

A Steep Learning Curve: Bhutanese on Social Media

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Teeming Millions

As of March 2020, 3.8 billion people in the world (49 percent of 7.7 billion people) are on social media. Of the 7.7 billion, 2.4 billion people (33 percent) are on Facebook, the world's most widely used social media platform.

According to www.datareportal.com, an online digital data portal, 430,000 Bhutanese are on social media, accounting for 58 percent of Bhutan's projected population in 2018 (734,374). 410,000 of them (56 percent of the population) are on Facebook. The figures far exceeds the global average. The number of social media users in Bhutan increased by 40,000, or 11 percent, between April 2019 and January 2020.

Facebook's 2019 revenue was USD 70.7 billion (Nu 5,019.7 billion). Bhutan's 12th Five-Year Plan budget outlay is Nu 310 billion (Nu 62 billion a year). Thus, Facebook's annual revenue is 81 times bigger than Bhutan's annual public sector budget outlay. Other social media companies, like Twitter, Instagram, and WeChat, are not far behind Facebook in terms of revenue and the number of users.

The traditional media are now little islands in the wide ocean of social media. Unlike formal media organisations, the growth of social media is not constrained by institutional norms and structures. Therefore, individuals and organisations on social media can be bigger than traditional media in terms of reach and influence.

For example, Kuensel has 125,948 followers on its Facebook page, meaning its reach on Facebook is 29 times wider than its print copy circulation (Kuensel circulates 4,357 copies a day on average, according to the report "Determining the Timely Reach and Circulation Figures of the Newspapers for the Year 2018", published by Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority).

Individuals can be bigger — and potentially more powerful — than organisations on social media. For example, journalist and activist Namgay Zam is followed by 74,476 people on her Facebook page and footballer Chencho Gyeltshen by 45,885 people. Their reach is wider than the print and digital copy reach of all the newspapers in Bhutan put together. Now compare them to the National Assembly, which is followed by 20,052 people and the National Council, followed by 14,893 people.

In neighbouring India, this tweet from Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently generated 46,000 replies in 90 minutes: “This Sunday, thinking of giving up my social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram & YouTube. Will keep you all posted.”

Today, social media is used for communication, marketing, brand promotion, research, and dissemination of research findings. Experts say that when millions are on social media with immense reach and influence, using or not using social media is no longer an option. The option is to use it or risk being left out.

Most reputed companies and organisations have recognised the inevitability of social media. In 2010, the BBC told its news staff to “embrace” social media or “leave” the organisation. “BBC journalists must keep up with technological change — or leave,” the director of BBC Global News, Peter Horrocks, warned. Some reluctant staff were forcibly brought into line.

In 2016, Singapore became the first government in the world to use Facebook’s Workplace for communication and public service delivery.

Although not facilitated by the government, the growth of social media in Bhutan has been rapid, but the country’s transition from the age-old oral culture to social media has been sudden, with no time for the people to wean themselves off the old habits.

A Cesspool of Gossip, Rumour, and Wrangling

In March 2011, the government of Bhutan issued a circular suggesting that social media sites “should be blocked in the office servers during the official working hours”. The circular stated that senior officials of the government had expressed concerns over “increasing misuse of time and equipment,

with a large number of civil servants surfing the Internet, chatting online, or spending prolonged time on various social media sites”. At that time, the Singapore government was actively using social media to engage the public.

The circular revealed two interesting dimensions of social media use in Bhutan — the use or (as the government put it) misuse of social media by the average educated Bhutanese, and the dismissal of social media by public authorities as a platform for chatting and gossip. The power of social media then had yet to dawn on both the government and members of the public.

Social media use in Bhutan has been characterised by gossip, anonymity, character assassination and vanity, with a few exceptions for constructive use.

The best example of social media abuse is a Facebook group called Our News & FORUMS, set up in September 2012. Over the years, the group has assumed other names, such as BHUTANESE INFORMER, BHUTANESE FORUM, and BHUTANESE News & FORUMS. The group has 192,459 members (26 percent of the projected 2018 population) and is administered by three anonymous accounts. The members include journalists, academics, senior government officials, and MPs, who feed the group with a constant stream of rumour and gossip, or make them popular by reacting to them. The topics of discussion or gossip by the group include individuals, government officials, politicians, love affairs, relationship breakdowns and corruption allegations.

Besides Our News & FORUMS, there are hundreds of Facebook groups, pages, and anonymous accounts that churn out tonnes of mental junk corrosive to communal harmony and well-being. A typical exchange on a gossip post reads something like this:

User A: I guess you’re an idiot too

User B: Hiw [sic] does idiot look like? Is it like you? [idiot emoji]

User C: Come to Bhutan. Am waiting for you

User D: [@User C] Moron like you can’t do anything

User C: You come and face. One punch is good enough to teach you the lesson of life

User A: Oooo I am scared of fat fucktard like you

User C: You will taste my punch soon

Such arguments go on endlessly. Even a social media post on a serious topic tapers off into such exchanges. Even highly educated people can be seen vehemently engaging in such exchanges with anonymous users on social media. Last year, a post on Our News & FORUMS read: “Most of the ladies are in animal form because they never hesitate to share others husband hehe.” Within four hours, the post generated 77 comments. Among the users engaged in disjointed arguments was an eminent khenpo and a popular teacher.

