privatization of media in Bhutan these influences and the accessibility of media increased.

*Upload 60% complete...*

Things really had begun to change at this point. No longer were people listening to Bhutanese *ragsar* music, but Justin Beiber. The once popular BBS was being skipped over to watch Hindi soap operas and American action movies. With all of these great programs accessible who really needs to play outside? Speaking of playing outside isn't it much easier to play without a gho or kira on? The pants and shirts that had been flaunted all over the media then began to be adopted. Replacement of Bhutanese culture began occurring, manifesting itself in all aspects of life.

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The research I conducted took place in Thimphu and Kanglung and is focusing on these changes and the impacts of the late entrance of media into Bhutan. As apart of the Gross National Happiness philosophy, one of the four pillars is the preservation and promotion of culture. With the introduction of media, shifts in Bhutanese culture have occurred with important aspects of the culture losing favor with younger generations.

Examining what is happening and the reasoning behind these changes in 2013 allows for an updated understanding of media in Bhutan. By talking to people who produce and consume media who are concerned about the state of media and culture in Bhutan it has opened my eyes to some of the dilemmas that need to be addressed. Television is now available in almost every village in Bhutan and Internet has begun to become more accessible. Bhutan's syncing to the world of media is nearly complete and marks a critical point in Bhutan's future.

Processing...

## NEWSPAPER

With people reading newspapers everyday the content of the papers is important to educate and inform the country. Within the constitution of Bhutan, which was written July 18th, 2008, there are two important articles to look at regarding media and freedoms:

*“Article 7 (2): A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion, and expression*

*Article 7 (5): There shall be freedom of the press, radio and television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic.”*

These articles lay a broad framework that in theory give complete freedoms to people and press in terms of speech, opinion, and expression. However what I’ve found is that while there is freedom of speech and press in Bhutan; the content in the press has been what Bhutanese have described as “without credibility.” There is a lack of faith in the newspapers, which hasn’t always been the case. Before the privatization of media in 2006, *Kuensel* was the only paper, but the staff working there was highly skilled and was often times trained overseas in countries like Australia and Singapore. Without a journalism school in Bhutan, this method of training the early pioneers of the paper industry worked well. People I have talked to now have said that the quality of newspapers in Bhutan has definitely declined. This can be attributed to the privatization of media, which allowed for more newspapers to enter the market, but with that also meant that these papers required funding. Wealthy people or groups would fund some of these papers, but the majority of funding is received through advertising. Here’s the hitch, about 70-80%<sup>1</sup> of advertising in papers is funded by the government. Now this would be fine if the government advertised in all of the papers, but this is not the case. The leading paper, *Kuensel*, has the lion share of the advertising in Bhutan. Now what does this mean? For one it creates an inequality amongst the papers, but also makes *Kuensel* more reliant on the government. This funding creates a reliance on governmental aid, which makes the paper accountable to the government and not the people. “Papers seem to focus more on development than corruption,” said an ex-reporter for *Kuensel* who left shortly after the privatization of media in 2006. By having the main source of revenue for the press be government sponsored ads it creates a lack of transparency within the press. The effect of this is other papers have turned to other means to try and compete with *Kuensel* and other major papers such as the *Bhutan Observer* and *Bhutan Times*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Information and Communications. (2010) *Media Development Assessment 2010*, Thimphu, Royal Government of Bhutan



With twelve papers are competing for the attention of about 725,296<sup>2</sup> people other papers have resorted to as what Bhutanese have called “sensationalist tactics” to try and grab more readers. As a side effect to this people have begun to doubt the legitimacy of claims made by the papers and the credibility of the press as a whole.

Another frustration with the content of the media is the “Thimphu-centric” nature of most of the stories reported. Thimphu is but one of twenty districts within Bhutan and the voice and news of the few is being given more weight than that of the many. Although Thimphu is the capital of the country, it isn’t always relevant to those in rural areas about the on goings in that area. There is a lack of proximity in the news, which is a concern and is a necessity to unify and provide relevant news to all of Bhutan.

## **THOUGHTS ON SHIFT FROM PAPER TO DIGITAL**

Since the popularization and greater accessibility to television and Internet, paper readership has been on the decline. It’s easier for people to tune into the news or quickly skim through some web-based news sites for their information. Why is it that the paper specifically is losing favor? In some cases literacy is a big factor. For those that are illiterate, being able to listen to BBS for news or listen to the radio is the best and only way to really receive news aside from word of mouth. Another is people’s perception that the paper has become less credible. For some, papers have become too sensationalistic and aren’t telling the real story and are strictly fishing for readers. Television and Internet is seen as a more credible source for news and has become accessible nearly everywhere in Bhutan.

A thing to think about in terms of urban areas is the pace of life and lifestyle changes in that sense. Workers have begun working longer days in order to make more money. While more money for families is a good thing and is necessary, looking at how people stay informed is also important. If people don’t have the time in the day to sit down and read the paper then they are naturally going to shift their focus to quicker forms of media that simply “spoon feed” the news to you.

