



# **The Information and Media Policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan**

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## 1. Policy Name:

The Information and Media Policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan

## 2. Rationale:

Bhutan more than any other country has taken a deliberate path to development using the notion of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Perhaps Bhutan's best known intellectual gift to the rest of the world, GNH is also the best example of how the country sees the purpose of development—not merely an economic pursuit, but more a self-actualization of individuals in the collective. The premise is that the ultimate aspiration of every human being is happiness.

Taking GNH seriously means that media development has to be viewed through the perspective of GNH principles. This is unique in the world. On the one hand, it offers exciting possibilities of “thinking out of the box” and exploring alternative paths of developing the media. On the other hand, as a unique case, such a notion is as challenging as it is trail-blazing; there is no example to follow. The path of media development therefore has to be trod cautiously with continuous monitoring and analysis, as the situation develops to be sure that Bhutan remains on the right track.

The media laws and policies that were instituted in 2008 have had several years to work themselves out and it is now timely to review them. It is important that Bhutan learns from its own media experience of the past five years as the Bhutanese media attempted to play a significant contributory role in the pioneering years of the democratic process.

This policy is intended to provide a policy vision to guide media development for the next few years. The policy builds on the various studies, assessments, seminars and meetings conducted on the role of the Bhutanese media. Among the more important of these sources of information on the media are: the Information and Media Policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan and Institutional Plan for Department of Information and Media (approved by the 246<sup>th</sup> CCM Session, 23 November 2004), Bhutan Media Impact Study 2008 and 2013, Media Development Assessment 2010. Underlying this policy is the continuing refinement of GNH as an operating concept in the governance of Bhutan. Documents and material representing the discourse on GNH were important in providing the context as well as direction for this policy.

Policy recommendations are based on GNH values and principles that are carefully explicated to avoid ambiguity.

The objectives of the proposed policy are:

- I. Achieve professional and sustainable media industry. This includes contributing to employment generation.
- II. Promote social cohesion and empower women, through access to timely and accurate information.
- III. Preserve and promote Bhutan's culture and traditions through media.
- IV. Create a vibrant media industry that upholds highest ethical standards through training of media professionals and establishing oversight body like media council.
- V. Enhance democratic discourse through media platforms in creating a vibrant democratic governance.
- VI. Ensure that the media promotes the values of GNH instead of commercialism.
- VII. Enhance equal opportunities to all with access to media and right to information.
- VIII. Guide and promote the evolution of information and media in Bhutan.

- IX. Promote sharing of Infrastructure to reduce environmental degradation and increase efficiency.
- X. Promote shared national consciousness through responsible media.

### 3. Definitions

Technical jargons have been deliberately kept to a minimum in this policy in order to ease understanding. The following are terms that require some special attention:

- Cross media ownership: refers to the ownership of multiple media platforms. A newspaper company that owns a TV and a radio station is a cross media owner. Such an owner would reap economies of scale and this should help profitability. On the other hand, there is the potential for the owner's views and stance on issues to crowd out other positions, in their words, create monopolies.
- Media literacy: refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds.
- Self- and co-regulation: Self-regulation is the regulation of an industry by the industry. In pure self-regulation, no government law or agency is involved in passing, monitoring or enforcing the rules. Historically speaking, self-regulation included government enforcement of the rules even though that may be limited to cases where the offender is recalcitrant and refuses to abide by the sanction of the industry body doing the self-regulation.

Today, where government is involved in any aspect of self-regulation, it is termed co-regulation. Because there is a government "back stop" that can discipline the offender in the worst case, co-regulation is a more effective mode of industry self-regulation.

### 4. Policy Statement:

#### 4.1 Gross National Happiness:

4.1.1. The GNH pillars of Sustainable Development, Preservation of Culture, Conservation of Environment and Good Governance and the expansion of these pillars into nine domains shall be the foundation of the media policy of the country.

4.1.2: The media shall support the values of GNH and its vision of democracy and human well-being and not pursue commercialism only for their own sake. Media should help develop society, not just themselves.

