Discourse Analysis: How Bhutanese Issues are Discussed Online?

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With the introduction of the Internet, online news sites are encouraging ordinary people to discuss and address their issues. Employing critical discourse analysis approach, this paper analyses the discursive representation of news articles published on tsheringtobgay.com. A critical discourse analysis of articles published on the site reveals that Bhutanese news issues are discussed through two main discursive constructions: the discursive construction of Bhutanese culture and moral responsibility, and the discursive construction of national politics. Within these two constructions, five major techniques are identified by which news discourses are constructed. The analysis concludes that articles published on the sampled site describe the Bhutanese people as being responsible and generous and encourage readers to enhance their mutual understanding, promoting peaceful coexistence in society. However, the news articles are critical of politicians and sceptic about government plans and programs.

Keywords: Blog; democracy; Internet; journalism; issues

The advent of modern technology has facilitated a new venue of personal expression where people from diverse backgrounds discuss issues of public concern through a variety of multimedia and communication systems. They organize political campaigns and rallies, and mobilize a network of people across the country in support of their favourite candidates. Publishing political views and opinions on the Internet, they challenge the coverage of news provided by the mainstream media. The most plausible manner of perceiving this venue consists of several culturally fragmented cyberspaces that occupy a virtual public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002; Joyce, 2007), which is dependent largely on the local and global communication system.

Thus through various forms of online journalism, such as blogs and podcasts, ordinary people are now able to express their views and address their common issues. This means that political opinions expressed online may not be different from those that take place in face-to-face interactions. Thus the advance towards the freedom of expression achieved through political struggles, along with the online nature of communication, has led scholars to suggest that the Internet may offer a space where people may engage in political debates for a change. It is in this context that this paper aims to examine discursive strategies employed by tsheringtobgay.com, a political blog dedicated to the issues of Bhutan and Bhutanese people.

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Country Profile

Almost completely cut off from the rest of the world for centuries, Bhutan is a small country, which lies between two countries: India and China. Until the first quarter of the seventeenth century, Bhutan mainly existed as a battlefield for warring chiefs. However, it adopted a hereditary monarchy in 1907, coming into contact with the outside world, and has started letting in some aspects of the outside world in recent decades while guarding its cultural values. It made its political transition from an absolute to constitutional monarchy in 2008, becoming the youngest democratic country in the world. As well as being a tiny country, Bhutan is also the most sparsely populated country amongst South Asian nations, with a total population of 797,765 people (World Bank, 2016). Today, Bhutan is frequently described as being one of the fastest growing economies in the world, with a projected growth of over 11% in 2018 (International Monetary Fund, 2016).

The Bhutanese society is centered around the practice of Buddhism, which is conceived as informing all aspects of life and to help people grow towards greater enlightenment, and the Bhutanese people have become particularly known for their equal management of spiritual and material happiness in the world. In contrast to the rest of the world, Bhutan measures the well-being of its people by Gross National Happiness (GNH) instead of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2006, *The Business Week*, an American weekly business magazine published by Bloomberg, rated Bhutan as the first happiest country in Asia and the eighth happiest country in the world (One World Education, 2016).

Bhutan is made up of several different religions, cultures, and languages, although it does not have its own ethnic groups that may be classified as indigenous inhabitants, as the people of Bhutan are all migrants from outside countries (Chadha, 1982). Thus the national identity of the Bhutanese people is often described using a list of several different aspects that are linked to the origin of people, religions, geographic landscapes, or even indicators that measure the quality of life. A few examples include 'Indo-Burmese origin' (Schoubroeck, 1999), 'Buddhist or Buddhism' (Hutt, 1996), 'gross national happiness' (Braun, 2009), and 'happy society' (Hisayoshi, 2013). These themes, which are related to multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, are now emerging as new issues for discussions in relation to the construction of the national identity of the Bhutanese people (Spring, 2007; Hisayoshi, 2013).

However, the population of Bhutan may be classified into three broad ethnic groups for this study. Firstly, the Ngalong in the western and northern parts of the country who are mainly of Tibetan origin; Secondly, the Sharchop, who are believed to be a mix of Tibetan, South Asian and Southeast Asian descendants, in eastern districts. Lastly, the Lhotshampa who live in the southern part of the country and are mainly of Nepalese origin (Shappi, 2005). Over one hundred thousand of these Lhotshampa are now living in different parts of the world as political refugees. Not surprisingly, all of these groups have their own *lingua franca*, i.e. Dzongkha for the Ngalong in the north, Tshangla for the Sharchop in the east, and Nepalese for the Lhostsampa in southern foothills. The Dzongkha language, which is derived from Tibet, now serves as the national language for Bhutan.