An interesting thing to note is what the cell phone has done to the pace of daily life. Being able to call anyone or send them a text is a great thing for communication and allows people to work much more efficiently, stay in contact with people who are not in the house, and is a great social tool. On the other hand being connected essentially 24/7 makes people more accountable for work when they are off the clock. Especially when you throw smart phones into the equation, people begin to expect that you can be reached when you are not at work, which means that you have to be tuned into to your device more often. With this kind of accessibility and not allowing yourself to “unplug” increases stress levels which is an unfortunate side effect. Having talked to people who work in offices, they often find that they have to then work at home as well and are called, texted, and emailed after office hours. With these added expectations it can be understood that the time for leisure is lessened. With limited amount of time to relax and unwind, it seems that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bt.html>

people are moving away from reading the paper which requires mental engagement and spending time using forms of media that require less exertion.

## MUSIC

Music can be seen as part of the identity of any culture seeing as music is a common theme across the world. Traditional instruments, rhythm patterns, and themes are all things that need to be examined when talking about traditional music. In Bhutan there are major genres of traditional music: *boedra*, *zhungdra*, and *rigsar*. *Boedra* and *zhungdra* are considered to be more folk-like in quality and pertain to themes of Buddhism. *Rigsar* on the other hand is a slightly newer development, in which it takes elements of these songs, but instead of utilizing traditional instruments it uses more modern backbeats and western instruments. *Rigsar*, in particular, is a fusion between traditional elements and outside influences. This is a great example of an evolution of culture, which is healthy for society as it still helps to maintain a cultural identity for Bhutan.

However, these traditional genres have become less popular as outside musical influences have begun flooding in. Hindi/Bollywood, Western, and Korean music have begun monopolizing the airways of radios and music videos from these groups are broadcasted all over the television. On the television, the music is highly sexualized displaying beautiful people in revealing clothing performing provocative dance moves. It all seems so exciting and vibrant, how does traditional music stand a chance? In terms of the divide in music there is a clear generational divide. Older generations still appreciate and prefer more traditional music, where as younger generations prefer foreign music.

After talking to students about musical tastes, almost all said that they don't really listen to traditional music. Bhutanese music they said just wasn't cool and was too old. The idea that parts of Bhutanese culture seem too old is another thing I will touch upon later. *Rigsar* is meant to be the modern fusion, but its evolution has seemed to stagnate. Instead of continuing to evolve to match the tastes of young people it has maintained the same formula and is now seen as dated by young people, which is the exact thing *rigsar* was meant to solve.

This trend isn't unique to just Bhutan however, countries all over are facing a musical imperialism from Hindi, Western, and Korean producers. As seen with Psy's hit song "Gangnam Style" which replaced Justin Beiber as the most watched video on Youtube with 1,570,341,368 views<sup>3</sup>. The funny thing about this was the fact the most people watching didn't understand the lyrics. The success that Psy has had and the wide appeal deserves it's own research.

The emergence of the Internet has allowed for the mass viewing of videos, but also allows smaller artists to spread their work and work towards that one in a million goal of Internet stardom. As Bhutanese artists begin to progress it will be interesting to note the usage of Youtube and Facebook as means to spread their

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<sup>3</sup> as of 5/1/2013

works and if a re-popularization of Bhutanese music can be made possible through the Internet.

## MOVIES

The film industry of Bhutan is what I find to be one of the most burning topics within the developing media of the country. Every year more Bhutanese movies are being produced, but the popularity of Bhutanese films is low. In Bhutan there is no professional film training school so those who produce Bhutanese films either have been trained abroad, primarily in India, or have no formal training whatsoever and are self-taught. What then occurs is the production of low production value films. Similar to the divide in music, more of the older generations tend to appreciate Bhutanese films than younger people. However, even amongst older people they can recognize that there is a huge gap in quality between Bhutanese films and foreign films. The consequences of this has been the consumption of foreign films which has had in my opinion the greatest influence in altering peoples opinions of Bhutanese culture.

Foreign films, the term I'm going to use to group together Bollywood, Hollywood, and Korean films, have distinctly different themes and show much more aggressive images compared to Bhutanese films. In these foreign films the "oversexualization" of women is a constant. In Bollywood films, often times women are portrayed as beautiful, but submissive to men and in need of men's help. Hollywood also does this, both are guilty of turning women into sex objects by showing images of women in revealing clothing and making the goal of the male protagonist to end up having a high intensity sexual encounter. Images like these are seen in advertising as well, but movies especially. These beautiful women become role models for young girls, but the message that is being transmitted to them is oppressive. These ideas entering Bhutanese society are driving forces behind changes in clothing and cultural attitudes. Along with this comes the desire to obtain what these actresses have in terms of looks and body types. Most of which are far out of reach unless drastic means of diet and exercise are used to try and force their body to look as such. This brings up two problems. For one this has led to an increase in eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, which have been plaguing other countries for a while, but is now becoming more frequent in Bhutan. The p

Then you come to the violent foreign films, which there are no shortage of. The graphic and absurd action that is displayed on screens is exciting, which I guess is why it's so popular. But these films are what teachers are pointing to as the "worst influence" on Bhutanese culture. Fingers were pointed at Korean and Japanese gang films for an increase in gang violence in Bhutan. While this has died down a little, the fact remains that the idolizing of violence was occurring amongst the youth. What is it about these violent films that are drawing people to them? Is it a matter of power: dominant versus submissive? Then there's the romanticizing of gangs and violence that goes on in these films. Through violence people achieve respect and status, which is all something worth wanting. This can be applied to not just these

gang films but also other violent films in general. Looking at what draws people and then what influences people to emulate these films at least provides a perspective to understand.