## **4.2 Governance:**

- 4.2.1 Governance of the media shall promote the watchdog role of the media in safeguarding and promoting democracy. In practice, this means that the principles, laws, rules and administrative processes relating to the media shall help promote the watchdog role.
- 4.2.2 The media can only perform the watchdog role if the industry is financially healthy. A viable framework for government advertising should be established.
- 4.2.3 Periodic audits of media shall be conducted for purposes of confirming circulation, readership, reach and viewership.
- 4.2.4 A Media Council shall be formed as a part of the move to promote responsible and independent media.

## **4.3 Media's Role:**

- 4.3.1 Media should play a watchdog role and promote democracy and good governance.
- 4.3.2 In fulfilling its watchdog role, media should educate and inform the public and provide the public platform for discourse that is open and accessible to all.
- 4.3.3 Commercialism should not be the primary goal of media. The media in turn should support the values of GNH and its vision of democracy and human well being and not pursue commercialism only for their own sake. Media are mandated to help develop society, not just themselves.

#### **4.4 Bhutan Information Communications and Media Authority (BICMA):**

- 4.4.1 The autonomy and independence of BICMA as the media regulator should be strengthened. BICMA staff, including the director, should be appointed such that they are given security of tenure and yet independence from the Royal Civil Service's strictures. Greater autonomy in terms of employment conditions and benefits may be necessary in order for BICMA to hire quality staff with the expertise to regulate the fast moving ICT and Media industry.
- 4.4.2 Decisions that impact stakeholders shall be made by committees rather than individuals.
- 4.4.3 BICMA should attempt to work with industry through self- or co-regulation. That is, it shall help establish and then work with the Media Council to self-regulate media content including advertising.
- 4.4.4 BICMA shall conduct regular audits to determine the well-being of the media industry as well as the impact of its work. It shall aim to produce an annual report on the state of the media. This shall inform potential investors of the state of the markets. The audits shall be undertaken by an independent third party under BICMA's supervision.
- 4.4.5 BICMA needs to develop in-house expertise to regulate media competition; including sharing of infrastructure facilities.

#### **4.5 Media and Information Literacy:**

- 4.5.1 The Government shall aim to increase the Media and Information Literate (MIL) population. This means educating Bhutanese citizens beyond reading and writing to understanding how to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds.
- 4.5.2 Initiatives in MIL by government, civil society and the private sector should be encouraged.
- 4.5.3 Integrate MIL into existing education curriculum from class PP – X. Introduce MIL studies as an optional subject in classes XI – XII.

#### **4.6 Sustainable Development of the Media Industry:**

- 4.6.1 An advertisement guideline to ensure that all advertisements are legal, decent, honest and truthful shall be adopted by the media industry. Such a guideline will increase the trustworthiness of advertisements, ensure a level playing field for the media and will help the industry to grow.

- 4.6.2 The placement of advertisements by the Government shall be done in an objective, fair and transparent manner based on a written guideline.
- 4.6.3 Media outlets shall show their audited circulation and reach figures to their advertisers in order to help them make more informed choices in their marketing.
- 4.6.4 Given the emphasis on GNH and quality, advertisements by the Government shall be placed through a combination of factors: using circulation and reach as an important criteria, and perhaps also including quality of the medium as well as the effort expended.
- 4.6.5 Cost-benefit analysis shall be conducted on a periodic basis to show the efficacy of the advertising money of the Government. That is, media shall cooperate to show the results of the Government advertisements in their respective media outlets. This is the only long-term sustainable practice.
- 4.6.6 Media shall be encouraged to share common infrastructure facilities such as printing press and broadcast towers.
- 4.6.7 To ensure that there is fair play in the sharing of infrastructural facilities; BICMA shall build its expertise in fair competition.
- 4.6.8 Govt. subsidy for the media shall only be based on criteria that will be examined and changed on needs basis.

#### **4.7 Preservation of Culture:**

- 4.7.1 Notwithstanding that it is a challenge, media shall produce content that promote GNH values but in a way that also interests viewers and readers.
- 4.7.2 Enhance promotion and development of local content by incentivising media organisations to create more local content.
- 4.7.3 Archival records shall be made of all media (print, broadcast, audiovisual, performances such as music, films, drama and other entertainment and performing arts), and stored in the National Archives.

