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Dechen Wangmo and Thomas Jayaprakash Yesudhasan

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**Abstract:** Bhutan has been a latecomer to the world of public service broadcasting (PSB). As the global debate on whether there still is a place for PSB in the changing media landscape is continuing, Bhutan, on the contrary, is working towards strengthening its PSB. There are compelling reasons why Bhutan seeks to strengthen its PSB. As the isolated Himalayan kingdom is bombarded with over 50 international satellite TV channels, PSB is an important source of news and information for the Bhutanese audience. It plays an ever more critical role in strengthening the country's nascent democracy by providing the public a platform to voice their concerns and debate and discuss various social, political, cultural and economic issues. Also, as the only local or national TV channel, it plays a crucial role in counterbalancing the flood of foreign programming beamed into the country and protect Bhutan's unique Buddhist culture and nurture it for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Over the last few decades, public service broadcasters, almost everywhere, have been scrutinised on every front- commercial, ideological and political (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008; Padovani & Tracey, 2003; Rahman, 2014). Much has been written about the state of PSB and a great deal of the discussion has revolved around the role and legitimacy of PSB in the new broadcasting scenario dominated by cable, satellite and digital transmissions (Coppens, 2002; Padovani & Tracey, 2003). Public service broadcasting has been slammed as an out-dated, expensive and ineffective form of media (Abbott, 2016). By the 1990s, some academics, media scholars and government officials declared that PSB was in the final stages of its existence, while some pronounced it already dead (Tracey, 1998).

However, in Bhutan, an isolated Himalayan kingdom, debates and discussions on public service broadcasting are a fairly new development. This is not surprising, considering that media development in Bhutan started at a much later stage. Bhutan introduced television only in 1999. The Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), which was a radio station until then, launched its television service in the same year. As BBS began its TV broadcast, the

challenges were many. Lack of trained manpower, which inhibited the broadcaster's ability to provide quality news and programmes, was the major concern in its initial years. Thus, the discussions and criticisms surrounding BBS in the early years mainly concerned the quality of its service. It was only recently that discussion on its status and role as a public service broadcaster emerged.

The status and role of BBS remained undisputed until the 2008 elections, Bhutan's first parliamentary elections, which transformed the nation's political system from constitutional monarchy to parliamentary democracy. However, in the years following the historic 2008 elections, BBS saw its role, status and funding model come under increasing scrutiny by politicians (Subba, 2016; Tobgay, 2010; Wangdi, 2010). The broadcaster has been a recurrent topic of debate and discussion in the parliament. BBS describes itself as a public service broadcaster but not everyone views it in the same light. Instead, it is often seen as a state broadcaster because the government funds it.

In addition, with no clear law unambiguously defining its status and mandates, the question of what exactly is the BBS has become an ongoing discussion. Some politicians have been quick to insist that BBS is a state broadcaster and that it is accountable to the government. As for its role, the same politicians have argued that, as a state funded broadcaster, BBS should function as a government mouthpiece (Subba, 2016 ; Tobgay, 2010 ; Wangdi, 2010). This has often put the two sides at war. An editorial in the November 10, 2010 issue of *Kuensel* (can you give the reference to this with a http link if possible in the reference list?), the national newspaper, entitled "Media in the public interest" noted the friction between BBS and the country's first democratically elected government. It said "since the advent of parliamentary democracy, the station and the ruling government have had a few differences, with discussions even being held at the National Assembly on the mandate and role of the television station". A news article in the same issue reported " the BBS has clashed with the ruling government on several occasions, particularly on the live telecast of national assembly sessions, and on news coverage of the ruling government" (Wangdi, 2010).

However, politicians are far from being the only ones questioning the status of the BBS. The issue of whether the state-funded BBS can be relied upon to function as a public service broadcaster was one of the main concerns at the first ever international seminar on the challenges of public service broadcasting, held in Thimphu in November, 2010 (Iyer, 2010; Tobgay, 2010 ). The former managing director of BBS, Pema Choden, in her article entitled ‘Let’s Talk about BBS’, published in Drukpa magazine, writes about the different ways in which BBS is being perceived. BBS, she writes is a trustworthy source of news for many Bhutanese, particularly those living in rural Bhutan. For other media in the country, BBS is a state-funded rival competing unfairly in the small local advertising market (Choden, 2010). Bureaucrats see the BBS as a government-owned entity that can be used at will to promote their agencies and institutions on one hand and as a dangerous media that might report damaging stories about them on the other.

