

Journalist Attrition and its Expected Impact on Democracy in Bhutan⁺

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Abstract

According to the human resources records of Kuensel, the number of journalists fell by 37 percent from 2021 to 2023, with only 4 out of 15 vacancies filled over the past two years. Other agencies are experiencing similar workforce challenges. While the departure of educators, civil servants, and health professionals has been featured in the headlines over the past year, little attention has been devoted to the attrition ongoing in the media itself. To understand the issues driving journalists out of the profession, a survey of a non-random sample was conducted of 63 professionals who worked as a journalist in the past five years. While 32 had left the profession, 31 stayed in the media. Of those who left the profession, 66 percent left in the past two years, and 44 percent left the country (for Australia in almost all cases). The rest remain in Bhutan but are no longer working as journalists. Of the leavers, 19 per cent are now unemployed, while the other 81 percent have moved on to new jobs, notably including teaching (in Bhutan) and aged care (in Australia). When asked about reasons for leaving the profession, low salary and lack of professional development came out as the most common complaints. Of the stayers, 40 percent expressed dissatisfaction with their pay, and 43 percent claimed to be actively searching for ways to change their employment status. This study reflects on the

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implications of the survey findings for the future of media and its relationship with democracy in Bhutan.

Keywords: journalism, democracy, Bhutanese journalists, Kuensel, Bhutan Broadcasting Services, attrition, media

Introduction

The media is often regarded as the fourth pillar of the state, playing a crucial role in keeping the public informed and educated and enabling them to make informed decisions. The Constitution safeguards the freedoms of speech and information, further emphasising the significance of the media as a vital role in a democracy. News and information hold immense importance in Bhutan, especially considering the ongoing shifts in political and socio-economic landscapes. While it may sound clichéd, an informed citizenry is the foundation of a thriving democracy and media has a responsibility to work for and serve the public in a democracy.

Many studies have also shown that the mass media in Bhutan has become dynamic in terms of the social, political, economic, and environmental situation in the last two decades. It has also shown that the media has served the government, policymakers, and the public in nation-building. Given the significant reforms and changes taking place in Bhutan, the role of media becomes even more pronounced in our current context.

Any news reporting, apart from informing people, is also considered a way to garner public debates, and discussion, and receive feedback from the public on the various policies and decisions adopted by the government. The information between the people and the government also serves as policy responses. The media sector appears to have moved backwards with democracy, particularly in terms of diminishing access to information and restrictions on freedom of expression. Bureaucrats frequently decline to engage or share information with journalists, citing various regulations, which poses a

significant obstacle to the media's ability to provide accurate information through their reporting.

The media is seeing ever more attrition of journalists. According to Kuensel (national newspaper), "more than 80 journalists, including 20 from the print media, quit journalism in the past year." Bhutan Broadcasting Service, the lone broadcasting television, alone lost over 60 employees, including news reporters and editors. There are seven newspapers and four FM radio stations. Bhutan's press freedom ranking dropped to 90th place this year from 33 according to the 2023 World Press Freedom Index compiled by the France-based Reporters Without Borders.

A study (Mathews et al., 2023) had said that former journalists expressed feelings of powerlessness, a form of disappointment for one's dream job provoked by the omnivorous demands of the industry's digital transformation. "Meanwhile, the former journalists harnessed the power of the digital platform (i.e., blogs) as a discursive strategy to provide advice to those remaining in the news industry,"(Mathews et al., 2023).

Journalists play a vital role in providing the public with information about important issues. When journalists leave the profession, there is less information available to citizens to make informed decisions about their government and society. When journalists leave the profession, it can also lead to a narrowing of perspective in the medialess representation of minority groups and reduced diversity of voices.

In the realm of professions, journalism has gained a reputation for demanding work environments, inadequate compensation, and the imposition of challenges on work-life balance. These difficulties have been further exacerbated by two concurrent factors: widespread economic instability in the industry due to a decline in advertising revenue and the pervasive adoption of a constant digital-first mindset.

The Washington Post puts it succinctly: “Democracy dies in darkness.” It’s a sentiment that underscores journalism’s close connection to democracy - democracy cannot exist, the argument goes, without the information environment that journalism helps create (Wolfgang et al., 2019).

