GLOBAL MEDIA, DAILY LIFE AND PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL CHANGE IN BHUTAN

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Declaration

Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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22nd September 2009
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# Table of Contents

Declaration.......................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments............................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents............................................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... ix
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... ix
Abstract................................................................................................................................ xi

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1

2 Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 5
   2.1 International media comes to Bhutan in the 21st Century ............................................ 5
      2.1.1 About Bhutan ...................................................................................................... 7
   2.2 Media in Bhutan ........................................................................................................ 11
      2.2.1 TV and radio audiences in Bhutan ...................................................................... 11
      2.2.2 Media impacts in Bhutan .................................................................................... 15
   2.3 Globalisation and local media ................................................................................... 17
      2.3.1 Importance of geographic localism .................................................................. 27
      2.3.2 The role of local media during disasters .............................................................. 33
      2.3.3 Relevance to local communities ....................................................................... 37
   2.4 Changes in social life and culture ............................................................................. 39
      2.4.1 Television and girls in Fiji .................................................................................. 40
      2.4.2 Family impacts from media .............................................................................. 41
   2.5 Bhutan’s neighbourhood - aspects of media in Asia ................................................... 43
      2.5.1 Cultural change and satellite television – India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka 45
      2.5.2 Local media in Nepal ........................................................................................ 51
      2.5.3 Global television and Korean women ................................................................ 53
   2.6 Theoretical perspective - Duality of Structure ........................................................... 54

3 Materials and Methods .................................................................................................. 60
   3.1 Research questions .................................................................................................... 60
   3.2 Constructivist epistemology ...................................................................................... 61
   3.3 Qualitative inquiry, ethnographic research and in-depth interviewing ...................... 62
   3.4 Research design and methods .................................................................................. 65
      3.4.1 In-depth interviews ............................................................................................. 67
      3.4.2 Documentary evidence ...................................................................................... 68
      3.4.3 Researcher observation and experience ............................................................... 69
   3.5 Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 69
List of Tables

Table 1  Importance of news service to the ABC Newcastle radio audience................................................................. 31
Table 2  ABC Newcastle audience preferences by issue .......................................................................................................................... 32
Table 3  Summary of Research Methods and Process .............................................................................................................................. 72
Table 4  Summary of Participants’ Background and Details ....................................................................................................................... 80
Table 5  Estimates of the total household amount of electronic media consumption per day ............................................................ 91
Table 6  Estimates of individual consumption of local media or international television ............................................................... 97
Table 7  Summary of findings relating to emergent themes ...................................................................................................................... 198
Table 8  Summary of findings from the Media Impact Study 2008 as they relate to emergent themes … 216

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of Bhutan showing the 20 Dzongkhags .............................................................................................................................. 9
Figure 2. Age and Gender of Bhutanese Interviewees ............................................................................................................................ 79
Figure 3. Example of structure – agency – action duality .......................................................................................................................... 242
Abstract

Using a constructivist epistemology and following the model of duality of structure proposed as part of Giddens’s (1982) theory of structuration, an ethnographic approach was undertaken using in-depth interviewing to analyse perceptions of change in Bhutanese society, following the introduction of television. Twenty seven in-depth interviews were conducted with Bhutanese participants across a range of occupations, age groups and locations. Within limitations researcher observation was undertaken in addition to the collection of documentary evidence from the field. Field interview data was transcribed verbatim and themes and ideas were established and categorised. A triangulation style of evaluation used data from the in-depth interviews plus documentary evidence, including audience studies from Bhutan. Analysis was undertaken of participants’ perceptions of changes to daily life from before the introduction of television to after television had been integrated into the majority of urban households. Two major quantitative studies were used to compare the findings. The primary research question was: how has the introduction of global media changed local forms of communication and culture from the perspectives of Bhutanese people?

Multi channel international television was introduced into Bhutan in 1999 as part of the Kingdom’s drive towards modernisation and move to become more integrated into the global economy. At the same time the local public broadcasting organisation, the BBS, introduced a local television station. Prior to this Bhutan did not have television and most Bhutanese people lived in isolation with very little contact with, and knowledge of, the world outside their country. Bhutan is a small Himalayan Kingdom with a high proportion of the population not literate. Therefore, the electronic media plays an important role in educating, informing and entertaining the population. However, while television was provided by the state at an affordable level, the internet has remained unaffordable to the majority of the population. The impact of the sudden introduction of globalised television content to the media naïve society is examined, as is the role of localism in the culturally diverse, multi lingual population.

Bhutanese people were found to value international content. Program preferences and the amount of viewing had significant impact on the actions of, and interactions between, people in their daily lives. Perceived changes in culture were attributed, predominantly, to the influence of television programs. Substantial changes to the rules relating to communication in households were identified, which had significant impact on the passing down of cultural heritage from the older generation to the younger. The introduction of new resources and decisions of individuals led to changes in the rules and structures of some aspects of society, which led to substantial changes in the daily lives of Bhutanese people.