AI and Bhutanese Journalism: Towards a Human-Centred Framework

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence is reshaping journalism across the world. In Bhutan, this change is unfolding within a small and fragile media ecosystem. The country has moved rapidly from oral communication traditions to digital and platform-based communication without passing through a print-dominant phase.

Today, Bhutanese journalism faces declining advertising revenue, shrinking newsroom capacity, weak access to information, self-censorship, declining press freedom indicators and growing dependence on digital platforms.

This article argues that it is imperative that we understand AI not as a technological tool for newsroom efficiency but as a force entering an already constrained democratic communication environment.

While AI provides clear benefits of improved efficiency and larger audience reach, it may also increase the circulation of low-cost, repetitive and synthetic content if it is used without strong editorial oversight. In such a context, Bhutan may appear information-rich while becoming weaker in original reporting.

Drawing on the ideas of the "Gutenberg Parenthesis", the platform society and human-centred journalism, the article examines how AI interacts with Bhutan's compressed media transition and fragile reporting structures. It proposes a practical framework for Bhutanese newsrooms that distinguishes between appropriate, cautionary, and high-risk uses of AI. The framework emphasises human-in-the-loop systems, newsroom-level AI guidelines, and transparency in AI-assisted content.

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Introduction: AI and the Future of Journalism in Bhutan

Generative artificial intelligence is changing various aspects of journalism including the workflow, production, distribution, verification and audience engagement across the world. According to Newman (2024), multiple AI tools are being used in newsrooms to reduce repetitive work (captions, subtitles, content adaptation) and produce multilingual and platform-ready content through transcription, translation, and summarisation.

AI raises important ethical, professional, and democratic questions for journalism. With the danger of the internet being flooded by synthetic content, Newman (2024) urges journalists and news organisations to rethink their role. Their value lies not only in producing content, but in verifying information, explaining context, and building trust with audiences.

Globally, there are concerns that synthetic content may carry bias, hallucinated details and fabricated claims. These risks affect accuracy, transparency, accountability and public trust (Schiffrin, 2024).

These concerns matter in Bhutan because AI is entering a small media ecosystem already under pressure. Many of these pressures are not unique to Bhutan. What makes the Bhutanese case distinct is the small size of the media market, limited private advertising, dependence on government advertising, close social networks and a short print history.

Bhutan's Constitution provides formal protection for democratic communication. Yet the exercise of these rights is shaped by institutional access, self-censorship, financial pressures, and the small-society context.

Self-censorship remains a concern linked to a small society syndrome and the fear of backlash (Bhutan Media Foundation, 2023; Journalists' Association of Bhutan, 2025). Financial instability has also weakened newspapers, and most publications now depend on digital platforms like Facebook, Youtube, Tiktok, and messaging groups to reach audiences.

The AI debate must take into account these issues while acknowledging that a small media ecosystem can benefit through reducing grunt work (and the accompanying cost of news production), improving accessibility (multilingual content) and engaging storytelling formats. Yet it can also

intensify existing weaknesses if it is used mainly to produce summaries, reposts, low-cost explainers and synthetic content.

This article examines AI in Bhutanese journalism as part of a wider concern about democratic communication, rather than as a narrow issue of technological adoption. It draws on three ideas: The "Gutenberg Parenthesis", which helps explain Bhutan's compressed transition from oral communication to platform-based digital culture (Sauerberg, 2009); the "platform society", which shows how digital platforms shape the production, circulation and visibility of information (van Dijck et al., 2018); and a human-centred view of journalism, which sees reporting as essential to democratic communication.

The article argues that Bhutan's AI future should keep the human reporter at the centre. AI may support journalism, but it should not replace field-based reporting, contextual understanding or editorial judgement.

The article also proposes a practical framework for Bhutanese newsrooms which distinguishes between appropriate, cautionary, and high-risk uses of AI. It emphasises human-in-the-loop systems, newsroom-level AI guidelines and transparency in AI-assisted content. The aim is to ensure that technological efficiency strengthens, rather than weakens, public-interest journalism in Bhutan.

From Oral Society to Platform Culture

Bhutan's media has followed a compressed path, leapfrogging from oral communication to online platforms. According to Avieson (2015), stories, religious teachings, public messages and cultural knowledge moved through spoken traditions, monasteries, community gatherings and interpersonal networks.