However, there is no doubt that media holds significance in Bhutan, and it must find its way to persist, especially with the ongoing reforms that have heightened the media’s visibility. The significance of media became evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, as people relied on mainstream media to authenticate the information, they come across on social media platforms. The role of media in a democratic society is enduring, and the content of its reporting can assess the vitality of a nation, the quality of its journalism, and the degree of media freedom it enjoys. In a democratic framework, the media serves as a critical platform for addressing issues that are relevant to national interests and the concerns of the people. Nevertheless, this can only be achieved through data democratisation and access, a crucial element that is currently lacking.

In today’s evolving media landscape, the role of a well-trained professional journalist is even more critical. This is because the media, acting as a gatekeeper, plays a vital role in our future. With the proliferation of fake news, unfiltered content, and fabricated information, politicians and influencers may exploit these technological advancements. Therefore, the media’s role in fact-checking and verification becomes increasingly important.

Experienced journalists can bring several significant benefits like in-depth reporting where journalists could use their skills and knowledge to conduct in-depth investigations and analyses. Seasoned journalists are trained to ensure that news is accurate, balanced, and trustworthy, reducing the spread of misinformation and fake news. Bhutan is a young democracy, and experienced journalists can play a vital role in providing

balanced and unbiased information during elections and political processes.

In response to these changes, traditional media and journalists may need to return to fundamental principles. Many media and journalists struggle to verify information and provide accurate facts. News lacking in-depth analysis may lead people to question the credibility of news sources and journalists.

Hence, it becomes important for us to revisit the foundational principles of journalism and reconsider its purpose, the role of journalists, and their purpose. Journalists are now grappling with challenges posed by emerging channels and platforms, where individuals share their narratives and express their frustrations, giving rise to citizen journalism. This necessitates a reevaluation of the core views and objectives of journalism. Attrition of journalists from the mainstream media can also have specific impacts on democracy in different countries. For example, in countries with weak institutions and a history of corruption, the absence of strong and independent media can make it more difficult to hold governments accountable and prevent democratic backsliding.

To address the problem of attrition of journalists from the mainstream media, it is important to support journalists and create an environment where they can work freely and without fear of intimidation or harassment. This includes protecting journalists' rights to freedom of expression and access to information and providing them with adequate training and resources.

This is why this study focuses on Bhutanese journalism within the context of democracy and addresses the repercussions of journalist attrition. While numerous research efforts have explored journalism's influence on democracy, this study specifically investigates the reasons behind journalists leaving the profession. Using an online survey distributed among former journalists, it delves into the causes prompting their departure. Simultaneously, it interviews current journalists to

understand why they remain in the field. The study gathers diverse perspectives on how the attrition of journalists impacts democracy, drawing insights from both groups. Extensive literature reviews were consulted to shape inquiries regarding the relationship between democracy and journalism, exploring the factors that motivate journalists to exit their profession.

To understand the issues driving journalists out of the profession, a survey was conducted of 63 professionals who worked as a journalist in the past five years. 32 had left the profession, while 31 stayed in the media. However, the survey does not cover all journalists who left or are currently serving. The analysis uses t-tests to detect statistically significant differences between stayers and leavers. Stata (version 16.0) was used to conduct the tests, as well as construct other summary statistics for the study. Of those who left the profession, 66 percent left in the past two years, and 44% left the country (for Australia in almost all cases). The rest remain in Bhutan but are no longer working as journalists.

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer three basic questions concerning journalist attrition in Bhutan:

1. What types of journalists tend to leave the profession vs. stay in the profession?
2. What are the factors that have motivated journalists to leave the profession?
3. What are journalists' views on the media's role in democracy, and the likely impact of journalist attrition?

Literature review

The media is often referred to as the fourth arm of government because it plays a vital role in holding governments accountable and informing the public. Journalists investigate corruption, expose wrongdoing, and provide a platform for diverse voices to be heard (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2013). It also said that

having free media becomes a source of peace of mind, knowing that an institution is on the lookout for transgressions. When the press is free, the government is on its toes to ensure that basic public services are delivered efficiently and expediently. Ideally, no elective official will risk bad publicity by ignoring basic responsibilities. That is the normative theory of the press as a fourth estate and as a watchdog (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2013).