Media and Development

The Bhutanese people lived in relative seclusion for centuries. Thus the development of the media in Bhutan only began after the government introduced *The Kuensel*, an internal government bulletin, in 1967. The Bhutan Broadcasting Service was established six years later. Both television and the Internet were introduced in 1999, and since the liberalization of media policy in 2006, the number of media outlets began growing considerably in all

formats: the print, broadcast, and online. Today, Bhutanese television programmes are available in more than forty Asian countries, from Turkey in the West to Indonesia in South East Asia.

There are currently eleven newspapers (seven in English and four in Dzongkha) and five radio stations, including one community radio operated by Sherubtse College in eastern Bhutan. Radio is the main source of news and information for the majority of population in the country, although television penetration has increased in recent years, giving the rural population a more access to both local and international news and entertainment. *The Bhutan Times,* which was published in 2006, is the first privately owned newspaper in the country.

Bhutan is a fairly small-scale economy in terms of advertising, and thus, the government still remains the biggest advertiser. A 2007 survey revealed that the government places more than 80 per cent of the advertisings in national newspapers that are loyal to the government (Wood, 2007) as the private sector media continues to struggle for its survival. Several media outlets, including *The Bhutan Youth,* a weekly newspaper, and Radio High, a local FM station, were closed down recently after suffering financial losses. *The Bhutan Observer,* the country's second private newspaper, also suspended its print edition and went Web-only in 2013 for financial reasons.

Even as the private media in Bhutan is in dire straits, it continues to perform the role of a watchdog by criticising the government's policies and by investigating corruptions and malpractices in the country's political systems. For example, in 2012, the Bhutanese media investigated corruption scandals on the Gyelpozhing land case and the Bhutan Lottery and Education City scams involving influential and powerful people, including a former Prime Minister and some of his cabinet ministers. The 2013 National Assembly Election was fiercely fought, and the former ruling party's (The Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party led by Jigme Yoser Thinley) defeat was seen as a result of the coverage of corruptions by the media (Rai, 2016).

The impact of media in Bhutan is also visible in the lifestyle of young population, although access to the media and the interest of people may vary between the old and the young, the population of rural and urban areas, and the rich and the poor. With the introduction of the Internet, online news sites are now emerging as an alternative media, and various online news sites and social-media outlets are giving ordinary people a platform to express their political views, challenging policymakers.

Despite the introduction of liberal media policies, the government continues to monitor the media for political reasons. Thus the media system of Bhutan represents somewhere in-between the pure market (US) model and the two-tier, a dichotomous (Russia) model, in which the government controls some media houses, including the national television, and promotes its political ideology (Rai, 2016). In recent years, the government has started promoting the use of the Internet for social and economic development, although it uses various measures to control the content for political and religious reasons. Thus a few Bhutanese news sites are now being operated abroad to promote a greater democracy in the country.

According to the Internet World States (2016), internet users in Bhutan by mid 2016 made up 39 per cent of the total population, with 4 per cent having landline and 76 per cent mobile phones. The country ranks 94nd out of 180 countries in the 2016 Reporters Without Borders press freedom rankings (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

This study uses a socio-cognitive framework of critical discourse analysis, focusing on the concept of 'representation' (Van Dijk, 1995), and investigates how discourses on the nation,

people and culture are reproduced in the coverage of tsheringtobgay.com. This study is critical in a sense that it primarily aims to focus on the structural relationships of dominance as manifested in the coverage of tsheringtobgay.com. Central to this study are the ideology and concept of representation. The term *ideology* refers to the 'basic framework of social cognition, shared by members of social groups, constituted by relevant selections of sociocultural values, and organized by an ideological schema that represents the self-definition of a group' (Van Dijk, 1995, p.248). Representations are socially shared forms of knowledge that are organized around ideas about group identities, particularly important about the national identity, which is often structured in ways that maximize differences between 'us' and 'them' (Van Dijk, 2009).