Unlike western societies, literature and writing were not deeply institutionalised in Bhutan. This meant that newspapers did not have centuries to shape political debate and public life. Television and internet entered Bhutan in 1999 under the modernisation reforms of the fourth King (Dema, 2021), leading to a set of rapid changes.

Mobile phones (114 per cent of the total population), internet access (88.4 per cent) and social media platforms (60.8 per cent) have become part of everyday life within a relatively short period (Kemp, 2025). This led to the growth of public communication through Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, messaging applications and online platforms. These spaces appealed especially to younger audiences because they were immediate, interactive, and conversational.

This transition can be understood through the idea of the "Gutenberg Parenthesis". Sauerberg's idea (2009) describes print as one phase in the longer movement from oral and manuscript cultures to digital communication. On the other hand, Bhutan's experience was shorter and more compressed. The country moved from oral traditions into television, internet and mobile communication without passing through a print-dominant period.

This has an implication for journalism. In countries with a print history, newspapers became strong public institutions before the arrival of digital platforms. But in Bhutan, newspapers have remained vulnerable due to financial and human resource constraints and a socio-political environment which encourages a cautious and non-confrontational style of journalism.

By contrast, digital platforms rapidly became major spaces for public visibility and social commentary. This shift can also be read through the idea of the "platform society", where platforms organise public communication and influence visibility (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In Bhutan, this platform shift has created new opportunities for communication. More people can share views, raise concerns, circulate local information and participate in public conversations. In some cases, the relative anonymity of social media has allowed users to discuss sensitive issues more openly.

Digital spaces have also allowed news organisations to reach audiences beyond print circulation, with many news organisations now depending heavily on social media accounts and online platforms to distribute their stories.

At the same time, platform-based communication has changed the conditions under which journalism operates. Digital platforms do not simply distribute news. They shape what becomes visible, what circulates widely and how audiences engage with public issues (van Dijck et al., 2018). For news organisations, this has created both reach and dependency.

Platforms allow even small media organisations to reach wider audiences, but they also make visibility dependent on multiple factors (algorithms, engagement metrics, and platform rules) (Bell and Owen, 2017; Nielsen and Ganter, 2018). A story that travels widely is not always the story that has been most carefully reported. Public attention can move quickly from one issue to another, with audience engagement becoming an important measure of value. News, opinion, entertainment, and personal commentary often appear together in the same digital feed. For resource-starved newsrooms, this environment creates opportunity and pressure at the same time.

The arrival of generative AI must be understood within this longer transition. AI is entering a small media environment already shaped by oral traditions, a short print phase, rapid digitalisation, and growing platform dependence. It is not being added to a stable media system with strong reporting institutions and deep financial reserves.

This raises an important question: How will AI interact with a communication culture that has moved so quickly from oral exchange to social media visibility? Protecting original reporting becomes especially important as it can provide verification and context in a fast-moving information environment.

Fragile Journalism and the Shrinking Space for Original Reporting

Bhutan's journalism ecosystem remains small and structurally fragile. The democratic transition of 2008 encouraged the growth of newspapers, radio stations and digital news platforms. At its peak, in 2013, the country had 12 newspapers (Ministry of Information and Communications [MoIC], 2013). By 2026, this had fallen to six.

With limited private enterprise and a small, relatively closed economy, journalism in Bhutan has a weak economic base. Private media organisations

depend on government advertisements, subsidies, donor-supported projects or institutional support (Bhutan Media Foundation [BMF], 2023; Journalists' Association of Bhutan [JAB], 2025; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC], 2014).

This dependence affects sustainability and shapes editorial confidence. The JAB Study 2025 and a report by the National Council's Social and Cultural Affairs Committee 2024 note that government austerity measures and the shift of public notices to electronic procurement systems have reduced important revenue streams for private media (JAB, 2025; Dolkar, 2024).

The loss of regional reporting matters because stories from outside Thimphu may become less visible, weakening journalism's connection with grassroots realities.

These pressures are visible in media systems around the world, but their effects are sharper in Bhutan because the market is small and the institutional base of journalism is thin. As of June 2026, Bhutan does not have a single newspaper with a daily hard-copy circulation.