As much as the media is important so are the journalists and when journalists leave the profession, it weakens the media's ability to fulfil its democratic role. Many researches have shown that journalists leaving would mean reduced accountability, less informed citizens, and reduced diversity of voices. Without journalists to investigate and report on government activities, there is less risk of exposure to corruption and wrongdoing leading the government to become more authoritarian and less responsive to the needs of the people.

According to Mathews et al. (2023), as with any profession, advice giving in journalism has always occurred in myriad interpersonal settings with a variety of actors, from educators to colleagues to friends. "Mediated advice would occur within the relatively restricted realm of journalism trade press. Yet self-publishing digital platforms provide public outlets for advice giving, including to former journalists who have lost their news platform for speaking to the public," (Mathews et al., 2023). Journalists play a vital role in providing the public with information about important issues. When journalists leave the profession, there is less information available to citizens to make informed decisions about their government and society. When journalists leave the profession, it can also lead to a narrowing of perspective in the medialess representation for minority groups and reduced diversity of voices.

Papers like (Çipuri & Marku, 2022) noticed that the lack of job security, salary level, and recognition are the main reasons that have made them leave media to move towards other fields.

“More than 80% of the journalists would not leave journalism if they had satisfactory salaries” is what the study (Çipuri & Marku, 2022) found. Journalists who have left the media emphasize that recognition, work satisfaction, and appreciation for their contributions are just as important as salary when deciding whether to stay in the field. This concern is echoed by a majority of surveyed journalists, who view it as a pressing issue within the media industry.

Journalism is often discussed in terms of its relationship to democracy (Wolfgang et al., 2019). However one’s conception of democracy can influence how one understands journalistic concepts. “Indeed, journalism is frequently defined in terms of its relationship to democracy: journalism provides the news, information, and interpretation that persons need to engage as citizens. Indeed, media sociology supports the notion that how journalists understand democracy potentially influences how they conceive their professional role and how they go about doing their work” (Wolfgang et al., 2019).

Mathews et al. (2023) has concluded that originally perceived as a dream job and a path to help cover and empower communities, in their narratives, the former journalists expressed how difficult their profession had become because of the demands of the market and unending work. “They did so on an individual level that supported leaving journalism as a personal choice while also making clear their respect for the profession as a whole,” (Mathews et al., 2023).

Without a doubt, research like (Dzur, 2002) also agrees that public journalism may be the most significant reform movement in American journalism since the Progressive era. Prompted by flagging popular interest in public life and declining newspaper readership and influenced by ideals of deliberative democracy, public journalists think the promotion of reasonable and informed dialogue among citizens should be part of the role journalists play in a democracy.

During an era when news outlets are grappling with defining and advocating for their significance, Konieczna & Powers (2017) suggests that journalists should transparently showcase their endeavors to support democracy, alongside showcasing the outcomes of these endeavors.

According to Zelizer (2013),

The link between journalism and democracy is not a new supposition, in that western political philosophers have argued for it since the Enlightenment. The journalism/democracy nexus they supported was consonant with a certain version of modernity to which most western thinkers subscribed. Prevalent from the late 19th century onward, their version of modernity rested on an association with rationality, certainty, consent, reasoned thought, order, objectivity, progress and universal values, all of which journalism was expected to promote in order to create the conditions needed for an optimum public life.

The connection between journalism and democracy became extremely strong after the two world wars. These conflicts heightened hopes for democracy to effectively promote global stability.

Zelizer (2013) has also noted that the legacy for connecting democracy and journalism continued during the Cold War, when the United States heightened its investment in the project of democracy-building. “Simply put, journalism became widely regarded as the lifeblood of democratic theory beyond the West” (Zelizer, 2013). Like how journalism or media become even more prominent in Bhutan after Bhutan opened to democratic nation in 2008. Along with oldest national newspaper, Kuensel, more private newspapers came into market because media mattered in the democracy.

While various countries approached the relationship between journalism and democracy differently - for instance, in the UK,

it emerged within sociology departments as a challenge to ideas of pluralism, while in the Middle East, it was viewed through the perspective of international relations - the core connection between them remained fundamentally appealing as a concept.

However, the same research (Zelizer, 2013) has also said that “While one might argue that journalism has been historically necessary for democracy, the opposite assertion does not hold to the same degree. In fact, circumstances show that democracy has not been necessary for journalism, and the idea that democracy is the lifeline of journalism has not been supported on the ground” (Zelizer, 2013). Many existing discussions (Zelizer, 2013) of journalism have become insular, static, exclusionary, marginalizing, disconnected, elitist, unrepresentative and historically and geographically myopic.