What is shown by these discussions surrounding the status of BBS is the need to clarify exactly where the BBS stands. The Kuensel editorial mentioned above, notes “such clarity is becoming necessary so that an enabling environment is created for the media to serve the people, the primary purpose for which it exists” (Wangdi, 2010). In what’s seen as a positive development, during another parliamentary debate on the status of BBS in 2014, the then government promised to make BBS a public service broadcaster (Dema, 2014). It is in light of these on-going developments that this study has been carried out. How can the BBS, Bhutan’s national public radio and television, be transformed into a true and independent public service broadcaster? How can BBS maintain its independence from the government even as it continues to be funded by the state?

## **Origins of BBS**

The BBS came into being as an amateur radio station in 1973, with just a half-hour transmission of news and music on Sundays, in the Bhutanese capital of Thimphu (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005; Servaes, 1994; Smith, 2012; Wangchuk, 2008). The radio service was an initiative of a group of volunteers called the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB). Consequently, it was named as Radio NYAB. Six years later, Radio NYAB was

taken under the wing of the then Department of Information of the Ministry of Communications. That's when Radio NYAB became a full-fledged public service radio (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005; Smith, 2012). In 1986, it was renamed as the Bhutan Broadcasting Service.

An important historic development in the history of Bhutanese media took place in 1999. It was the year BBS launched its television service with a daily one-hour broadcast in Dzongkha and English, just in the capital city, Thimphu (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005; Smith, 2012). In February 2006, BBS TV went nationwide when it launched its satellite television service. The switch to satellite broadcasting has made BBS service available in more than 40 Asian countries (Lhamo & Oyama, 2015). In 2012, the BBS launched its second television channel, BBS2. BBS TV1 broadcasts news and current affairs programmes in Dzongkha and English, while BBS2 broadcasts educational and entertainment programmes 24/7. BBS Radio also has two channels. Channel 1 broadcasts news and programmes in the national language, while channel 2 broadcasts news and programmes in English and two major local dialects: Tshanglakha, a language widely spoken in the east of the country; and Lhotsamkha, a language spoken by people in the south of the country.

### **Development Communication Role of BBS**

Since its establishment, BBS has played varying important roles. It started as a developmental tool, disseminating the government's plans, policies and objectives to the people (Dema & Knight, 2011; Dorji & Pek, 2005; Servaes, 1994; Tshong, 1994). Its role diversified after it was delinked from the government and declared as an autonomous corporation, in 1992. Apart from providing government oriented news on development activities and issues, the role of BBS expanded to providing other social, political and economic news (Tshong, 1994). The role of BBS became even more pronounced when Bhutan embarked on a journey to become a parliamentary democracy, in 2008. It had to inform and educate people about the electoral processes to enable them to make informed decisions. As Bhutan continues to strengthen its fledgling democratic institutions, BBS continues to play an important role by providing a public sphere for debates and discussions

on a wide range of issues ranging from social to political, economic, environment, culture, sports, health, politics, crime, corruption and youth and women related issues.

Today, BBS TV and Radio are an important and trusted source of news and information, particularly for the country's rural population: a status that is undisputed and unrivalled. Government sectors such as health, education and agriculture rely on radio to reach people in the remote pockets of the nation with vital information. There are scores of newspapers, but many of them are in English and, therefore, serve the bureaucracy and the literate lot only (Dorji & Pek, 2005). Almost half of the country's population of a little over 700,000 people are illiterate and a majority of them live in the remote pockets. For these people, BBS is their only source of local and national news and information (Wangchuk, 2008).

### **Media Impact Studies**

According to the Bhutan Information and Media Impact Studies (MIS), commissioned by the Ministry of Information and Communications to study the pattern of media and information consumption and to examine the impacts of media in the country, BBS is the main source of news. The MIS, which Avieson (2015) and McCluskey (2009) describe as a significant piece of literature on the state of Bhutanese media, found BBS Radio and TV to be the most preferred media in the country. BBS TV was the most popular form of media, followed by Bhutanese radio. The same study found BBS Radio and TV to be one of the most trusted media, with 64% of the study respondents describing its news and programming content as credible. BBS Radio also has the biggest reach, followed by BBS TV (McCluskey, 2009; Pek, 2013). Today, BBS is in the process of strengthening its public service image. Its mission is to become a public service broadcaster of international standing. How is BBS faring in terms of its quest to become a true public service broadcaster? What challenges lie ahead of it? These are the issues to which this study turns its attention next.

Bhutan's mainstream media landscape is a diverse one, consisting of public, private and community media. In terms of number, Bhutan now has a total of eleven newspapers of which seven are published in English and the other four are in the national language,

Dzongkha (Bhutan Media Foundation, 2014). From just one radio station up until 2005, the country, as of 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019, has ten radio stations- five FM and five Community and Campus. While the growth of print media has surpassed that of both radio and TV in terms of number, radio and television continue to lead in terms of their reach and impact (*Media Baseline Study*, 2012; Pek, 2013). The Bhutanese media traditionally has been seen as a development catalyst. Today, the media are critical players in the country's new political system.