Kuensel, the country's largest newspaper, stopped daily print production in January 2026 and shifted to a biweekly print schedule to reduce losses (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2026). It continues to publish through online platforms. This does not mean journalism has disappeared. It does, however, indicate a further weakening of the institutional base of print journalism. It also shows how deeply news distribution now depends on digital platforms.

Bhutan's Constitution provides clear support for media freedom. Article 7(2) guarantees freedom of speech, opinion and expression; Article 7(3) recognises the right to information; and Article 7(5) protects freedom of the press, radio, television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic media.

However, the practical exercise of these rights remains shaped by institutional access, legal uncertainty, self-censorship and the small-society context. This tension between formal protection and everyday practice is also suggested by Bhutan's low Press Freedom Index rankings. In 2026, Reporters Without Borders ranked Bhutan 150th out of 180 countries

(Reporters Without Borders, 2026). Such rankings should not be read as the full story of a country's media system, but they are useful indicators of the political, legal, economic and sociocultural conditions that affect how freely journalists can work.

The situation has been made more difficult by a shortage of experienced journalists. More than 60 percent of senior journalists reportedly left the profession between 2021 and 2023, leaving many newsrooms with younger and less experienced staff (Rinzin, 2023). This loss of experience can weaken editorial judgement, investigative capacity, and the media's ability to support democratic accountability.

Access to information is related to press freedom, but it is not the same as press freedom. It concerns whether journalists and citizens can obtain timely and reliable information from public institutions. Bhutanese journalists often struggle to get information, verify facts and examine policy decisions as some regulations and administrative practices discourage openness (BMF, 2023), and the Right to Information Bill remains stalled (JAB, 2026). The existence of strict defamation laws and limited legal transparency also discourages critical reporting.

Self-censorship is widespread in the close-knit society, with 84 percent journalists reporting that they practise it (BMF, 2023). This does not mean that Bhutanese journalism does not question institutions or authority. Rather, such questioning often takes a measured and non-confrontational form, shaped by professional caution and the fear of backlash.

This caution is not abstract. BMF (2023) reports that 39 percent of journalists had experienced insult, abuse or hate speech, while 25 percent had experienced trolling on social media. The study also found that only 10 percent of journalists felt comfortable doing investigative stories, while only three per cent actually executed them. Safety and security were among the concerns.

This creates a media environment where public-interest journalism exists, but is constrained by limited time, newsroom capacity, editorial confidence, financial stability and access to reliable information, despite the constitutional protection given to free expression, information rights and media freedom.

Digital media has partly changed this situation. Influencers, creators, and social media pages now play a visible role in raising awareness, mobilising attention and making issues more accessible. However, influencer-driven communication does not necessarily involve hard public-interest reporting. Much of it focuses on seeking information and entertainment (BMF, 2021). These forms are part of the wider communication ecosystem, but they cannot fully replace journalism.

The key concern, therefore, is the shrinking space for original reporting, which is expensive and requires travel, interviews, document review, source-building, verification and editorial time. It also requires professional courage. In a fragile media system, this work becomes difficult to sustain.

Many social media pages, creators, aggregators and AI systems draw on information first produced by professional newsrooms. Digital platforms may amplify and reinterpret public issues, but legacy and mainstream media often remain important producers of original reporting and agenda-setting information (Messner and DiStaso, 2008; Chadwick, 2013). When original reporting declines, the wider information ecosystem also becomes weaker. If fewer journalists are gathering information from the field, there is less reliable material for others to interpret, discuss or adapt.

This point is central to the AI debate. Generative AI can produce polished text, summaries, headlines and explainers, but it cannot replace field presence, source-building, document checking, local context and difficult questioning.

If Bhutan's pool of original reporting continues to shrink, AI may amplify repetition rather than insight. It may help circulate information without deepening public understanding. The challenge, therefore, is not only digital adaptation but the protection of reporting capacity. AI can support newsrooms, but it cannot solve weak access to information, revenue decline or self-censorship on its own. Without investment in journalists, legal clarity, public access to information and editorial independence, technological efficiency may produce more content without strengthening journalism.

When Information Grows but Reporting Shrinks

The use of artificial intelligence in journalism is now well documented. Newsrooms across the world are using AI for content generation and scaling, investigative data analysis, real-time newsgathering, audience personalisation and content adaptation.