Çipuri & Marku (2022) suggested that to prevent the journalists’ exodus towards similar professions, media should not do anything else, but treat the journalists and all the supporting employees and staff with dignity, through their work contracts, good salaries according to the market, continuous training for the professional growth of everyone in the field (Çipuri & Marku, 2022).

This study focuses on Bhutanese journalism within the context of democracy and addresses the repercussions of journalist attrition. While numerous research efforts have explored journalism’s influence on democracy, this study specifically investigates the reasons behind journalists leaving the profession. Using an online survey distributed among former journalists, it delves into the causes prompting their departure. Simultaneously, it interviews current journalists to understand why they remain in the field. The study gathers diverse perspectives on how the attrition of journalists impacts democracy, drawing insights from both groups. Extensive literature reviews were consulted to shape inquiries regarding the relationship between democracy and journalism, exploring the factors that motivate journalists to exit their profession.

Methodology

Survey Instrument

This study is based on a survey of journalists. The data were collected in October-November 2023, through two questionnaires. The first was designed for former journalists who had left the profession (“leavers”) and the second was designed for current journalists who remain as journalists in Bhutan (“stayers”). Both surveys started with demographic questions requiring structured answers before proceeding to free-response questions on views about media and democracy in Bhutan.

Data Collection

A survey of a non-random sample was conducted of 63 professionals. The survey was shared in online Google Form format with a comprehensive list of former and current journalists who had worked in journalism between 2019 and 2023. After follow-up with the invitees, 33 former journalists answered the leavers’ survey and 30 current journalists answered the stayers’ survey. Respondents were associated with five print media companies and one broadcasting media company.

Data Analysis

The analysis used chi-square and t-tests to detect statistically significant differences between stayers and leavers. Stata (version 16.0) was used to conduct the tests, as well as construct other summary statistics for the study.

Findings

A. Leavers Vs Stayers

According to human resources records of one of the top news agencies (Kuensel), the number of journalists fell by 37 percent from 2021 to 2023, with only 4 out of 15 vacancies filled over the past two years. Other agencies are experiencing similar workforce challenges.

To understand the issues driving journalists out of the profession, a Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies surveyed 63 professionals who worked as a journalist in the past five years. 32 had left the profession, while 31 stayed in the media. However, the survey does not cover all journalists who left or are currently serving.

Statistically, there is no difference between stayers and leavers in terms of gender (53.97% male), age (mostly between 31 and 40 years old), marital status, number of children, and years of journalism experience (below Table 1). They reported on a similarly wide range of issues, ranging from sports to climate change. The assessment revealed that while there was a higher quantity of journalism present, there appeared to be diverse attempts to cover a range of topics from education and health to agriculture, economy, and politics. However, the data suggests a potential deficiency in coverage concerning corruption, mental health, human trafficking, the queer community, and investigative reporting. Nevertheless, those who remain in the field may choose to focus on these subjects to ensure comprehensive coverage.

They were also equally inquisitive as groups, and equally passionate about the journalism profession, according to self-reporting. But stayers were significantly more likely to self-identify as comfortable with questioning authority. Stayers also tend to have more education than leavers.

Table 1. *Comparisons of leavers and stayers*

Variable	Leaver average value	Stayer average value	Difference	Pearson chi-square p-value
Male	0.47	0.61	-0.14	0.25
Young (21-30 years old)	0.31	0.39	-0.07	0.53
Experienced (more than 5 years)	0.56	0.68	-0.11	0.35
Married	0.69	0.61	0.07	0.54
Number of Children	0.75	0.77	-0.02	0.46 ⁺
Post-BA qualification (diploma or MA degree)	0.69	0.84	-0.15	0.16
Journalism was first choice profession	0.63	0.61	0.01	0.92
Self-reportedly comfortable questioning authority	0.41	0.71	-0.30	0.02 [*]
Self-reportedly inquisitive	0.34	0.35	-0.01	0.92

^{*} *Chi-square test implying a statistically significant difference between leavers and stayers*

⁺ p-value of t-test

Of those who left the profession, 66 percent left in the past two years, and 44 percent left the country (for Australia in almost all cases). The rest remain in Bhutan but are no longer working as journalists. Of the leavers, 19 percent are now unemployed, while the other 81 percent have moved on to new jobs, notably including teaching (in Bhutan) and aged care (in Australia). When asked about reasons for leaving the profession, low salary and lack of professional development came out as the most common complaints (Figure 1).