Films are also key influences for music, primarily Bollywood films. Disco scenes and musical choreography is widespread across Bollywood films. This allows another avenue aside from music videos to enter the home through film. The dance numbers are sexy, fun, and extravagant enticing viewers who then seek out these songs on the Internet after watching. Students that I talked to all told me they find out about new music either from movies or through friends, with the bulk of students enjoying Hindi music the most, followed by American pop music.

This is the reason as to why a Bhutanese film industry is so crucial to keeping the culture relevant. There's nothing wrong with change in my mind because it is necessary for culture to evolve, but without the right tools it's hard for the to be allowed to happen.

## **IMPACT OF MEDIA ON CHILDREN**

In Bhutan there's a new generation of children that are growing up with new media making them the first of their kind. The effects of this are in their midst and the media habits of children of children are beginning to become more relevant to these changes. With television becoming more widespread throughout Bhutan, children have the access to allow them to become familiar and form daily routines revolving around this technology. At home it is seen in how kids are spending their free time. "As a kid I used to go out and play all day," said Ganchu, a radio show host on Radio Valley. "I've noticed kids aren't doing this anymore and use what free time they have watching television or being online."

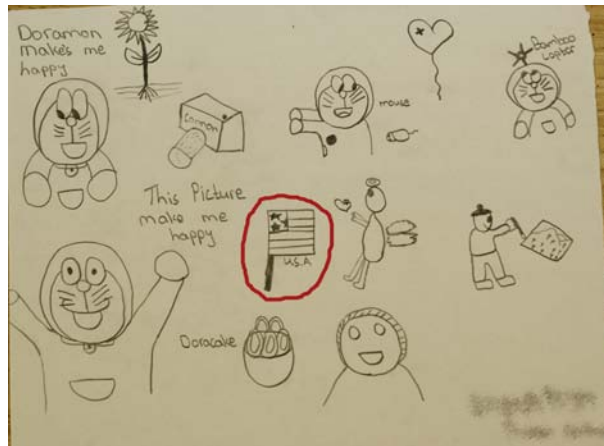
In urban areas especially this is true. There is a lack of parental guidance when it comes to children consuming media, which can be attributed to two things: parent's not staying at home and the lack of time adults and children have spent with new media. As a child my mother was very strict when it came to the television. I could only watch certain channels and certain programs and when it came to movies I had to ask for permission. I asked Trishna Rasaily, a teacher at the Druk Primary School in Thimphu, about her impression of the parental involvement in regards to children's consumption of new media.

*"City life is so busy, parents are at work all day and there's no one to guide the children back at home except maybe a babysitter or any other people at home, not the parents. So what I see is that children have no way to divert their minds so for them it's the television or watching a movie or the Internet"*

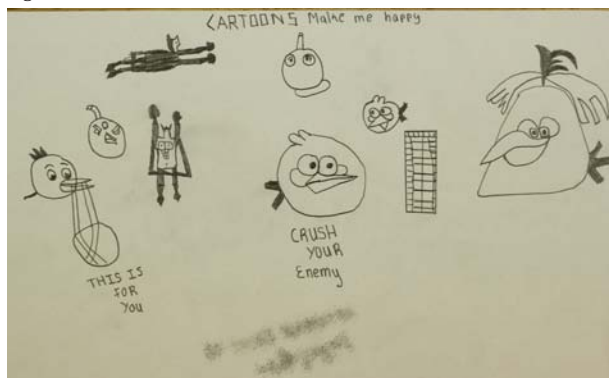
The lack of parental guidance was noted. With kids in the school yard practicing kicks instead of playing and fake wrestling matches breaking out ending up with a kid in a headlock and another yelling, "1...2....3!" One can look at it two ways: kids just being kids or the shows they are watching are rubbing off. When I asked both teachers from the Druk Primary School in Thimphu, as well as the principal of the Kanglung Primary School about what they thought we're the worst

influences for children they all said the violent shows on television. There is so much violent content on the television and with no supervision at home there is no filter for children. This lack of filter gives children the ability to watch whatever they want. Whether it be western action movies, Hindi police shows, American wrestling, or any other the other violent shows.

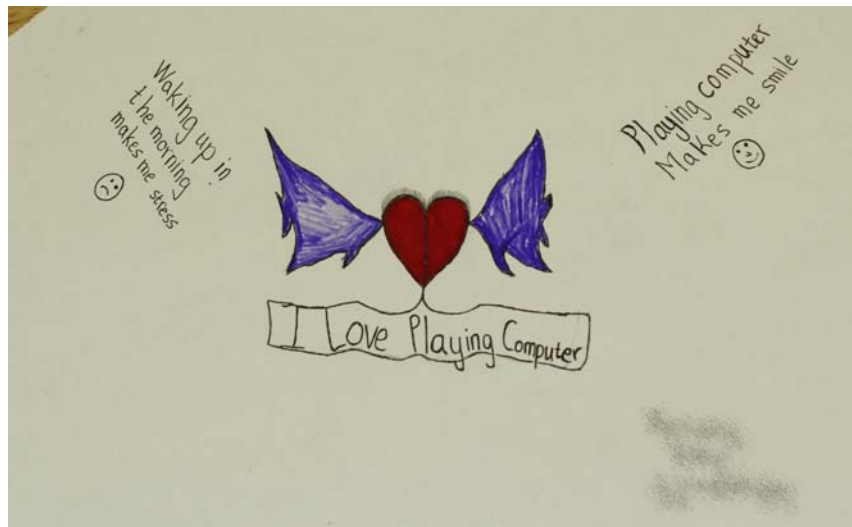
At the Druk Primary School, I helped run an activity with a group of class five students where they to draw what makes them happy and stressed. The workshop was intended to help my colleague do research on happiness, but in turn I found the results representative of the impacts of media.