The Bhutanese have taken anonymity and gossip culture to a different level by creating “confession pages” on Facebook. A page called Thimphu Confession Page is followed by 55,872 people (eight percent of the population). The page’s tagline is: “Page where Bhutanese people can express there [sic] stories anonymously.” On 30 November 2019, the page recorded its 29,087th confession. Confession number 29,085th starts this way: “Badly cheated by a married woman. I didn’t know that I would fall such an easy prey to a flirty, fake and preposterous lady....” The post has generated 52 comments, 330 reactions, and two shares. Among the followers of the page are some easily recognisable faces in Bhutan.

There are many such pages, mostly created by college students. They include Shercol Confession Page (1,189 followers), RTC Confession Page (509 followers), RTC Confessions (554 followers), Royal Bhutan Army Confession Page (a group with 410 members), Phuentsholing Confession Page (a group with 1,810 members), and many other confession pages not linked to any institution. A media trainer recently joked that, going by the number of confession pages on Facebook, most Bhutanese seem to spend their time confessing anonymously.

Social media has also led to the proliferation of digital pornography in Bhutan in recent years. An investigative story by Business Bhutan last

year revealed at least five pornographic WeChat groups circulating porn clips. The members — some of whom are thought to be children and youths — share only pornographic pictures and videos, including ones involving Bhutanese people. The Royal Bhutan Police registered 17 digital pornography cases between 2007 and 2019.

This is not surprising. A quick look at Google Trends for Thimphu’s web search trends over the last five years shows that the word “porn” accounted for 94 percent of searches and the word “books”, only six percent. The pattern is similar in other parts of the country.

According to the Bhutan Information and Media Impact Study 2017, carried out by the Department of Information and Media, around 83 percent of Bhutanese agreed that the use of social media has led to family problems like divorce, misunderstanding, and extramarital affairs.

Anonymity allowed by social media has made a large number of Bhutanese reckless and irresponsible, spreading fake news and lashing out at anyone who does not agree with them. Any potentially constructive discussion descends into personalised or politicised bickering. Many people have become victims of online trolls.

When the Prime Minister’s Facebook page announced Bhutan’s first case of COVID-19 at 7.00 am on March 6, anonymous social media users immediately started lashing out at the government for inaction. One of them, Penjore Tshering, started an online petition at www.change.org calling for Prime Minister Lotay Tshering’s resignation “on account of the failure to protect the vulnerable citizens of Bhutan”. Two hundred and eighty-five people signed the petition. A counter-petition to discontinue the petition garnered 4,977 signatures. By March 9, the announcement on the first Covid-19 case on the Prime Minister’s Facebook page generated 975 comments. Most negative comments came from anonymous users.

This was followed by a wave of fake news and rumours about COVID-19 across social media platforms. Regular updates on the disease by the Prime Minister’s Office, the Ministry of Health, and media outlets were barely able to quash rumours and fake news. However, not all is lost to the cesspool.

A Silver Lining for Democracy

Social media has widened the horizon of democratic discourse in Bhutan. Individuals and groups have used it for public discourse, essential to creating a democratic culture, with a certain degree of success.

Between 2008 and 2013, social media had made possible many online discussion forums, including Bhutantimes.com (now offline), Nopkin (now offline), Kuzu.net (now offline), and Bhutanomics, as well as occasional Facebook groups discussing specific issues. Additionally, there appeared many blogs featuring hard-hitting articles.

Notable among the blogs are www.yesheydorji.blogspot.com, www.tsheringtobgay.com, www.passudiary.com, and www.dorji-wangchuk.com. Among them, www.tsheringtobgay.com, run by former Prime Minister and opposition leader Dasho Tshering Tobgay, was so effective that the blog, combined with other social media, was believed to have catapulted the People's Democratic Party to power in 2013.

Most discussions in these forums were started or led by individuals without any editorial oversight that would have lent neutrality. Therefore they, most notably Bhutanomics, were mired in controversies. Bhutanomics was blocked by Bhutan Telecom in February 2013. Most of them closed down. However, all of them contributed to public discourse and pushed the boundaries of expression. Some prominent blogs are still online, albeit less active and vibrant.

In March 2011, when the Tobacco Control Act of Bhutan, enacted by Parliament in 2010, came into force, a Facebook group called Amend the Tobacco Control Act gathered 2,986 members to protest against the “draconian” provisions of the Act. Unlike other Facebook groups populated by anonymous users, this group was created by journalist Kinley Tshering. The members included the opposition leader, a few MPs, and Facebook users. The group managed to create a constructive public discourse around the Act. Aljazeera took notice of the group and described it as “the first show of dissent”. The Act was amended in 2012.