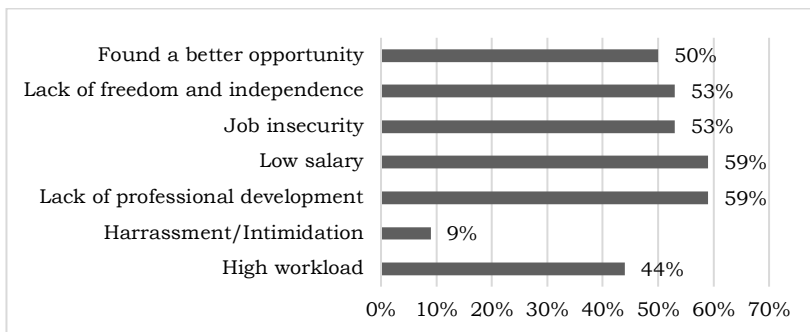


Figure 1. Survey of 32 respondents

And what of those who remained in the profession? Of the stayers, 40 percent expressed dissatisfaction with their pay, and 43 percent claimed to be actively searching for ways to change their employment status. This suggests that the media exodus may not be over yet. On the other hand, a large proportion of stayers (two-thirds) claimed that a feeling of duty and service kept them working in the media.

All respondents, whether they stayed or left, were allowed to reflect on the state of journalism in Bhutan. Stayers and leavers alike commented on the importance of journalism for building accountability and transparency in Bhutan’s young democracy. Lack of access to information was a common concern, with nearly two-thirds of the 60 respondents identifying this as the main challenge for journalists working in Bhutan.

B. Analysis of the respondents’ opinion on the likely impact of journalists’ departure

The research surveyed both departing and remaining journalists, querying them about the effect of journalists exiting the field on Bhutanese democracy. The objective was to gauge the perception of the importance of journalism among these professionals and to understand its potential ramifications on the media’s role in democracy amidst a significant exodus of journalists. The gathered responses

underwent thorough analysis using thematic analysis methods.

Based on the responses it is undying fact that losing journalists means losing journalism and when journalism is lost, we lose a part of democracy too. The implications of the departure of experienced journalists for reporting remain to be seen. The former and current journalists have views on the likely impact of a weakening journalism workforce.

A number of them expressed concerns that the most common impact was media was left with many inexperienced journalists because, in last two years, more than 60 percent of senior journalists have left the profession. The thematic analysis showed that losing seasoned journalists meant losing in-depth, critical, and analysed stories. Any kind of news reporting, apart from informing people, is also considered a way to garner public debates, and discussion, and receive feedback from the public on the various policies and decisions adopted by the government. The information between the people and the government also serves as policy responses. A lack of in-depth stories means a lack of debates in the national dialogue.

If this trend continues, the media will be left in the hands of inexperienced journalists and editors and this will impact the democracy. A vibrant democracy requires a vibrant media.

The attrition of accountability, absence of thorough investigative reporting, and a lack of checks and balances were highlighted as key impacts by respondents. The attrition of seasoned journalists was identified as a major factor hindering the uncovering of corruption. One individual emphasised that as journalists depart, the profession itself loses credibility, ultimately impacting the vibrancy of democracy.

The departure of experienced journalists creates a pressing issue as it results in newsrooms being predominantly staffed by inexperienced reporters who lack proper training. This state

weakens the trust of both audiences and readers, posing a threat to democracy in Bhutan. Thus, there is a clear necessity for the media to prioritise professional development to nurture and prepare young journalists for the field.

Several individuals also highlighted that the absence of experienced journalists significantly affects the creation of well-researched and critical political stories. While younger journalists might step in to fill this void, they often face harassment due to their lack of confidence in covering political news or conducting critical analyses.

However, it was intriguing to observe that three respondents (referred to as 'stayers') expressed the belief that the departure of journalists would not impact democracy. They argued that Bhutanese journalists have not significantly influenced important democratic discussions over the last 15 years of democracy. One respondent stated that there has not been a substantial impact so far and predicted that the Bhutanese media will continue to serve as a mouthpiece for the government.

