

# Bhutan

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## INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a peaceful country of less than a million people, with a benevolent monarchy which voluntarily handed power to a government elected by the people in 2008. For most of the 20th century Bhutan had a policy of self-isolation and rejected foreign influences brought by mass media. While local radio and newspaper appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s, it was the last country to get television, which arrived in 1999 along with the Internet.

In 2006 the King granted licences for independent newspapers as part of the country's move to democracy, however these gained limited penetration, while mobile phones, Facebook and social media were immediately adopted, better suiting Bhutan's oral culture. Bhutan bypassed print capitalism, with media sustained not by commercial advertising but mostly by government advertising and funding.

The two strongest media houses are Bhutan Broadcast Service TV & Radio, which is state-owned, and *Kuensel* newspaper, which is 51% state-owned and 49% by the national pension fund (NPPF) and individual shareholders. There are 7 independent newspapers which employ one to four regular staff, augmented with freelancers. The country suffered economically from the pandemic and many journalists left for study and work opportunities overseas. The data were collected in September 2023 via a Qualtrics online survey.

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The journalist cohort in Bhutan comprised significantly more men than women, with 59.6% male and 40.4% women. The average age is 34.0 (SD = 9.9; Median = 32). Bhutanese journalists are generally well educated with 86.5% having a Bachelor's degree or equivalent and 11.2% having a Master's degree or equivalent. In terms of formal education or training in journalism, 57.3% have received training, with 49.0% via an apprenticeship or cadetship; 54.9% through university or college; and 78.4% via a short-term course.

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

The major background of employers of journalists in Bhutan is print, with 40% of journalists working for organizations that focus on newspaper publishing, 24.7% on state-owned TV; 27.1% on radio and 8.2% for a news agency. Nearly 80% (79.5%) of journalists in Bhutan were employed on full-time contracts, and 9.1% on fixed term contracts. Of the part-time workers, 2.3% were on permanent contracts and 1.1% on fixed-term contracts. A further 8% felt their terms of employment didn't fit into such categories.

The work was not enough for self-sufficiency with 55.6% reporting that they had other sources of income, while 44.4% reported their journalistic work was their sole employment.

The average length of experience was 10.1 years (SD = 8.8; Median = 8) and the average number of hours worked each week was 48.4 (SD = 19.1; Median = 50; for those in full-time employment). This would reflect the fact that the Bhutanese working week includes Saturday mornings.

Nearly half the respondents interviewed (47.2%) said they work on specific beats, covering the same subject areas for their employer, with the remaining 52.8% saying they work across various beats.

The state-owned BBS TV and Radio, and the half-state owned *Kuensel* newspaper, are the major employers, with modern newsrooms that broadcast and publish in both Dzongkha, the national language, and English. BBS TV and radio are broadcast across the kingdom, reaching further via the Internet and social media. *Kuensel* newspaper produces a print edition in English six days a week and a Dzongkha weekend edition, that are distributed nationally, as well as via Facebook and as a PDF. The independent newspapers, publish in Thimphu only but also disseminate via Facebook and PDF.

These independent media exist in a state of precarity related to their small share of limited government advertising and funding. There is not a union for journalists in Bhutan, representing their interests in the workplace, but the Journalists Association of Bhutan is a social society where they meet and network with stakeholders.

**SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS**

Journalists in Bhutan express low fear of physical harm from their reporting, but express slightly more concerns about digital and psychological safety, with 14.6% experiencing hacking or blocking of their social media accounts or websites. This may reflect the pressures of reporting in a small society, with strong familial networks, all highly connected by social media as well as cultural sensitivities around public shaming. However, the sense of safety provided by job security is significantly low, which reflects the economic precarity that has faced the print media since its inception, as income comes mostly from the government, augmented by NGOs, with virtually no commercial advertising. It would also be the result of the severe economic hardship facing the country coming out of the pandemic. This has resulted in reduced media funding, and staffing, as many journalists left for jobs or study overseas.

**TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS**

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	90	4.4%	14.4%	33.3%	26.7%	21.1%
Public discrediting of your work	89	3.4%	14.6%	23.6%	25.8%	32.6%
Surveillance	90	7.8%	10.0%	21.1%	28.9%	32.2%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	89	2.2%	3.4%	14.6%	25.8%	53.9%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	89	0.0%	1.1%	3.4%	5.6%	89.9%
Legal actions against you because of your work	88	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	11.4%	85.2%
Stalking	89	1.1%	3.4%	5.6%	22.5%	67.4%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	89	1.1%	1.1%	13.5%	29.2%	55.1%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	89	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	5.6%	89.9%
Other physical attacks	90	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	4.4%	93.3%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

**TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS**

	N	Agree/strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	90	11.1%	2.37	0.94
Concerned about physical well-being	90	41.1%	3.09	1.17
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	90	60.0%	3.47	1.16
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Bhutan go unpunished	89	38.2%	3.15	1.06

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

**JOURNALISTIC ROLES**

Bhutanese journalists are in near unanimous agreement that their most important roles are educating the audience (98.9%), letting people express their views (98.8%), supporting national development (97.7%), shining a light on society's problems (96.6%), counteracting disinformation (94.3%) and pointing towards possible solutions (94.2%). This collaborative focus reflects the effects of the pandemic such as needing to rebuild the economy and provide accurate health information, as well as the effects of social media on public discourse.

**TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES**

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	90	82.2%	4.22	0.90
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	86	83.7%	4.16	0.89
Shine a light on society's problems	89	96.6%	4.60	0.56
Motivate people to participate in politics	86	50.0%	3.51	1.09
Provide analysis of current affairs	89	87.6%	4.44	0.74
Let people express their views	86	98.8%	4.74	0.51
Provide information people need to form political opinion	89	71.9%	3.93	1.10
Advocate for social change	87	88.5%	4.34	0.93
Influence public opinion	87	47.1%	3.24	1.36
Set the political agenda	85	35.3%	2.67	1.43
Promote peace and tolerance	87	81.6%	4.23	0.90
Educate the audience	87	98.9%	4.78	0.44
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	86	94.2%	4.41	0.68
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	87	86.2%	4.24	0.78
Support national development	88	97.7%	4.59	0.54
Support government policy	89	49.4%	3.61	1.01
Convey a positive image of political leaders	88	22.7%	2.36	1.28
Provide entertainment and relaxation	88	37.5%	3.31	1.05
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	90	70.0%	3.92	1.06
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	88	50.0%	3.45	1.03
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	89	52.8%	3.55	1.09
Support efforts to protect public health	89	89.9%	4.44	0.67
Counteract disinformation	87	94.3%	4.55	0.68
Discuss future implications of current events	90	85.6%	4.19	0.76

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

## JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

The journalists surveyed were almost unanimous that the public needed interpretation to make sense of facts, with a strong belief that journalists could represent objective reality (71.9%), though 44% believe strongly that it is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from their reporting.

**TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	89	92.1%	4.31	0.73
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	90	57.8%	3.71	0.97
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	90	44.4%	3.28	1.00
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	89	51.7%	3.43	0.96
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	89	71.9%	3.88	0.72

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

## JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Journalists in Bhutan strongly agreed on the importance of professional standards rather than subjective and situational considerations for ethical reporting. When it comes to the justification of controversial reporting methods, however, accepting money from sources was most strongly rejected (3.4%), and publishing unverified information (8.0%) also highly unpopular. About half (55.2%) found it acceptable to use hidden recording devices on occasion, and just 40% to use confidential documents without authorization.

**TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	89	93.3%	4.52	0.66
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	89	73.0%	3.97	0.78
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	89	61.8%	3.63	1.00
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	88	34.1%	2.90	1.19

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

**TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS**

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	88	9.1%	37.5%
Using hidden recording devices	87	6.9%	55.2%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	88	5.7%	40.9%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	88	4.5%	43.2%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	89	3.4%	30.3%
Paying people for confidential information	88	8.0%	27.3%
Accepting money from sources	88	3.4%	2.3%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	86	4.7%	25.6%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	87	4.6%	35.6%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	88	8.0%	18.2%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

## EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Bhutanese journalists reported limited freedom in their work. Nearly half claimed to have complete or a great deal of freedom in selecting their stories (48.9%) and just over half claimed freedom in deciding which aspects to emphasize in a story (56.7%). Media freedom was rated low at just over 30%.

**TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	90	48.9%	3.48	1.03
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	90	56.7%	3.61	0.98
Media freedom in Bhutan	86	31.4%	2.94	0.94

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Bhutan journalists considered journalism ethics, access to information and their relationship to news sources to be the most significant factors influencing their work as news producers (see Table 8). Public relations also rated highly at nearly 50%, indicating the significant role played by communications professionals in government and civil society, in providing information and influencing media output.

**TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/ extremely important	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	86	26.7%	2.69	1.14
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	86	53.5%	3.27	1.30
The business managers of the news organization	79	22.8%	2.53	1.24
The owners of the news organization	75	34.7%	2.76	1.27
Editorial policy	85	49.4%	3.25	1.39
Advertising considerations	75	24.0%	2.53	1.18
Profit expectations	73	12.3%	2.16	1.13
Audience research and data	81	33.3%	2.88	1.22
Availability of news-gathering resources	85	41.2%	3.22	1.24
Time limits	82	48.8%	3.26	1.27
Journalism ethics	85	64.7%	3.69	1.13
Self-censorship	85	40.0%	3.18	1.18
Personal values and beliefs	86	40.7%	3.14	1.29
Colleagues in other media	85	24.7%	2.60	1.19
Friends, acquaintances and family	87	20.7%	2.48	1.19
Feedback from the audience	87	44.8%	3.23	1.14
Competing news organizations	88	43.2%	3.20	1.20
Media laws and regulation	88	40.9%	3.20	1.21
Access to information	86	60.5%	3.73	1.18
Government censorship	87	43.7%	3.16	1.24
Government officials	86	37.2%	3.12	1.21
Politicians	86	29.1%	2.85	1.32
Business people	84	17.9%	2.44	1.19
Public relations	88	47.7%	3.23	1.26
Relationships with news sources	86	57.0%	3.44	1.31
Police	85	36.5%	3.06	1.32
Issue advocacy groups	83	37.3%	2.95	1.26
Scientists or health experts	81	34.6%	3.01	1.19

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)