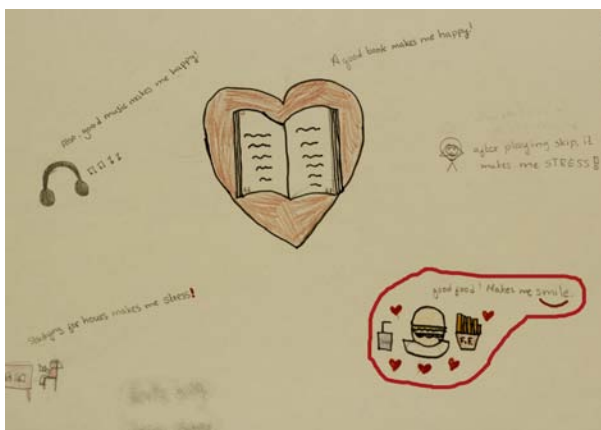
There are two things of note in this picture. The one I found the most interesting was the one I circled in red. As a part of what makes this student happy they drew an American flag. Someone must have done a great job of advertising the United States if they convinced this student that America makes them happy. Television and movies glorify the outside world, but younger people don't understand that this isn't reality, but the medias image of said places. As a part of my experience in Bhutan people would tell me that all Americans are beautiful, sex is open, and there is no violence. Then you have picture of Doramon, who is a popular cartoon. Again showing the impressionability of the shows kids are watching.



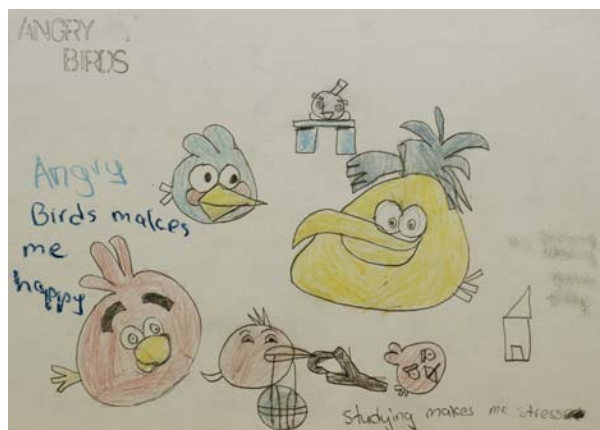
"Cartoons make me happy," "This is for you," "Crush your enemy," are the phrases strewn across the page. Slogans are a powerful thing with kids being very impressionable they often remember these tag lines and repeat them. These aren't the nicest catch phrases in the world; instead they promote destruction and violence. Understanding that it is a cartoon and it is seen everywhere is necessary, but still these violent tag lines are staying in kid's minds. There is a shift occurring within Bhutan with how people are shifting more towards the consumption of media and away from other activities. If cartoons make this student happy, odds are he spends his free time watching cartoons. What are the losses of finding happiness through secondary information? What kind of moderation is encouraged at home? Is there a filter at home? These are all things to think about when it comes to kids consumption of media.



This is the natural course of media's influence has taken. Children are finding happiness through secondary experiences. This is pretty blatant, but the fact that playing computer is the first thing this student thinks of when it comes to happiness shows a total shift in lifestyle and how free time is being spent. What are the consequences of this shift? The gains? A generation of children growing up with these new technologies means new things for Bhutan in terms of how work will be done and time will be spent



What caught my eye here was this student's idea of what "good food" is. Instead of drawing Mom's best dish, she draws a picture of a hamburger, what looks similar to fast food French fries, and a fountain drink. Having spent time in Bhutan, it is not easy to find a meal that looks like this, but also shows that the favorite foods are no longer Bhutanese based, but more western. Especially in Thimphu, food imperialism can be seen by the offerings in restaurants that try to stay relevant by providing more western food options.



Angry Birds. Started off in the U.S as an iPhone app that became a best seller, but has now spread all over the world, but how? For such a huge phenomenon how many people actually have an iPhone to have played the game? This is more a nod towards the blooming consumerism and the popularization of an idea simply through association. If people with iPhone's enjoy Angry Birds, then I like Angry Birds. Then you have this case where this student has chosen Angry Birds as what makes him happy, not family or home, but Angry Birds.

## CLASSROOM

Internet and television are great education tools to disseminate information quickly, visually, and aurally. As the new generation of children grows up with these new medias, children have adapted to using them and older technologies have begun to fade. "Now even in the class when I tell them [students] to come to the class with information they are not going to go to the library to look for information in a book, but will go straight to the Internet and find it there," said a teacher from the Druk Primary School. A new thing schools are going to have to start thinking about is how they are going to adapt to the new learning styles that are forming as a result of media consumption.

*"The amount of media influence is too much that it is so difficult for teachers that want to go and teach a lesson for an hour. Now we as teachers have to think "Will they be listening to us for 50 min or an hour?" Because once they watch a television set and if they find something boring they just switch off the channel, but in a class they cannot do it! Research has found that because of television the attention span has gone down. But now it's becoming difficult as a teacher to keep them attentive through out the period."*

This is an important question in order to help teach kids and make sure that education is working for them. How do you keep kids engaged in a lecture for an hour? The answer might be that lectures might not be the way to do it. The Druk School in particular is starting to realize this and is starting to plan accordingly. "What we do now is plan so many activities so they stay engaged," said Trishna Rasaily specifically about her class. If these are the signs of medias involvement it's good that it is being recognized and being addressed rather than forcing children into an educational style that simply doesn't suit them any more.