In Bhutan, the media is restricted in certain areas and topics, unable to question freely. Even when we possess information, it's consistently filtered before reaching the public.

Other considerations beyond the survey suggest that at present, there is a concerning trend where media largely relies on press releases, and government institutions and bureaucracies are increasingly releasing their statements on social media. In a democratic society, the media's role is to monitor the success of democracy, and this requires going beyond merely reverberating press releases. To sustain the visibility and relevance of media, the media must remain vigilant in assessing the effectiveness of democracy.

It is essential to remember that even if traditional media is controlled or restricted, avenues for expressing freedom of

speech persist through social media, music, art, films, and other forms of creative expression. This could potentially diminish the influence of mainstream media, leading to a decline in public trust in both traditional media and state institutions. The use of technology for expression will continue to evolve. Society will find ways to inform, and express their feelings and opinions.

Experienced journalists can bring several significant benefits like in-depth reporting where journalists could use their skills and knowledge to conduct in-depth investigations and analyses. Seasoned journalists are trained to ensure that news is accurate, balanced, and trustworthy, reducing the spread of misinformation and fake news. Bhutan is a young democracy, and experienced journalists can play a vital role in providing balanced and unbiased information during elections and political processes.

C. What do stayers and leavers think about strengthening media?

The survey also provides some hints as to how journalist retention can be improved. Fostering professional development seems to be one key. This would include not only training and advancement opportunities but also building an enabling environment in which journalists can access the information they need to explore topics close to their hearts. Such investments will help ensure that media continues to play its critical role in Bhutan's democracy.

For instance, a former reporter shared how her story about lapses in procuring Nu 4.3 million worth of incinerators remained incomplete because she could not access information. Many agents from the government, commission, and an international firm were involved and they felt sharing this story was creating only disharmony in the society. Officials involved refused to talk. Likewise, there are several times journalists have pointed out where access to information was denied often marking it as "too sensitive" for the country. This, according to many respondents, led to particularly in terms of

diminishing access to information and restrictions on freedom of expression.

Bureaucrats frequently decline to engage or share information with journalists, citing various regulations, which poses a significant obstacle to the media's ability to provide accurate information through their reporting. Research (Afzal et al., 2021) has concluded that the free flow of information through independent and growing media will redefine the performance measures of democratic representatives. "The expanding media has made the masses more aware of their rights and provided a platform to demand these rights for themselves. Access to information has reduced the gap between different strata of the society leading to greater equality in the distribution of services," (Afzal et al., 2021).

The Right to Information Bill has remained on paper for decades, and none of the last three governments put any effort to enact as Act. This was in itself an indication to silence media at several levels. This is why former and current journalists felt having the Right to Information could boost many journalists to perform their duty and retain themselves in the media fraternity.

Unlike the approach followed by Thimphu Thromde and certain other institutions, which involve requesting reporters to email their questions and wait a week for responses, this method grants agencies and institutes significant leeway to manipulate their replies. Embracing a more traditional approach involving face-to-face interviews or real-time information shared over calls with journalists would be more preferable than providing limited written answers based solely on the questions submitted.

Leavers and stayers alike emphasise the significance of a decent salary, recognising its importance in acknowledging their dedication and effort to uncover truths and inform the public. Both groups suggested increased state investment in

comprehensive, long-term training programs for media professionals, particularly emphasising journalism and storytelling. Such initiatives would not only help retain journalists but also necessitate incentives like compensations aligned with journalists' experience levels. Moreover, training, especially in political journalism, has emerged as increasingly crucial in this landscape.

Some suggested that the government should cease providing printing subsidies to media companies to encourage more robust output through competitive means. To foster a sense of recognition among the media, it is proposed that government officials refrain from impeding information flow, even if they perceive the truth presented by the media as negative. There is a call for personnel within various agencies to receive training regarding the role and significance of media in disseminating information.

Given the commonness of inexperienced and young journalists in numerous newsrooms, it is crucial to prioritise comprehensive training and avenues for professional development. The analysis suggested the implementation of an effective media policy to facilitate the expansion and advancement of media.

