The Need for Critical Thinking Against a Tide of Social Media

Tshering Eudön

While Tshering Eudön bases her thought piece on her own experience with Facebook, the Druk Journal believes that it is relevant to all Bhutanese wading through the social media landscape.

I am a Bhutanese student in my late 20s currently working towards a Masters degree in Public Administration (MPA) in the United States (US). I also work to support myself in the university where I study. In the last two years, I have been learning and thinking about the nature of large bureaucracies, public systems and policy.

Those thoughts have lately become largely focused on the US presidential election process that started last year. As an international student, it has been an incredible experience being here in the country as it was taking place. In the aftermath of a very sobering election, I reflect back on some observations I've made of what I believe to be valuable lessons for a young democracy such as our own.

The Dangers of Misinformation Spread on Facebook

It was only in the last year that I began thinking about how social media can lead to increasing political polarisation. When I speak of social media in this case, I am only referring to Facebook because it is the platform that I am most familiar with. I don't think I can really speak about other platforms although I know that Twitter is an active site for Bhutanese political discussion.

While growing American distrust of their mainstream media has led to disillusioned citizens searching for alternative sources to inform themselves, I don't know that this is really the case back home. In Bhutan, I don't think that it is so much distrust of the mainstream media, but rather the lack of media coverage that leads people to sites like Facebook in search of information.

There are high profile debates, and even court cases, being discussed in the social media because of inadequate coverage by the mainstream media. Not being in

Bhutan, I feel I cannot comment on how much Bhutanese trust or distrust our mainstream media. I don't think the "atmosphere" on Facebook, a site with unlimited and unfiltered amounts of raw information, can be used as a basis to evaluate the attitudes that youth have in reality back home.

In the US, Facebook has given impetus to alternative media groups or groups that claim to provide news. "Echo chambers" on Facebook encourage users to view, 'like' and follow only those sources or pages that already agree with their points of view. There are limited presentations of opposing viewpoints and there are limited challenges to one's opinions. The lack of alternative viewpoints then progressively narrows a user's perspective on various issues making them less open to opposing viewpoints, feeding one's ego as they consistently reaffirm that their views are "right" and others are "wrong".

After the 2016 US election, various articles appeared in the mainstream media on how misinformation on Facebook, especially through fake news media sites, had impacted the outcome. The New York Times covered a story on this for example. It was about a fake news website started by an unemployed 22 year-old Georgian student, who published pro-Trump and anti-Clinton stories because it guaranteed him higher income from ads. His income was not as rewarding when he published pro-Clinton stories. Some of these stories were true, some were highly exaggerated, and others were completely false. This is disturbing because a Pew Research study in May found that, out of the 67 percent of American adults who use Facebook, 44 percent of them get their news from the site.

We can mitigate this in Bhutan through (social) media literacy. For me this is why civil society organisations are so important because they can help make our youth media-literate, since this does not exist in the formal education system. Furthermore, this US election has shown me that media literacy needs to be extended to our adult population as well, or to any citizen who has access to and uses the Internet.

The Need for a Media Literate Citizenry

I have observed that some of my Facebook friends from various countries (myself included) are unwilling to accept opposing viewpoints online. This is not to accuse them of bias because we are all susceptible to it. Halfway through the US elections last year, I took a step back from reading too much into the content that appears on my own Facebook feed because I was beginning to align myself further and further to the American left, and becoming less and less open to hearing what the right had

to say. Because of my own opinions, I observed that my feed too leaned more in one direction than the other. I participated in American political polarisation by only 'liking' and following pages that seemed to take the same stand as me on ideas or issues I believed I was passionate about.

Once I became aware of this, I tried to unfollow such pages or at least tried to balance my Facebook feed out by following pages offering alternative viewpoints, or unfollowing pages I felt were "too biased" altogether. I have since tried to constantly be aware of bias, tried not let my preconceived notions take me over, and to have the facts or objectivity as my top priority when reading any article. It is still very hard though and I still tend to follow news media from outlets that I lean more towards.