On a college level you see similar trends, but on the other hand teachers have more access to providing more "engaging" lectures through more modern means of PowerPoint and projectors. For teachers improvements in technology have been great. No longer are chalkboards used instead teachers throw together PowerPoint presentations with all the notes on there. "I've found at Sherubtse that some kids really enjoy PowerPoint and some do not," said Dorji S. Kheng, a history professor at Sherubtse College. "Those who like conventional methods think it's helpful that you are made to listen and write because it helps you stay engaged. What I've seen is that students that like PowerPoint feel that even if they don't pay attention they can just get the presentation after class and they'll be okay." Dorji S. said that he found that his more serious students generally preferred old style lectures to those who enjoyed PowerPoint.

Teachers have noticed students showing up to class, but being exhausted and not mentally present. What they discovered was that students will often times stay up until the early hours of the morning to watch football matches that are occurring in Europe. The sport is so popular with students that they are willing to put their studies second to watching it on the television. "Watching kids play football or even

basket ball you can see students trying to imitate the pros they see on television,” said Dorji S. as he began to smile. Even he was guilty of going to bed at 9pm and then waking up at 12am to watch the football matches. From an academic stand point it goes both ways. Media is a great tool to teach, but at the same time television and social media such as Facebook often times are used for the sole purpose of entertainment. With no filter or regulation these distractions can detract from education.

## **DIET**

Another side effect of the lack of parental has been the uprising in consumption of unhealthy snacks. As apart of the Druk Primary School they have set up a ban against unhealthy candies and sodas within the school, but the concern is not the consumption during school hours, but when kids leave school. Trishna Rasaily is concerned about the health of her students, also having kids herself; she observed that the busy workdays of urban areas have had impact on the way kids eat.

*“Parents have no time for the children. So what happens if they want money? The parents will just give them money. What do they do with that money? They go buy junk food. Parents buy it for them even though we tell them it’s not good for them. But still parents have no time so they have to make their children happy one way or the other so they just buy junk food and go off to offices. So these kind of clashes between home and school are also happening.”*

Now the media has impacted this by what children perceive as the “cool snack” to buy. What they see in advertisements on the television and are drawn to is often what they end up buying. The advertisements children watch infuse a sense of materialistic joy in children, convincing them they need to buy these products with flashy ads that often have nothing to do with the actual product. It’s a matter of perception and how children perceive what’s cool. In advertisements for sodas and snacks good-looking people, movie stars, and athletes are seen endorsing the product. For kids looking for role models, these people can seem pretty appealing to want to emulate which influences kids into the purchasing these products. This has led to a surge in the consumption of junk food and lifestyle diseases that didn’t really exist before, but are starting to become more frequent due to the change in diet as well as lack of physical activity.

## **STYLES**

Another aspect of Bhutanese life that has been affected and has become a growing concern amongst some is the state of the Bhutanese traditional dress. In 1989 the Bhutanese government as apart of Driglam Namzha, the official behavior and dress code of Bhutan, made wearing the Bhutanese traditional dress (the gho and kira) mandatory in governmental offices, dzongs, and monastery’s as a means of cultural preservation. For students it is also mandatory to wear the official dress



during school hours, but often times what has been seen is that students don't elect to wear the traditional dress outside of when they are supposed to. Dawa Tshering, a radio producer in Thimphu, is producing a radio show to address issues with the youth in the form of a talk show. From the youth he talked to he said that kids are feeling "awkward" when they go to hang out with their friends in a gho or kira. The amount of western styles in urban areas of Thimphu is overwhelming with more people walking the streets in pants and shirts than ghos or kiras. Even in the east at Sherubtse College, students find changing out of their ghos or kiras to be the norm once their class time is over. "In the past all of the pants and shirt was a very weird thing to do. But now people have to wear the gho to go to an office, but otherwise some might not touch it for a year," said a second year student from Sherubtse College. Even on a primary school level "if you see our children going out they will feel embarrassed to go out with their gho and kira. Now they have started thinking "I must wear something nice when I go out." And for them that's pants and short skirts," said a teacher from Thimphu observing the trend in and outside the school.

A more recent phenomenon in Bhutan amongst the youth is the recent popularization of Korean popular culture (also known as K-pop). Hairstyles have been going up, literally, with massive amounts of gel, young people have begun spiking their hair in mimicry of K-pop culture. Gels, dyes, and bleaches have entered their hair in order for it to perform the same way. As harmless a thing as hairstyles are it is a shift from traditional Bhutanese ideas. Normally, Bhutanese men are "supposed" to keep their hair short and straight and women also keeping it short. Now nitpicking something as small and seemingly insignificant as a hairstyle may seem overboard, but it does show the adoption of other cultures through media.

## **FAMILY**

A shift that has been occurring within families and home life can also be attributed to the influence of media. This differs greatly between urban and rural areas in terms of the type of impact, but both have been affected.

In urban areas, with greater access to new media, there has been a shift away from togetherness.