Another consideration beyond the survey suggests that new advancements in digital technology, such as ChatGPT and Artificial Intelligence, have emerged, in addition to the pervasive social media. These developments pose a significant threat to traditional media practices and have the potential to substantially replace the substantial roles played by media professionals. Also, the mass media industry is now confronted with the challenges posed by Bhutan's expanding internet presence, where an increasing volume of news and information is disseminated through blogs and social media platforms.

Given such a scenario, there is no doubt that media holds significance in Bhutan, and it must find its way to persist, especially with the ongoing reforms that have heightened the

media's visibility. The significance of media became evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, as people relied on mainstream media to authenticate the information, they saw on social media platforms. The role of media in a democratic society is enduring, and the vitality of a nation can be assessed by the content of its reporting, the quality of its journalism, and the degree of media freedom it enjoys.

One way to retain or improve would be data democratisation which can play a significant role in enhancing the media landscape in a country by empowering both media organisations and people, resulting in more transparent, accountable, and diverse media ecosystems that better serve the needs of a country's citizens.

When data is democratised, it becomes easier for journalists and fact-checkers to verify claims and statements made by public figures. This can lead to more accurate reporting and hold individuals and institutions accountable for their actions and statements. This is why sometimes fake news and speculation travel faster in social media because media or people do not have information to validate the news source. Access to data can enable journalists to tell more data-driven and evidence-based stories leading to improved storytelling. Diverse perspectives, audience engagement, data-driven journalism, government accountability, innovation and efficiency, and media sustainability are some of the ways to enhance the media landscape.

With the proliferation of fake news, unfiltered content, and fabricated information, politicians and influencers may exploit these technological advancements. Therefore, the media's role in fact-checking and verification becomes increasingly important.

This underscores the importance of media independence and professionalism. Governments should establish policies, laws, and regulations that safeguard and promote media freedom. It must be recognised that a strong media is in the best interest

of everyone. As per a survey conducted by the Journalist Association of Bhutan in August 2022, it was revealed that the Prime Minister's Office received the highest rating in terms of providing access to information. It is essential to maintain this level of transparency in the next government. One potential approach to ensure this is by establishing a Press Information Bureau within the Prime Minister's Office. However, for this bureau to be effective, it should be institutionalised and led by a secretary or joint secretary. Moreover, it should actively seek feedback and provide advisory services to the government regarding its information dissemination.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Of those who left the profession, 66 percent left in the past two years, and 44 percent left the country (for Australia in almost all cases). The rest remain in Bhutan but are no longer working as journalists. Of the leavers, 19 percent are now unemployed, while the other 81 percent have moved on to new jobs, notably including teaching (in Bhutan) and aged care (in Australia). Low salary and lack of professional development came out as the most common complaints. However, a large proportion of stayers (two-thirds) claimed that a feeling of duty and service kept them working in the media.

Lack of access to information was a common concern, with nearly two-thirds of the 63 respondents identifying this as the main challenge for journalists working in Bhutan. Some expressed concern that the loss of experienced journalists would reduce the volume of in-depth stories and availability of mentors for young journalists, all with a detrimental effect on public trust and democratic processes. A few expressed attritions would not bring any differences. However, others expressed a belief that the departure of journalists would not impact democracy. Fostering professional development seems to be one key. This would include not only training and advancement opportunities but also building an enabling environment in which journalists can access the information they need to explore topics close to their hearts.

In response to these changes, traditional media and journalists may need to return to fundamental principles. Currently, many media and journalists struggle to verify information and provide accurate facts. News lacking in-depth analysis may lead people to question the credibility of news sources and journalists.

Hence, it becomes important for us to revisit the foundational principles of journalism and reconsider its purpose, the role of journalists, and their purpose. Journalists are now grappling with challenges posed by emerging channels and platforms, where individuals share their narratives and express their frustrations, giving rise to citizen journalism. This necessitates a reevaluation of the core views and objectives of journalism.

It is another concerning aspect that often citizens know about certain information or any kind of government decisions through international media. Mainstream media must be given the freedom to function without compromising the nation's security and remain unbiased. And only if media is recognised as a state institution at par with other organisations.

Considering our strategic geographic location, our people have to often remain unified and rally in support of our King and government. However, the increasing fragmentation in media consumption presents a potential obstacle to national unity. To address this, reliance on our national mainstream media becomes indispensable.

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