The American magazine, TIME, for example, has introduced TIME AI (an innovative platform in collaboration with Scale AI) to offer summaries, translation, audio and more personalised reader interaction with its journalism (Howard, 2024). In local journalism, UK regional publisher Newsquest and other publishers have used AI to draft stories from press releases, meeting notes and public documents, with reporters expected to check and edit the output before publication (Bruell, 2026). In India, Aaj Tak introduced *Sana*, an AI-powered news anchor designed to deliver daily multilingual news updates, showing how AI is being used to scale presentation and audience engagement (IndiaAI, 2023).

These examples show that AI is moving into daily editorial operations and that safeguards matter. Many international publishers have already issued AI-use guidelines, while others are developing them.

These guidelines usually emphasise transparency, human oversight, accountability, disclosure and the preservation of journalistic values (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). This is relevant for Bhutan, where the conversation about introducing AI-use guidelines for newsrooms is picking up steam. The question, therefore, is not whether newsrooms should use AI, but under what editorial rules they should use it.

This is especially important because AI may not always create new reporting. It may also produce amplified versions of existing information. This concern is linked to what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe as information disorder, where false, misleading or harmful information circulates through digital networks. Generative AI can add new layers to this problem because it can produce convincing content at scale. In platform-driven environments, where visibility depends on speed, engagement and constant updates, AI may also increase the pressure to publish faster and more frequently.

Another risk is stylistic. When reporters rely heavily on AI-generated drafts, articles can become long-winded and the voice of the reporter may get obscured. Sourati et al. (2025) found that when large language models are used as writing assistants, they can reduce linguistic diversity and "homogenise" writing styles, preserving broad content but suppressing individuality and stylistic variation. Thus, the judgement, clarity, context and voice which are key aspects of journalism may get impacted, though the outputs may sound polished.

This is why Bhutan risks becoming information-rich but reporting-poor. People may receive more updates, summaries, reactions and opinions, while fewer journalists gather information from the field. Public communication may become more visible, but less grounded and accountable.

Audiences may also find it harder to distinguish between reported information, opinion, promotion, satire, AI-generated text, and synthetic visuals. This can weaken trust and make it easier for powerful actors to dismiss uncomfortable reporting as fake or manipulated.

Creator culture adds another layer to this discussion. Digital creators and influencers can reach younger audiences through formats that are more conversational and accessible than traditional journalism. They can support participation and expression.

However, creator-driven communication does not always involve verification, public-interest investigation or editorial accountability. Bhutan's future media ecosystem may include hybrid forms such as journalist-creators, independent newsletters, podcasts, explainers and community-based reporting. However, their democratic value will depend on whether they are grounded in reporting, fairness, and accountability.

The problem is not AI itself; it is how AI interacts with a fragile media ecosystem. When newsrooms are financially weak, when access to information is difficult and when self-censorship is common, AI may encourage safer and cheaper forms of content. It may also make weak information appear more complete than it is.

For this reason, AI should be placed within clear editorial rules. It should help journalists organise, translate, and analyse information, but it should

not become a substitute for field reporting, source-building, local context and editorial judgement. What matters is not only whether information circulates, but whether society can still see itself clearly through verified, contextual and accountable reporting.

A Practical AI Framework for Bhutanese Newsrooms

AI can bring value to Bhutanese journalism if newsrooms are clear about what they want it to do. In small newsrooms, where journalists often report, write, edit, take photographs and manage social media, AI can reduce repetitive work and create more time for reporting, verification and analysis. Its strongest use is not as a replacement for journalists, but as a newsroom assistant.

The experience of small and regional newsrooms suggests that AI adoption depends less on sophisticated tools than on simple editorial rules. Many news organisations have adopted frameworks based on transparency, human oversight, and accountability.

The Associated Press, for example, permits AI-assisted tasks such as transcription, data processing and content support while requiring human review of published material (Associated Press, 2023). The BBC (2025) emphasises that AI use in editorial work must remain subject to clear editorial standards and accountability. Reuters has adopted guidelines requiring journalists to verify all AI-generated outputs and prohibiting the use of AI-generated content that could mislead audiences (Reuters, n.d.).

Existing newsroom AI guidelines often return to a few basic principles: Disclose significant AI use, maintain human editorial control and prohibit AI-generated fabrications or deceptive content (Schiffrin, 2024; de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). These approaches are particularly relevant for Bhutan, where limited resources make efficiency attractive, but mistakes can quickly damage trust in a small media environment.