### **Broadcasting Landscape**

Bhutan's experience in broadcasting is unique, compared to those in many other countries. One thing that sets BBS apart is the fact that it is the only television channel broadcasting from the Bhutanese soil. Unlike PSBs in other countries that operate along with scores of private and commercial broadcasters, BBS enjoys an absolute monopoly. However, that does not mean BBS is free from competition. In fact, right from the beginning, BBS had to compete with scores of international channels transmitting endless foreign programming. When Bhutan introduced television in 1999, more than 40 foreign channels invaded the homes of Bhutanese (McCluskey, 2009; McDonald, 2004; Rapten, 2001; Wangchuk, 2006). The sudden flood of foreign TV channels raised concerns, with many describing it as a direct onslaught on Bhutanese culture and traditions. Scholars, teachers and newspaper editorials debated the pros and cons of television (Linthicum, 2007).

Writing about the negative impacts of television in urban Bhutan, Rapten (2001:192&193) noted "it has encouraged adoption of western lifestyles of conspicuous consumption, erosion of native values and languages and changed their interactions with family and neighbours. It has also allowed foreign culture to penetrate and influence traditional cultural practices". In the same vein, McDonald (2004:68) concluded, "the arrival of 45 channels of commercial television symbolized the beginning of the end for Bhutan's unique identity and culture".

Neutralising the impacts of global media is one of the main challenges of the Bhutanese media (Wangchuk, 2006). The global media, if left unchecked and not counterbalanced with

adequate local programming, would do irreparable damage to Bhutan's age-old culture and traditions. Noting global media as an inevitable part of globalisation, Wangchuk (2006) argues that staying local is the key to survival. Being local is what will give Bhutanese media an identity that is its own and is unique to suit the local needs.

Whether the impact of exposing the Bhutanese people to commercial channels has been good or bad is certainly a debatable issue. What is certain is that the Bhutanese are exposed to foreign content more than they are to local content. BBS TV, introduced at the same time as the cable television stations, had to counter the uneven flow of global media into the country, which it still tries to do. Right from its inception, one of the main roles of the BBS has been to offset the dilution of Bhutanese culture, traditions and values caused by the inundation of international TV channels within the Bhutanese market and homes. It is from this view that a broadcaster that offers programming rich in local content is deemed essential.

### **Call for Innovation and Diversity in Programming**

A former BBS anchor, producer and news manager, Tshewang Dendup says the BBS has been able to build its PSB image through “years of care and deliberate planning to avoid sensationalism and tabloid journalism.” A member of parliament from the country's opposition party credits BBS for its role in the nation building.

BBS has played critical role in nation building particularly by fostering common understanding and collective identity (D. Wangdi, 2016)<sup>1</sup>.

However, they and others agree that if BBS is to continue its public service role, it must strive towards providing more innovative and attractive news and programming. Dorji

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<sup>1</sup> Email interview with author, November 10, 2016

Wangchuk, a former BBS manager, described the current BBS programming as being mediocre in quality and professionalism. He states:

Attracting viewers and fulfilling the PSB mandates need not be a choice of one over the other. Both can be achieved with innovative, well-researched and inclusive programming carried out with certain professional standards (D. Wangchuk,2016)<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly, another former BBS manager and editor, Kesang, said that the broadcaster must give up its ‘love for status quo’ and initiate innovative programmes.

BBS must set and maintain national technical and production standards in broadcasting. It must produce increased programming for children and youth, commission independent programmes and encourage local productions (Kesang,2016)<sup>3</sup>.

There is an emphasis on youth and children’s programming. A media consultant and expert, Sok Sain Pek Dorij, who has been championing for PSB in Bhutan said.

Considering half the population of Bhutan is youth, the youth programming deserves more thought and planning and improvement. The reality is that our youth watch other channels, which are deemed more interesting, whilst our own local TV programmes seem to be much less interesting and with less reach (since the stations are run with limited funding). So, we’re losing a generation of Bhutanese viewers and listeners (S.S.P. Dorji,2016)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Email interview with author, October 24, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Email interview with author, September 5, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Email interview with author, November 1, 2016.

Former anchor, producer and manager of BBS, Tshewang Dendup blames the mediocre programmes on lack of trained professionals. Most of the staff members, both in the news and production areas, are trained on the job.

The lack of qualified professionals who can lead the newsroom and production crews means that only a few ends up shouldering the major share of work, which negatively impacts upon their performance. BBS must train its reporters, producers, editors and camerapersons, not just in the field of journalism but also in “management, leadership and enterprise (T. Dendup, 2016)<sup>5</sup>.

