

A concept whose time has arrived

Vision for Information Society: *Bhutan in the 21st century*

Ministry of Information and Communications

Royal Government of Bhutan

Table of Contents

Background.....	3
The vision	4
Mission.....	5
The Information Society	6
The Bhutanese media.....	6
Oral	6
Television.....	6
Radio	6
Internet.....	6
Film (music)	7
Publishing – incorporate printing	7
Gaming	7
Mobile phone	7
MEDIA POLICY	8
a) Infrastructure.....	8
b) Education.....	8
c) Content (including advertising).....	8
INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY.....	10
Infrastructure.....	10
Skills (referring to systems and human capital)	11
Creativity.....	12
CULTURE – THE CREATIVE ARTS.....	14
Evolution	14
Contemporary culture	14
Virtual Bhutan	15
CONCLUSION	16

Background

This concept paper identifies a structural change for the Ministry of Information and Communications to make the two increasingly important sectors – information and transport - respond to the evolution of Bhutanese society and, therefore, relevant to Bhutan’s development. The purpose of intellectualising this change is to provide clearer focus on these two broad sectors by separating them in terms of their policies and activities. Even more important, the underlying aim is that people involved in the sectors, as well as society as a whole, must be inspired by a clear understanding of the functions of these sectors, as well as their personal roles, in the development process.

The treatment of the transport sector is brief because it is proposed to be taken up as a more comprehensive initiative with professional help from international experts. We present here **“A Vision for the Information Society”** that will be the basis for the future growth of MOIC and the broader sector that we call the Information Society. The premise is that the information society – encompassing ICT, the media, and elements of the performing arts - is changing so dramatically that it can be relevant only by being dynamic. Such a concept is both a response to and anticipation of global trends.



The vision

The vision of the Bhutanese information sector (with MOIC at the helm) is to nurture an information society bonded by a shared national consciousness. This consciousness will be the foundation of a national identity that is built on the values of Gross National Happiness.

Premise

A basic shift here is that we are going beyond the past vision of connectivity that has strong but limited connotations of technology, therefore limiting the horizon. This broader vision connects a national value system to the concept of national identity.

As an all-pervasive force, the information society has the role to promote national identity as a shared sense of social, cultural, economic and political values and to nurture the emotional ties of citizens to our country through a shared understanding of our problems, our successes and failures, our pride and disappointments.

In this day and age national identity ultimately means security because the threat posed by disconnected or alienated citizens is greater than threats from external armies. The information sector shapes and influences and is therefore responsible for behaviour and values.



Mission

To establish a clear understanding of the information society and the role of the information society. This concept paper defines the information society and describes the mandate of each of the distinct, yet converging, elements that constitute the information society.

Premise

What makes people in Merak Sakten, Samdrup Jongkhar, Dorokha, Laya, Pema Gatshel, Thimphu, Bumthang, etc. think alike? We talk about creating a knowledge-based society, an intelligent community, an informed population... what does it mean?

The fact that they are connected, they listen to the same radio programmes and folk tales, watch the same TV programmes and films, read the same newspapers and books, and enjoy the same songs and dances and festivals. They will, inevitably, also visit the same monasteries as well as museums and theatres. That is the sharing of values.

Based on shared values people should become, not just active consumers but active citizens.



The Information Society

We define the Information society as the converged fields of media, broader information technology, and culture – culture being interpreted here as the visual and performing arts and literary creations. Viewed in its relevance to broader society and their social, economic and political impact, these elements cannot be separated so their growth must be nurtured through interlinked policies and plans.

The Bhutanese media

The definition of the Bhutanese media, potentially a seamless sector, is drawn from what has been and what will be a Bhutanese experience. This concept presents eight different media although some of them converge with ICT and culture, for example, film is referred to as media, culture, and is not possible without technology.

Oral

This Bhutanese tradition must be preserved. The oral tradition ranges from the legacy of storytelling that kept history and culture alive for generations to the rumours and gossip that have their own impact on society.

Television

The power of the image has had a noticeable impact on Bhutanese society and is, in fact, an issue of concern in terms of its negative influences.