By revising and reconstructing myths, historical and cultural achievements, and national characteristics that are central to the discourses of nation, people and national identity, the media is seen to play an important role to inform the public in times of changing circumstances. However, news discourses of the traditional media legacy press often emphasize the discourse of those in power (Chan, 2012), and thus the ways in which discourses are constructed in the media vary from country to country. This means that the media chooses items that are delivered to consumers, playing a significant role in shaping readers' views on the nation, people and their national identity how they see themselves, and how they see others in the world. In such political circumstances, online news sites may play an important role in constructing a narrative of a nation, people and the national identity of people.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was chosen due to its relationship with the study, and tsheringtobgay.com was sampled for analysis, as the site was unique for this study: it was one of the English-language blogs in operation from within Bhutan during this study, it rejected some dominant practices of common blogs, such as placing commercial advertising on the Internet, and it was dedicated to promoting the political views of the author rather than offer independent news on current affairs.

The year 2012 was chosen for this study because of its relevance – the Bhutanese media was covering high-profile corruption scandals, sparking debates among the Bhutanese in homeland and abroad; and the future of refugees living in different parts of the world was being discussed in several different host nations, including Nepal.

Articles for this analysis were collected from 5 January to 23 November 2012, as the site published its news articles during this period. The search yielded 107 articles; however, the data collection process was restricted to articles that focused on general information, such as good wishes to members of the royal family, and general notice. After eliminating such articles, a total of thirty-two articles remained for this study. The coding process began with careful analysis of texts for key themes guided by questions:

(i)   How is the Bhutanese culture represented?
(ii)   How is the representation of Bhutanese politics discursively linked to the future of Bhutan?
(iii)   How is the Bhutanese national identity discursively presented?
(iv)   Which major actors are identified in articles and how are they represented (positive, negative, or neutral)?

Findings and Analysis

Initial analysis was followed by multiple readings and revisions of themes until they could be organized into meaningful clusters that recurred in multiple texts throughout this

study. Findings were summarized within two broad themes related to Bhutanese cultures and politics, and five major discursive techniques were identified by which discourses were constructed in the coverage of news.

Discursive Construction of Social and Moral Responsibility

The central concern for tsheringtobgay.com articles was about a new way of life in modern Bhutan. Thus most articles proposed for a change to improve the quality of life. However, they also urged readers to continue with their traditional way of lives, practicing Buddhism. Two techniques were identified which were used to construct discourses on the above theme.

Social and Moral Responsibility: The Bhutanese society aspires to survive through collective efforts and sacrifice, and therefore, tshergingtobgay.com articles frequently discuss the cultural values of Bhutan, focusing on collectiveness and moral responsibility. For example, public complaints about unrepaired roads in capital Thimpu are described: '...most [Bhutan's roads] are narrow, riddled with potholes, and have not seen any form of maintenance for years. Naturally, many local residents are frustrated. One such resident is Aum Thinley Lham. She lives in Taba and, for the longest time, has complained bitterly about the state of her road. But instead of continuing to grumble, she decided to take matters into her own hands; she has decided to repair the road herself ...If we want to enjoy good roads, good schools and good parks, we better learn, like Aum Thinley Lham, to contribute' (tsheringtobgay.com, 15 March 2012). Such descriptions suggest that every citizen in Bhutan is expected to bear his or her share of social responsibility in the development of the country. Here, the article moves beyond news reporting to urge readers to undertake good works for the benefit of the community. There is no suggestion that the local or national government should take responsibility for such repairs, but instead there is the expectation that individuals should literally take up tools themselves for the greater good of Bhutanese society.

Tsheringtobgay.com articles also frequently encourages readers to build a harmonious society by performing moral responsibility. For example, an article on a boy sentenced to jail for unknowingly smuggling tobacco into Bhutan describes: 'First, we should apologize. We should apologize and take full responsibility for arrogantly (and foolishly) passing a law that quickly subjected so many of our people to untold pain and suffering. '... Sonam Tshering and others like him are in jail because of us. The least we must now do is try our best to get him out' (tsheringtobgay.com, 24 January 2012). By focusing on the first person 'we' (actor), the article promotes the concept of 'collectiveness' and 'moral responsibility' to build a harmonious society in which Bhutanese people work together, sharing their joys and sorrows.

Bhutanese Culture and Buddhism: Bhutan has unbroken Buddhist culture and spirituality is embedded in daily life of Bhutanese people. Thus tsheringtobgay.com articles frequently urge readers to stick to the Bhutanese culture, focusing on the philosophy of Buddhism. For example, an article on the theme reads: '...the men yelled catcalls at them; then they threw some remnants at them; and when my wife protested, they bombarded with even heavier remains from the prayer ceremonies. And who were the perpetrators? A couple of monks, in robes...my wife and daughter were harassed by [Buddhist] monks, whose mission it is to spread the dharma' (tsheringtobgay.com, 21 March 2012). By discussing growing crimes in society, this article is concerned about the declining practice of Buddhism in Bhutan, which is seen as a philosophy of education maintaining an ideal society in the world.