*"They [the family] have stopped socializing, family time has shortened up, mothers are busy watching the daily Hindi serials, and fathers come back home late and they switch on to their news or football games, Children are busy in their room watching their favorite shows."*

This was a picture painted for me of what the home life was slowly becoming. Before television, dinners were held together and there was no secondary form of entertainment unless you owned a television and had movies to play on it. A part of Bhutanese culture is the importance of family. However, if families are spending less time together and more time being personally entertained through media then the shift occurring is a true value change for Bhutanese life. As a part of a social aspect, Cinema Halls have been decreasing in popularity with most people in urban areas owning a television in their homes resulting for people electing to stay.

I asked people what they remember their homes were like before they got a television and people would paint me a picture of everyone gathering around and eating dinner together, there would be dialogue and interaction within the family. During meal times now the television is on and eyes are glued.

Shifting to life in rural areas is slightly different. Although there isn't as great access to television and especially Internet (although it is increasing quickly) there are interesting changes occurring. As electricity has come to rural areas, the first thing people seem to want to pick up is a television set and a dish. If electricity means modernizing and the first thing people really want to use electricity with is a television then I suppose modernization is a build up to the television.

In rural areas the television is a great tool. It provides a new way for communities to become informed of what is going on in the world and helps people develop more global perspectives. This is a really important aspect of the television and is one not to be overlooked. Providing knowledge of what is going on outside of people's bubbles allowing people to think more critically of what is actually going on within their country by comparing and learning from the outside world.

One thing that I heard across the board is the time at which people used to go to bed has shifted. Before television, Bhutanese in rural areas would be going to bed on average at around 8:30pm and rise early to start doing work. Often times they would eat an early dinner, wash dishes, and prepare anything they needed for the next day before they went to sleep. With television entering the home it seems that more and more families are basing their days around television programming. Once people have finished work for the day the television is turned on, people watch, eat dinner in front of it, then keep watching. Chores that were being taken care of at night have become secondary to people's favorite programs and often times are left till the next morning. People are going to bed later as well, which is resulting in people waking up later. These may seem like minor shifts in lifestyle that are bound to occur, but it is important noting the power television has had in creating these shifts.

Something that is also being overlooked is the attention paid to children. Parental guidance and supervision is certainly important especially if family members have been working outside of the home all day. The parent child relationship is large part of the family structure so when something comes in between that there has to be some kind of change in how children will grow up than in the past.

Again this may not be happening in every household but through talking to individuals I've noticed a heavy trend in suggesting that this is a common occurrence.

## **MAKING CULTURE RELEVANT**

One of the major issues Bhutan is having with the shift in cultural values is keeping young people interested and engaged. This is certainly applicable to both culture and religion, which are both starting to be questioned by the youth. This is especially a concern in Thimphu as was expressed by a teacher in the area.

*“We’re trying to put values in children trying to teach them the importance of prayers and they find this very funny because they don’t pray at home. They think that only old people, grandmothers, grandfathers would pray but not the young ones because that’s what they see at home...they’ve got no time for all these things, but at the same time they think this is something done by olden people and not something done by us.”*

If a concern of Bhutan is the preservation of religion and culture there needs to be efforts made to make it appealing. Media can be used to help this. A specific example is the television show “Roll No. 21” that airs on Cartoon Network India, which follows the main character, Kris (Lord Krishna), as he tries to save the world from evil. The show is in English and is very popular with kids. This show does two things that are special. One of which is teaching kids about religious figures, but does so in an entertaining fashion. It manages to keep kids engaged and at least knowledgeable about religion by making it relevant to them.

This is all a matter of compromise in a sense. The way to keep people interested is to adapt culture to their tastes, but by doing so are you disrespecting the culture? In my opinion if the main concern is keeping people engaged and participating in culture then adaptations should be encouraged. “The message is what’s most important,” said Ganchu, “we should be allowing our culture and traditions to change, not make things off limits.”

The idea of allowing for less limitations and more freedom of expression is a great way to keep culture relevant. The idea of cultural preservation can be interpreted in a rigid way not allowing for change to occur. But for progression and evolution I think the idea of cultural preservation has to be looked at more loosely in order for it to truly become more successful. As strict policies are created to try and maintain old ideas of culture it seems to make outside ideas more appealing due to the fact that they aren’t allowed. I talked to students about Bhutanese architecture and what they thought about the laws that made Bhutanese architectural styles mandatory on all buildings. Many students expressed their frustration that this impeded development due to the slow building speeds and method of which these buildings were being constructed. If we looked at this from a more loose interpretation of cultural preservation it would allow people to become more creative with designs and style that can create a fusion. Fusion makes culture more relevant to more people and in turn preserves it.

Although something may not be the exact same as it was 1,000 years ago, if it maintains the same roots and message then is it preserved? I think so especially if you want to keep a culture around for another 1,000 years you have to let it develop and change in order for it to carry on. Making culture “cool” and relevant so that future generations will want to preserve it is what is truly important.

## **MEDIA EDUCATION**

Media education is important to provide in order to allow for a healthy evolution of culture. At Sherubtse College, this past school year was the launch of the first media department in Bhutan. The department is providing training in journalism and media production over the course of the three-year program. This

kind of education allows for Bhutanese to start being educated on how to create content for the media whether through print, radio, television, or film. Students will begin coming out of college with actual skills to make higher quality media. The hope is that these students can restore a sense of credibility in the media, as well as make engaging content people want to consume. Having home grown media content that people find enjoyable not only preserves a sense of culture but also gives people the freedom to be creative with how they view culture in Bhutan.