Some uses are relatively low-risk and immediately useful for Bhutanese media. AI can help transcribe interviews, speeches, press conferences and public meetings. It can support captions, subtitles and audio formats, making journalism more accessible on mobile and video platforms. It can also help organise archives, search policy documents, clean basic datasets

and identify preliminary patterns in public information. AI-assisted translation may also help newsrooms work between English, Dzongkha and other local languages, provided human editors check tone, accuracy and cultural meaning.

These uses can support public-interest journalism, but they also require caution. AI-generated transcripts may misread names, Dzongkha terms or local references. Summaries may remove context, headlines may exaggerate meaning and data patterns may be misread. Translation tools may miss cultural nuance. For this reason, Bhutanese newsrooms need a simple AI-use framework that distinguishes between appropriate, cautionary and high-risk uses.

Table 1: A Practical AI-Use Framework for Bhutanese Newsrooms

Editorial category	Typical AI uses	Risk level	Oversight required	Newsroom rule
Support	Transcription, translation drafts, captioning, subtitling, archive search, document organisation, data cleaning	Low to moderate	Journalist checks names, figures, local terms and sensitive details	Use AI to save time, not to replace verification.
Review	Summaries, headlines, social media captions, explainers, newsletter drafts, AI-assisted narration from verified scripts, visual prompts, data interpretation	Moderate to high	Editor reviews accuracy, context, tone, fairness and framing	Use AI for drafts, but keep editorial meaning human.
Restrict	Fabricated interviews, invented quotes, AI-written investigations without reporting, deepfake visuals, fake audio, synthetic political content, AI-generated allegations	High	Not suitable for publication	Do not use AI to fabricate reality or mislead audiences.

This framework places human judgement at the centre of AI use. The distinction is simple - routine support tasks can be allowed, AI-assisted content that shapes meaning needs review, and uses that fabricate reality

should be prohibited. The framework is not anti-innovation; it is a way to make innovation responsible and usable for small newsrooms.

Human-in-the-loop systems should guide all AI-assisted journalism. A tool may produce a transcript, summary, draft, caption or data pattern. A journalist or editor must still check it before publication. Final responsibility should always rest with an identifiable human editor or journalist. Newsrooms should also disclose AI use when it materially shapes published content, especially in synthetic visuals, AI-generated narration, translated interviews or automated explainers.

Each newsroom should develop a short AI-use policy. This can be a one- or two-page document stating which uses are allowed, which require editor approval and which are prohibited. It should include rules on disclosure, source protection, data privacy and corrections. Journalists should not enter confidential source information, unpublished documents or sensitive personal data into public AI tools.

Guidelines will work only if journalists know how AI tools fail. Journalists and editors need basic AI literacy. They should know where AI is useful, where it makes mistakes and how it can reproduce bias. This is especially important in Bhutan's linguistic and cultural context, where AI tools may be weaker in Dzongkha and local-language communication. Local meaning, tone and context cannot be outsourced to automated systems.

Conclusion: Keeping the Human Reporter at the Centre

AI is already part of Bhutanese journalism. Its significance is not only technical, but democratic. Its use may still be piecemeal, but the question is no longer whether Bhutanese journalism should engage with AI. The question is how it should do so. Any gains will matter only if they strengthen the public role of journalism.

This article has argued that AI is entering Bhutan at a time when original reporting is already under pressure. Print journalism has weakened, and newsrooms face financial pressures, access barriers and institutional constraints. Digital platforms have expanded visibility, but visibility alone cannot replace verification, field presence or editorial accountability.

For this reason, Bhutanese newsrooms need a human-centred approach to AI. Routine and technical uses can be encouraged but uses that affect meaning require editorial review. Uses that fabricate reality or mislead audiences should be restricted. The future of AI in Bhutanese journalism should, therefore, be judged not by how much content it helps produce, but by whether it protects reporting, strengthens trust and keeps journalists close to the communities they serve.

Generative AI use disclosure: I used ChatGPT to support brainstorming, organise research notes, identify relevant scholarly and industry sources, check citation consistency and assist with language editing. All arguments, analysis and final wording are my own. I independently reviewed the AI-assisted output, verified references where possible and take full responsibility for the content, accuracy and integrity of the article.

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