Social media has also enabled citizens to point out the flaws and failings of the system, by criticising authorities frequently. Bhutan observed the 2013

Earth Hour on March 23. All lights in Thimphu town were to remain switched off between 8.30 pm and 9.30 pm. By 9.00 pm, the whole town turned dark, but the ministers' enclave in Motithang was brightly lit. A picture taken by a social media user at 9.9 pm was rapidly shared on social media.

Today, Bhutanese are increasingly using social media for official and interpersonal communication, social causes, and public service. Namgay Zam raised Nu 1.8 million in three days to help a Bhutanese mother visit her bed-ridden daughter in Japan. In the nomadic village of Soe, herders use WeChat to round up their 1,461 yaks in the evening. The village has created a WeChat group in which herders in different parts of Soe share real-time information on the location and description of straying yaks, so that the owners can track them down.

Different institutions are already using social media for public communication, bypassing the news media and relegating them to being secondary sources of news and information. For example, the Facebook page of the Prime Minister's Office has become the source of breaking news from the government. The Royal Bhutan Police's Facebook page, Royal Bhutan Police HQs, reaches out directly to 58,139 followers daily, sometimes controversially publishing pictures of drug smugglers and alleged rapists. The National Assembly broadcasts its sessions on Facebook.

Social media has provided the biggest platform for building national consciousness in Bhutan's history. Never before have Bhutanese people come together in such large numbers to share a common sense of identity and an acute sense of vulnerability. Bhutanese from all walks of life living in different parts of the world can now come together on social media to celebrate the National Day, or the birthday of His Majesty The King, with a strong sense of nationalism.

There are WeChat and Facebook groups for religious discourse, construction of temples, promotion of Dzongkha, media literacy, and promotion of reading and writing. Such groups represent the growing civic space created and sustained by the citizens. This civic space is essential citizens' participation in the country's development process.

So, as an editorial cartoon of Kuensel noted, social media can be "a powerful

tool or a dangerous weapon” depending on how we use it. If it is inevitable, “we can only choose to be sane or insane” on it. The question is, how can we be sane? Some steps have been taken to harness the power of social media and reduce harm.

Towards Responsible Use: Social Media Policy

The Social Media Policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan recognises the opportunities and challenges social media brings to individuals, institutions, and society. The policy aims to “harness the potential of social media to do good and mitigate its dangerous effects”. It reflects the Bhutanese government’s maturing view of social media and encourages the civil service to embrace social media rather than dismiss it.

However, the well-written policy is not widely known or read. The government and the Ministry of Information and Communications have done little to educate civil servants or members of the public on the policy.

The policy lays down crucial parameters for social media use, which call for elaboration and interpretation. An important part of the policy is the code of conduct for social media users. The code expects a social media user to be transparent. This is particularly important given rampant cases of anonymity on the Bhutanese social media space.

The first step towards being transparent on social media is using an authentic-looking profile picture. Social media is an extension of real life. So, looking authentic and being authentic is the hallmark of transparency on social media. Individuals should not hide themselves behind pictures of flowers, dogs, or other individuals. Dubious and faceless individuals can be elbowed out of social media, by not befriending them or not reacting to their posts. In Bhutan, however, anonymous accounts thrive because the virtual community befriends them and acknowledges their posts.

The policy says that the government “expects all citizens to conduct themselves in the ‘virtual’ world as they would in the ‘real’ world”. In the real world, Bhutanese rarely shout at one another, but on social media, people often snap at one another. In the real world, individuals do not walk down the Norzin Lam announcing what they ate for breakfast, but this is exactly what they do on social media in the form of foodfies.

The policy recommends responsible and constructive use of social media. In other words, it means refraining from creating contents that have a negative impact on society.

Selfies, foodfies, airport pictures, and Bangkok holiday pictures shared on social media look innocent but they are not. There is growing literature showing how such pictures make those who share them narcissistic and others feel inadequate. According to a survey of 1,500 people by disability charity Scope, social media sites make more than half of users feel inadequate, and half of 18- to 34-year-olds feels unattractive.

Researchers from the University of California found that one negative post by someone in a rainy city influenced another 1.3 negative posts by friends living in dry cities. On the other hand, one positive post inspired 1.75 more positive posts. We live in an interdependent world, hence we should use social media responsibly.

The bottom line is to spread positive energy and be less vain about one's achievements. So, next time you fly to Bangkok for a holiday or enjoy a five-star dinner or get a phone that takes great selfies, the pictures are best saved in your personal album.

However, this is easier said than done. Today, people post almost everything on social media and the line between the personal and the public is blurring. Therefore, scientists are exploring ways to use social media to diagnose depression, by analysing social media profile pictures, depressive language, social engagement, and public expressions of emotion.

So, what is the answer for the responsible and ethical use of social media as an enabler? Experts say that while policies and regulations set broad parameters for social media use, how social media is used is driven largely by the users' skills and literacy. For Bhutan, this means translating the social media policy and rules and regulations into media literacy for different sections of the population. This means enabling people to use technology, and not vice versa.