I feel that if individuals are not consciously thinking about and critically assessing their media diet, it can be very harmful to voting citizens because the content and articles that they see could largely only continue to reaffirm the thoughts and ideas that they already have, not exposing them to alternative viewpoints. Political polarisation serves democracy negatively when a society already has the tendency to be polarised. I believe this tendency for polarisation is determined by factors such as a lack of civic education and critical thinking ability in the general population.

The US is supposedly an older democracy. The foundational or framing challenges that Bhutan is going through as a young democracy is a collective experience that American political discourse has already experienced over 200 years. We cannot move forward without the ability to embrace positive change, and we need civic education, media literacy and critical thinking skills to do this. I believe that it is precisely the lack of these that have deeply and painfully divided America.

Now more than ever, as part of the generation that grew up with the Internet, I believe it is the role of all young Bhutanese to become media literate in a world that is constantly bombarding us with overwhelming amounts of raw information. We need to learn to intelligently navigate through the sea of mostly trash, and to be able to critically assess information with multiple viewpoints to eventually make our own judgments to the best of our abilities.

Maybe the role of the young generation is to help make the path to change less painful for members of society who are more fearful and resistant. I believe one of the strengths of youth has always been the ability to embrace change more fluidly and to adapt to globalisation. As the satirical news writer, Bhutan Pundit, who has also recently disclosed his identity for the sake of credibility, put it, "...art and culture

are evolving every day. In the past, we never wore underwear; now we do… things evolve for betterment without necessarily changing our identity".

The Importance of Critical Thinking

I only learned to think critically in college. I had some inspiring teachers growing up in the Bhutanese public school system and have wonderful parents who made sure that our home environment growing up was always one in which curiosity and learning were encouraged. However, my interest in knowledge, especially in the humanities, was only honed during my first year of college. It was not so much the exposure to subject matter that I was interested in, but more the teaching methods of one particular English professor who taught me HOW to think.

Perhaps part of the reason critical thinking has not traditionally been encouraged in our country is because thinking critically means questioning everything, including authority. Going against the tide and challenging notions that have never been challenged can be a difficult experience for cultures, especially young democracies. A teacher trained under a system that values student obedience and discourages questioning the factual or educational value of subject matter, will certainly struggle with a student who challenges information laid out in a textbook. But a child's curiosity for knowledge must always be encouraged.

Unfortunately, this can often be perceived as disrespecting or undermining the authority of the teacher or the person in the position of authority. In the bigger picture, it can be perceived as a direct threat to the status quo. It is this kind of change that incites fear in people who have known and prefer this way of life.

I believe it is the duty of Bhutanese youth to communicate to our elders that this kind of change does not have to be negative, but that it will in fact help our society to progress and position ourselves better in the world. Positive change does not mean that we must abandon our identity and way of life, it means we adapt to new global challenges and actually strengthen our collective identity. Being a traditionally oral society, we Bhutanese have perhaps historically been predisposed to a more disadvantaged position in that the oral environment of spreading information encouraged gossip.

However, the advent of echo chambers and fake news on sites like Facebook shows us that, more than ever, we need to swim against the tide to not just be informed, but to be well informed and not misinformed. We cannot do this without critical

thinking and media literacy. And we cannot ignore this if we want to become a true participatory democracy. The ideal democracy demands a highly educated citizenry that is consistently informing itself and participating actively in political life. To me this is a utopian ideal because it would be so incredibly difficult to get everyone to participate so actively. Still, we must continuously work towards this goal and try our best.

I read that a young participant at a Druk Journal Conversation once argued that Bhutanese youth do not have a say in our collective future, because it has already been decided for us by our elders in the establishment. Reading this immediately reminded me of what I saw on TV right after the Brexit vote, where a few British youths were saying in an interview that they felt cheated and felt like their future had been stolen from them by the older generation who overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union (EU). This being said there were also many youths who apparently voted to leave the EU, only to google "What is the EU?" the next day, later regretting their decision when they finally learned the implications of their vote.