Having sat in on some of the classes in Sherubtse College and talking to students about what they think about the program, there was one area of major concern. In three years students are expected to come out of the college with training in print media, radio, television, and film production. Each of these are individual subjects with different techniques and nuances. The concern is if students coming out of the program will really be well equipped to be producing content or will over the course of three years will they have only gotten a brief overview into each topic as opposed to an in-depth knowledge into a specific field. The idea of splitting the media department into a journalism department and a digital media department came up a couple of times when I talked to people. I personally think that it would allow for students to really get involved in their field and allow for more time with hands on experience and projects.

The Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy has also played a large role in Bhutan's media education. BCMD has been working on various projects and workshops to provide media literacy education around Bhutan. They donated three DSLR digital cameras to Sherubtse College, allowing the students to have hands on experience with technologies they will encounter in professional settings. They also have run multiple workshops in order to teach students the art of telling a story through media. They work with students to produce documentary films as well as give students the opportunity to write an article on something they find interesting with the possibility of being published in *Kuensel*. This kind of experience is invaluable that wants to enter a field in media. This is the beginning of a shift away from self-taught filmmakers towards a more professional film industry.

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013 BCMD opened the Media Lab in Thimphu, an area for people to have access to lessons in media production of all sorts: digital and print. This is the first of its kind in Bhutan and is still as of right now in it's initial launch phase. Their goal is to have lecturers to come to the lab and teach workshops in their given field. The Media Lab will also provide a workspace for people that are working on projects of their own and allow for the rental of equipment.

This Media Lab marks the beginning of providing real media production education to the youth. It allows for instruction, but also provides the freedom to be creative. Education like this provides the fundamentals for youth to learn how to create their own content and allow for the production of quality of Bhutanese content. This is significant for the press, television, and film in Bhutan as well as allows for other arts like photography and digital art to be developed. More institutions spread out throughout Bhutan need to be developed similar to this or else an inequality in education between urban and rural areas will occur.

## **MEDIA LITERACY**

The idea of being media literate is a new concept. Media is now everywhere we look and being able to deconstruct these images and understand them fully is critical. Having active engagement in the media and making the media work for you allows for its most beneficial use. Especially when it comes to advertising, which has become a psychological science, the need to understand how advertisers use images to sell products and convince the public is a skill needed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 2008 Bhutan Media Impact Study<sup>4</sup> provides recommendations for promoting media literacy in Bhutan. Seeing as the issue of media literacy isn't age specific, but is applicable to everyone it needs to be spread through every avenue available. Already, BCMD has begun to provide workshops to teachers to provide them with the tools to work with students. Teaching children how to become a participant in media as opposed to a consumer is the main goal. Already starting in primary schools across Bhutan students are given access to newspapers (*Kuensel*) and are encouraged to read. For children that are too young to read the newspaper teachers have begun to bring in news stories and try and tie them into lessons going on in the classroom. Exposure at a young age to media is a good thing when it is guided and children are taught the importance of educating themselves.

At Sherubtse College the Sherubtse Media Society, a group of students that show their interest in media and media issues by providing news and education on the campus and surrounding area, have already begun plans to take the knowledge they have received from BCMD workshops and go to primary and secondary schools to teach their own workshops to students to try and promote media literacy. This is great way of spreading media literacy through a trickle-down effect of sorts allowing the education to reach more districts based on the location of collegiate institutions.

## **INEQUALITIES BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL**

An issue relating to the media literacy in Bhutan is the divide between rural and urban areas. Urban areas have greater access to news and information than rural areas due to greater connectivity to the resources of the capital, Thimphu. Around Thimphu is where the greatest amount of development in Bhutan has taken place, which has allowed for more modern accessories such as Internet to be more accessible. In rural areas however, there is less access to things like news which people in Thimphu have. A big problem with the press currently is it's focus on Thimphu and the lack of coverage other districts receive. This creates a lack of interest for those in rural areas who want to read stories that have an impact on their lives, in their area. Another issue is the timeliness of news for those in rural areas. The terrain of Bhutan is not conducive to travel so when it comes to delivering papers, that aside from a few, are printed in Thimphu it becomes very

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<sup>4</sup> 2008 Bhutan Media Impact Study, Ministry of Information and Communications (86-87)

hard to deliver to remote areas. So when people in these areas do receive news it is often dated or not the up to date.

Another issue is the literacy rate. With about 47% of people in Bhutan being literate, most of which are based in Thimphu. Only about 1/3 of the population lives in urban areas, which means 2/3 of those are in rural areas with many being illiterate. If people can't read the paper in rural areas then that leaves radio and TV as ways to receive news. With such an inequality in access to news across Bhutan there needs to be ways to connect the country and provide a balance.

BCMD has been working on a way to try and connect news through mobile devices by using IVR (Interactive Voice Response) technology. What BCMD wants to use this technology for is to provide a "call-in-center" for people all over Bhutan to call in and report local news, but use it as a way for people to call in to hear news about their districts. With about 93%<sup>5</sup> of people in Bhutan having a mobile phone this offers a lot of potential to provide access to local news.

It may just be a matter of time with this relatively new technology that more people will fully understand what it means to be media literate. As of right now though there is not enough "active consuming" of media going on. One example is the fact that some Bhutanese believe that WWE Wrestling is real. The question then becomes how far does this go in terms of what people are taking for face value? Are the advertisements people see being taken literally? How about American action films with drugs, sex, and violence? What does that mean in terms of how people then view the world? These are all serious questions to ask in terms of how people are actually interpreting what they see and educating has to occur to avoid this.