#### **4.8 Professionalism of Media:**

- 4.8.1 The Government, particularly the Department of Information and Media in cooperation with the relevant agencies, will conduct trainings for media personnel and explore funds to conduct trainings that are essential to professionalize the skills of media practitioners as per RGoB's existing rules and procedures.
- 4.8.2 The Department of Information and Media in collaboration with the Journalists Association of Bhutan will explore funds and train journalists on media ethics in order to maintain and promote high ethical behaviour in the practice of Journalism.

#### **4.9 Reaching the Unreached:**

- 4.9.1 Incentives should be given to all media agencies to improve quality content and encourage rural reach.
- 4.9.2 Local content (any creative content, expression of performance that resonates with the Bhutanese culture and tradition) production shall be encouraged wherever possible. Such encouragement may be in the direct form of grants and subsidies.
- 4.9.3 In areas where mainstream media like print and television are not able to reach, encourage community radio and other means to reach the unreached.
- 4.9.4 Promote social cohesion and empower citizens, through access to timely and accurate information.
- 4.9.5 Provide equal opportunities to all with access to information and media.

#### **4.10 Other Policy Recommendations:**

- 4.10.1 Cross media ownership shall be allowed given technological convergence to a limited extent while strategically and carefully preventing monopolies. The precise percentage of cross-ownership and of the content type (e.g. would it be just news, or all content) that shall be studied by BICMA. Each case would have to be studied by the regulator on its own merits. Rules will need to be developed to prevent market concentration and abuse of market power.
- 4.10.2 Online intermediaries shall be given limited immunity for third-party content.
- 4.10.3 A separate social media policy shall be issued and the policy shall include a code of conduct for all citizens and a guideline for the use of social media for good governance.

4.10.4 Regulate social media advertising and marketing with rules based on the advertising code.

4.10.5 The guidelines on “Media Coverage of Elections” drawn up by the Election Commission of Bhutan should be reviewed in the light of the 2013 general elections to determine if there is a need to fine-tune them.

4.10.6 The Government shall migrate from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting following international trends.

## **5. Legislative Compliance:**

5.1.1 BICM Act 2006 is the main legislation for media, which is currently being revised.

5.1.2 Foreign Direct Investment policy stipulates that media is in the negative list.

## **6. Implementation Procedure:**

The Policy recognizes the vital role that the Government agencies, Regulator, Civil Society and the Media can play for the overall development of the media industry and also in dealing with media related issues. Refer Annexure 1.

## **7. Monitoring and Evaluation:**

A periodic monitoring and evaluation will be carried out to keep track of the progress and achievements of Policy objectives. It is necessary to ensure that targets are reached and key stakeholders are accountable for the delivery of those targets.

7.1.1 Ministry of Information and Communications, Department of Information and Media shall have the responsibility for overall monitoring and also to ensure that the objectives of the Policy are successfully achieved

7.1.2 Periodic surveys and studies on the overall state of the media, such as reach and coverage, impact of media and the capacity need assessment for media personnel will be carried out. Based on the recommendations and conclusion of the surveys and studies, intervention in developing the media industry, particularly to achieve those objectives under this policy, will be carried out.

## **8. Approval Dates:**

## **ANNEXURE 1**

1. A mechanism for coordination and implementation of the policy shall be created among the stakeholders.
2. The Ministry of Information and Communications in collaboration with the Ministry of Education shall introduce media studies as an optional subject for class XI & XII and they shall also introduce media and information literacy in schools.
3. The Election Commission of Bhutan in consultation with Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) and the Department of Information and Media shall review the guidelines “Media Coverage of Election”.
4. In order to promote self-regulation “Media Council” shall be established with members from Media, Judiciary, CSOs, Government and the public.
5. Collaborate with BICMA, media agencies and other government agencies in providing conducive environment that will promote the role of media as “watch dog”.
6. BICMA and MoIC shall conduct periodic audits of media for the purpose of confirming circulation, reach, readership and viewers.