Writing about the challenge of public service broadcasting in the Asia and the Pacific, Leonard (1999) argues that one of the main challenges is remaining viable in a multi-channel age by ensuring its programming is “watched or listened to by the maximum number of viewers and listeners”. There was a time when PSBs held a captive audience. Regardless of whether their programming was good or bad, people watched and listened to because there was no other choice. This is no longer the case. People now have plenty of choice and if PSBs don’t step up, audience will switch to other channels. In this light, if BBS does not want to lose its audience, it must ensure its programming is good and attractive enough to keep the audience glued to it.

In the words of the former BBS anchor, producer and manager, “BBS occupies a central place in the psyche of Bhutanese” when discussing media in Bhutan:

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<sup>5</sup> Email interview with author, August 8, 2016.

The vast majority of Bhutanese, especially the illiterate and those living in the rural areas, hold the BBS in high esteem when it comes to authenticity and credibility (T. Dendup,2016)<sup>6</sup>.

While being a fledgling broadcaster, and the only one against a flood of foreign channels, presents numerous challenges, it also provides opportunities. BBS has the advantage of learning lessons from the vast global experience in public service broadcasting. The media expert and consultant states:

There's opportunity still for PSB in Bhutan to set the kind of standards that other countries have not been able to due to fierce competition from market-driven channels. We can still design programming that will inspire learning, inspire citizenship, inspire action for Bhutanese to become good citizens of Bhutan and global citizens (S.S.P. Dorji,2016)<sup>7</sup>.

As Bhutan undergoes this crucial phase of deciding the fate of public service broadcasting in Bhutan, what both BBS and the Bhutanese government must bear in mind is that Bhutan is a unique country with very different needs and conditions. As the General Manager of BBS Radio Kaka Tshering puts it for a small and mountainous country with a small economy and its people living in sparsely populated villages separated by mountains, gorges and fast flowing rivers, meeting their information needs is costly. In his view, only a public service broadcaster can ensure the information needs of all citizens are met.

Echoing similar views, the media consultant and expert stated that BBS should inform, educate and entertain the Bhutanese audience:

In a country where the reach of education is still a priority and with the growing influence of globalisation, a small country like Bhutan

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<sup>6</sup> Email interview with author, August 8, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Email, interview with author, November 1, 2016

has to provide public service broadcasting that will educate citizens on what's happening across the country. This is especially important since many newspapers provide inadequate reporting on Bhutan and all our diversity across the 20 districts (S.S.P. Dorji,2016)<sup>8</sup>.

Emphasising the important role of PSB within the public sphere, she warns that broadcasting in Bhutan must stay away from giving in to market forces completely. If not, it will lose its “ability to meet all the aspirations and needs of the public” and the possibility of providing programmes in the “public interest”.

While technological changes are sweeping the world, changing the broadcasting face of and situation in many countries, radio and television will continue to remain an important media for a developing country like Bhutan particularly for its rural and illiterate population. Ultimately, given Bhutan's current social, economic and political situation, any investments made into strengthening the country's public service broadcaster would bring considerable benefits for Bhutan and its people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The global debates on whether there still is a place for public service broadcasting in the changing media landscape is continuing. Bhutan, on the contrary, is working towards strengthening its public service broadcaster. There are compelling reasons why Bhutan is or should seek to strengthen BBS, its public service broadcaster. First, it is undeniably an important source of news and information for the Bhutanese audience. Second, it plays an ever more critical role in strengthening the country's nascent democracy by providing the public a platform to voice their concerns and debate and discuss various social, political, cultural and economic issues. Third, as the only local or national TV channel, it plays a

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with author, November 1, 2016

crucial role in counterbalancing the flood of foreign programming from more than 50 international channels available in the country.

Nevertheless, for Bhutan to be able to effectively harness the potentials of its public service broadcasting in achieving its goals of informing, educating and entertaining the Bhutanese audiences, it must, first of all, take care of the many challenges that lie ahead of it. The first and the most important step, perhaps is freeing itself from any direct or indirect government control. It must be noted that while BBS functions with a great level of independence, it is not completely free. For instance, it's the government that still decides who gets to become its managing director and board members. Another critical step would be ensuring it has access to an independent and adequate funding source. Being publicly funded is essential for its autonomy. Improving the quality of its programming is another area that needs equal attention. It must strive to provide programming that appeals to every Bhutanese from all walks of life.

Whether or not the BBS would be able to achieve its goal to become a credible public service broadcaster would largely depend on how soon and well it would be able to overcome these challenges. Much of these challenges can be solved by putting in place an independent law or a regulatory framework that clearly defines the concept of public service broadcasting in the Bhutanese context, how should it be governed and funded, and what role should it play in the Bhutanese society.

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\* Dechen Wangmo is a former Senior Editor and Anchor with the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS). She is now a Communications Analyst with UNDP Bhutan.

\* Dr. Thomas Jayaprakash Yesudhasan is lecturer at the Department of Journalism, School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, Australia.