In fact, the Bhutanese culture is expected to manifest in every aspect of life in Bhutan: 'A couple of friends and I went out for lunch the other day. We ate at Cousins… the food at Cousins [was] good…but in fact, there was very little that was really Bhutanese on the table; almost all the ingredients had been imported from India' (tsheringtobgay.com, 18 March 2012). This article is concerned about a declining food production in Bhutan, which has led the Bhutanese food industry to be dependent on neighbouring country India, forcing to import foreign food cultures.

A Bhutanese Way of Complacency: A common technique used by tsheringtobgay.com articles to assure readers that Bhutan will remain the happiest county in the world is to discuss GNH, i.e. the well-being of the Bhutanese people. To justify arguments, the concept of GNH is frequently described as a way of attaining ultimate happiness – that not every people in the world would have in life: '…in spite of their all successes, South Koreans are still grappling to identify themselves … on the other hand, Bhutan, a small country tucked away in the Himalayas with barely 600,000 people and with one of the smallest economies in the world possesses a powerful brand, i.e. GNH', (tsheringtobgay.com, 7 February 2012). By referring to the progress and economic standard of South Korea and the perceived 'powerful brand' possessed by the Bhutanese people, the article articulates a contrast 'us' and 'them' and assures readers that the Bhutanese way of life is better.

Similarly, when everyday life of Bhutanese people is discussed, readers are assured that Bhutan has many things to offer that may make everyone's experience joyful: 'I woke up to a glorious morning. The skies were clear. And the heavens promised a warm, sunny day. That's how it's supposed to be at this time of the year – warm, sunny and bright: perfect weather for harvesting paddy' (tsheringtobgay.com, 11 October 2012). By discussing the way of Bhutanese everyday life, tsheringtobgay.com articles discuss Bhutanese life experience with complacency and a self-pride.

Sometimes articles even describe Bhutan as being capable of competing against the outside world at an international level. For example, an article on a national sports competition reads: '…but what if we had about 1500 sportsmen, spread across the country, all using the latest equipment, and all putting in long training hours to compete in one national tournament? If that were to happen, we would then surely achieve the best international standards at that sport. In fact, that did happen, very recently…the tournament, which was conducted in 10 different venues over 7 whole weeks, saw Jigme Norbu of Blue Poppy Tours hit an incredible 46 Kareys in his 45 leagues rounds (tsheringtobgay.com, 12 September 2012). By referring to '46 Kareys in his 45 leagues rounds', readers are encouraged to be optimistic with the future of Bhutanese sports, although the country has poor sports infrastructures.

Discursive Construction of the Government and Politics

As a young democracy, Bhutan faces a number of challenges—from delivering good governance to maintaining its reputation as one of the world's happiest countries. Thus in their discursive constructions, tsheringtobgay.com articles are concerned about politicians' and the government's ability to live up to their duty of public service. Two techniques are used to construct discourses on the governance and politics.

Poor Governance and Inept Politicians: A theme that frequently appears in multiple tsheringtobgay.com articles is about poor governance and inept politicians. Most articles frequently urge politicians to be careful when making decisions, and often reject plans and programs introduced by the government. For example, an article on the government's proposal to make the Prime Minister 'GNH Ambassador for life' categorically rejects: 'First,

the Parliament did not follow due process. Second, no one knows what 'GNH Ambassador for life' entails–- what means, and how much it will cost. Third, the nominee is a serving member of the Parliament – such titles should be reserved for past members only, if at all, and only after they've proven themselves. Fourth, the nominee is currently under investigation for the Gyelpozhing land scam case. And fifth, it is outside the scope of the Parliament's authority' (tsheringtobgay.com, 12 July 2012). By rejecting the government's proposal categorically, readers are informed of the government's decisions to be wrong.

At times articles even challenge the government by positioning themselves as the authority: '...I questioned the government for not having a proper system in place to respond to natural disaster, a system that provides meaningful relief and offers adequate support for reconstruction... The earthquake had damaged thousands of houses...I can think of one reason: the government does not have a proper understanding of the ground reality' (tsheringtobgay.com, 26 January 2012). By suggesting that the government has no 'proper system in place', the article discusses weak political systems in the country. As no experts or sources are cited in their arguments, these articles may be described to be highly subjective in their presentation, however.