## **EVOLUTION VS. REPLACEMENT**

For cultures to progress and maintain it is necessary to allow the culture to change. Now in my opinion there is healthy change and unhealthy change that can take place. Healthy change is the evolution of a culture where it can maintain its identity, but begin to build upon it. Unhealthy change is the replacement of old by adopting new ideas and displacing the original culture.

There is a fear amongst Bhutanese that the culture is fading, but the question is whether or not it is evolving or being replaced. I think the key to this in terms of media is what kind of content is being consumed compared to what kind of content is being produced by the country. In terms of television content most people are watching foreign channels for entertainment, which has been leading to Bhutanese being subjected to foreign influence. That is not to say that some do not watch BBS, but for means of entertainment many are watching Hindi soap operas or other foreign content. What this means is the images people are seeing are not Bhutanese and do not promote any Bhutanese social or cultural ideas. Instead people have begun to replace old ideas of social norms, sexuality, and culture with that of what they are watching. This does lead to change and in some cases change means progress. But is it considered progress if you just take what you already know and

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<sup>5</sup> As according to Manny Fassi from the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy in an interview

replace it with a new idea? Is there some kind of metamorphosis that needs to occur of the old idea, allow it to develop for it to be healthy?

Bhutanese music is a good example of this. When *rigsar* originally was introduced as the modern traditional music, people loved it and really took a strong liking to it. There was a generation that grew up with this kind of music that still enjoys it. But now the younger generations are watching VH1 or MTV and are being exposed to new foreign music that seems more modern to them. Now Bhutanese music is losing its popularity, why? "In my opinion it's because Bhutanese music doesn't represent the changing times," said radio jockey for Radio Valley, Ganchu. Lyrically, Bhutanese music has stayed about the same with songs primarily focusing on themes of love or religion. There is no representation or integration of more modern themes that are more relatable to younger kids; instead they have been sticking to the old.

## CONCLUSION

Bhutan is now coming up on its 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the lifting on the ban of television and Internet in Bhutan. Already Bhutan is making strides to provide education in the production and interpreting of media. As new media (Internet and television) continue to become more accessible throughout the country the influences and impacts media has become something of note. Bhutan is reaching a critical point in it's media history in which more Bhutanese content *has* to be created. Without producing their own content the continuing cultural imperialism that has been affecting all aspects of life will continue. If cultural preservation is something that Bhutan is indeed worried about then using media as a means of preservation is crucial. By popularizing Bhutanese culture and making it appealing and relevant to people culture will preserve itself, Bhutan just needs to work to provide people with the tools and freedoms in order to accomplish this. The other way to prevent this cultural replacement is to provide proper media literacy education and get people actively involved and thinking about how they consume media. Transparency in government through media will need to become more prominent as well in order to provide the necessary checks and balances of democracy. The main take away is to look at what we consume, what we are taking away from it, and how can we provide the best media environment for everyone in Bhutan.

## METHODOLOGY

For my research I knew I wouldn't have the time or resources to try and quantify everything with surveys and attempt to provide worthwhile statistics. What I did instead was perform qualitative research through in depth interviews with people of different ages and locations. The thing about media is that everyone has an opinion about it due to the rapid development in the last 14 years.

I spent time at Sherubtse College staying with students, but also attending media classes as well as helping out with classes. A lot of time was spent talking to students, faculty, and people in the surrounding area of Kanglung about the impact of media on rural areas as well as the effects on education. I then briefly spent time in Lobesa at the College of Natural Resources and at the Paro College of Education staying with students where I talked to them about their homes and their own personal media consumption.

The bulk of my time was spent in Thimphu where the media of Bhutan is centralized. I used my time here to interview people who were involved in the media and to find out what their opinions were on the topic of media. I then talked to people such as Dasho Karma Ura, the director of the Center for Bhutan Studies, on the shift in culture and what it means for the future of Bhutan.

A part of my research led me to the Druk Primary School where I helped run an activity with school children in class 5. For the activity we had kids draw what makes them happy and stressed, one aspect of the research (that I was not conducting) was to look at sources of happiness, but from my side I was observing the influence media has on ideas of happiness.

Overall I was able to primarily focus on media in Thimphu with some insight into rural media consumption from my work in Kanglung, Lobesa, and Paro. If given further time to do research it would be beneficial to look at more of the 20 districts of Bhutan to collect a more complete pool of knowledge.

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## **ADVISOR BIO**

Barbara Stewart was a reporter for the New York Times and has written for the Guardian, the Carnegie Corporation and other newspapers. Barbara has been a writing professor at the City University of New York and is now teaching at Sherubtse in media studies. Barbara lives in New York and received her MS from Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

- Taking a look at the film and TV production in Bhutan and how production studios hire, train, and produce content
- How traditional music in Bhutan is trying to stay relevant amidst the other music that is coming into the country
- Further research can be done in terms of the inequalities between rural and urban access to media
- Research the paper industry and how minor papers are surviving and obtaining readership

## **CONTACTS**

Upasana Dahal- Journalist/Photographer: 77278119

Jane Hancock- Co-founder Music of Bhutan Research Center: 97577271782

Dawa Tshering- Radio Producer: 97517800934

Ganchu- Radio show host and music producer: 17110975

Supe- Ex-Kuensel journalist/English professor, Bhutanese film actor: 17696969