This to me is indicative of two issues regarding youth—the issue of apathy, and the generation gap between youth and the older generation who are currently running the world. This is a major indicator of the need for youth to work to bridge the generational gap in Bhutan. We are more responsible than our older counterparts, because we perhaps have a better understanding of globalisation as we were born into the global culture. Change when done right will help strengthen our cultural values and collective identity. A major strength of Bhutanese cultural tradition is the value we place on our community bond and vitality. We have to work together to preserve our sense of community and identity in the face of globalisation because Bhutanese are strongest when we support each other and move forward together.

Voicing Your Views in a Negative Environment

I confess that I do not try my best as a Bhutanese citizen, and here are my reasons. As much as I value the platform of social media and the opportunity of coming of age in democratic Bhutan, I am still very hesitant about voicing my opinions publicly. For a healthy democracy to thrive, a citizen must be able to actively stay informed and engage in debate. I believe I do engage in a little of the former but not much of the latter. I do not personally contribute positively to the dialogue that we need to move forward as a nation.

To all those Bhutanese who have expressed themselves and voiced their opinions on the public stage, and especially to those Bhutanese who have done so with grace, respect and consideration of others feelings, I applaud you and am grateful for your contributions. I admire you because I myself am afraid to do it. I fear the backlash or public outrage that voicing my opinions publicly may cause. I fear cyber-bullying. It is not even because I believe my opinions to be very controversial, it is just that social media has that nasty quality that can incite responses in the form of horrible personal attacks and negative judgment from people. Does this mean that one must be "thick-skinned" or very tough to voice their opinions online and stand by them? I think so.

I am a Millennial and the most common communication platform for my generation is the Internet. It is a space where one's intentions can be completely misconstrued. I consider myself a moderate liberal and I don't think that this is a radically different position from many in my generation. I believe I do have similar social and political beliefs to my childhood friends with whom I grew up.

However, as a member of a small and close-knit society, I feel hesitant to say anything because I am afraid that if it is not received well by Bhutanese social media even my family may pay the price through social stigmatisation. It is hard for me to accept this. I definitely think there needs to be change so that people feel more encouraged, but I don't know what the answer is.

There is something about the Internet that sometimes seems to bring out the worst in people. I have often heard the argument of the loss of empathy and increase in cruelty because it is a virtual world where you can vent all your frustrations. I feel it's the modern day equivalent of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* of life with the Internet being a nasty state of nature where everyone is only out for themselves. But it is important to note that I am by no means suggesting that the Internet should be regulated through restrictions and regulations so that people don't tear each other apart. There is a reason that state-mandated controls on free speech on the Internet remind us of countries often associated with totalitarianism, such as Russia, China and North Korea.

Instead, here again, I believe the answer is (social) media literacy and critical thinking. Such are the tools that will help youth and citizens self-regulate in ways in which free speech is not limited, but practised responsibly.

Concluding Thoughts

Facebook has really shown me how a single topic or story can be covered in completely opposing ways. This year has been a stark reminder to me of the important work civil society organisations are doing back home to help Bhutanese learn the importance of not letting your political views dictate the way you treat others who disagree with you. In the past year, I have seen how opposing viewpoints can cause rifts and divide society. To me, this is the most important reminder of the value of civility and basic decency in politics and in civic life. It entails the importance of engaging in debate without making personal attacks and by treating your opponent with respect.

At the end of the day, we should go home to our families without ill-will towards our political and ideological opponents, but with the knowledge that even if you think those people have some wacky ideas, it does not mean that they are horrible people and that you are a better person. In a democracy, because we are entitled to more rights and freedoms than is afforded by other forms of government, we tend to forget that freedom comes with responsibility. My freedom ends the moment it infringes on another's freedom. As Rousseau said: "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains".

And it is this idea of a civil society that people need to respect each other in order to live in peace and harmony. The frequent practice of actually listening to an opposing viewpoint, respecting the individual, and trying to see things from a different perspective, can help build tolerance, empathy and humility.