Discontentment: A common technique used to assure readers that Bhutanese people are not happy with the country's current political systems is to discuss national issues negatively, and blame the government and politicians for all faults: '...in 2008 and 2009, the Chinese army intruded deep into our country no less than 17 times; they have built temporary huts inside our country; almost every year. Tibetans enter our country illegally...' (tsheringtobgay.com, 17 January 2012).

When government officials and technical experts are quoted in articles, attention is often given to 'results', not to 'processes' involved. For example, an article published on 14 January 2012 reads: '...I asked the agriculture minister, to tell us what happened to that proposal, and, if possible, to let us know when we can expect crop insurance to be launched. The Agriculture Minster's answer, which was inadequate and insulting, was that his ministry had started a human wildlife conflict endowment fund, and that none of the members of Parliament had contributed to that fund'.

A similar article expresses its concerns about the government's handling of rupees crisis: '[During a television talk show] Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba and Lynpo Wangdi Norbu went to great lengths to inform us that the so-called rupee crunch wasn't a crisis.... They told us that the situation was normal.... [and] that we should not be worried, that we should not panic.' This description is more concerned about the ways in which the crisis is being addressed than about why it happened and how the crisis could be handled effectively. While the articles are critical of the government and politicians, they fail to offer solutions.

Discussions and Conclusion

This study reveals that tsheringtobgay.com publishes articles focusing on issues that are related to people, culture and politics of Bhutan, making two implicit claims. The first implicit claims that Bhutan is home to diverse traits and beliefs is made through three discursive techniques: social and moral responsibility, Bhutanese culture and Buddhism, and a Bhutanese way of complacency. The second implicit claims that the Bhutanese government and politicians are failing to perform their duty of public service is made through two discursive techniques: poor governance and inept politicians, and discontentment.

Particular important is the representation of Bhutanese culture which is based on the philosophy of Vajrayana Buddhism and which differs significantly in its ritual, liturgy,

and monastic organization from other schools of Buddhism. Buddhism is seen as a way of achieving happiness and a success, and thus Bhutanese people are encouraged to preserve their unique culture. However, this effort contradicts in practice because, on the one hand, Bhutan is letting in some aspects of outside cultures to integrate itself into the international community. On the other hand, it is encouraging its citizens to protect their culture from outside influences.

In most descriptions, Bhutanese people are described to be the happiest people in the world, and the articles articulate a contrast 'us' and 'them', thereby positioning the Bhutanese as happy, patient and morally responsible as those who fulfilled their civic duty, for example, Alum Thinley Lham. However, this claim is contradicted by hopes and dreams of over 100,000 people who have been forced to flee their home country to become refugees in different parts of the world. Thus while Bhutan is committed to a multi-party democracy, there is still some forms of authoritarianism in the country's political systems.

Bhutan is described as a small economy and dedicated to bringing about changes in the country, and the articles frequently persuade readers to bear their share of responsibility to create harmonious society and to contribute to the development of the country. The national identity of Bhutan is constructed focusing on the Bhutanese culture, religion, and spiritual innovations, such as GNH, which is discussed as a counter concept of GDP in other countries. The language of the Bhutanese national identity is emotive.

What is remarkable is that most tsherigingtobgay.com articles are critical of politicians and the government. They are sceptical of government plans and programs, and thus criticize the government and politicians for not making right decisions and challenge the government proposals categorically, such as in the case of appointing the Prime Minister as a GNH Ambassador. They accuse politicians of not living up to their task of public services and of mishandling national crises, such as 'rupees crunch' and 'natural disaster'. However, as experts and official sources are rarely cited in such articles, tsherigingtobgay.com arguments are subjective in their presentation.

To summarize, Bhutan characterizes unity in diversity as well as an amalgamation of spirituality and materialism. Bhutanese people are encouraged to enhance mutual understanding, promoting peaceful co-existence in society. They are also described to be morally confident and capable of competing international competitions, thus positive in interpretations. In contrast, politicians and the government's programs are viewed sceptically, thus negative in interpretations. Thus although Bhutan is widely described to be the happiest countries in the world, everyday life of Bhutanese people lies in between a hope for better future and a growing discontent with current social and political situations.

Scopes of future research: The findings presented here in the coverage of on tsheringtobgay.com have implications for political discourses in other policy areas and in other international contexts. The construction of discursive regime that excludes mainstream sources debases democratic processes of policymaking. An important direction for future research is to compare official media discourses to citizens' discourses in alternative media (e.g., citizen journalism).

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