Radio

Radio, somewhat neglected because of the immediacy of TV, has the widest reach. New radio services are showing disturbing signs. What are our children listening to and learning? Thousands of young children are talking like the RJs.

Internet

Known as new media, this is not new anymore. It is vastly underused in terms of reaching out to the young generation, or the “net” generation. The government needs to do much more to reach out to the netizens who are growing up capable of multiple activity but with short attention spans. Do we know what young Bhutanese

think of the government? What do they expect from the government? How can government reach out to netizens?

MOIC proposes to experiment with a division of computer savvy youth. This could be a team of youth who may be uncomfortable in ghos and kiras but completely at home in cyberspace. They will be in touch with Bhutanese youth, talk to them in their own language, asking them these questions, providing feedback

Film (music)

Also an element of culture, film creates role models and shapes values. Music is an important ingredient of films but fits into the culture department.

Publishing – incorporate printing

Publishing, a powerful medium, is a responsibility. In countries like Singapore responsibility is pinned directly on printers who cannot get away by saying someone else did the writing. Publishing is also linked with the culture of reading and writing that needs to be encouraged.

The concept of a printing city is currently being pursued by MOIC, the aim being to develop the Bhutanese printing industry.

Gaming

The video game is an increasingly powerful medium because thousands of children spend long hours in game stalls. We cannot move youth away from games so it is critical that the education system reaches out into the world of video and computer games.

Mobile phone

There are 10-20,000 computers, an estimated 75,000 TV sets and, by contrast, 280,000 mobile phone. Korea's Oh-My-News is the most penetrating media because of the cell phone. Farmers who have no computer or TV now have mobile phones. The concept of video on mobile videos, has also come to Bhutan, and is potentially a powerful tool. Bhutanese people are already using the mobile phone as radios and for Internet. Soon they will watch TV.



MEDIA POLICY

Media is public space and media must have social responsibilities and obligations. They will have to be continuously nurtured with government support to achieve professionalism. The support should also extend to all the eight identified media. MOIC proposes three approaches to media support:

a) Infrastructure

The government already supports infrastructure by waiving taxes on some items. MOIC recommends that the government waive all taxes on infrastructure to be used by all media. The government will also take steps to subsidise newsprint and software. The information highway will cause a major boost in media reach.

b) Education

Media education and media literacy is becoming more critical by the day. The government will promote all forms of media education: formal education at school and tertiary levels; trainings by public and private sector institutions and organisations; scholarships and grants by government and international donors.

c) Content (including advertising)

When we talk of media it is content that influences society. It is not the TV set, or even the access, but what is shown on the screen that affects people. Advertising is a particularly powerful form of content. MOIC recommends to all government and private agencies to adopt a professional approach to disseminating content to avoid wasting funds and missing the audience.

All content – including advertising – is meant to reach the right consumer. Government/public funds should not be distributed as kudu but allocated for the development of content. Government/public agencies must behave like professional content providers and advertisers by selecting the media that reaches the audience they want to reach and funding innovative content. The media could range from film and TV to newspapers and radio to mobile phones. The impact of the content must also be assessed.

MOIC will audit the reach and the audience of different media to give society a clear picture that helps content providers to choose the media that reaches their target audience.

Dzongkha needs to be subsidized and developed. We have gone beyond the stage where media is spared from the national language to survive. Two current strategies include subsidizing Dzongkha media for students and developing Dzongkha software for media. More needs to be done.

The Right To Information bill is being drafted to define information that needs to be placed in the public domain and to demonstrate how this should be done. RTI will include recommendations for information sharing and media spokespersons.



INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

The biggest challenge for Bhutanese society in coming to terms with ICT is to understand the nature of ICT. While the typewriter and telephone were obvious utilities the computer and Internet are more intimidating. At this stage, because the virtual world is moving so much faster than the perceived physical existence, the real challenge is to get over existing mindsets. These mindsets, that often translate into resistance to change, and is common to developing societies, are what prevents developing countries from becoming “developed”. So we need fundamental shifts and transformation of mindsets. We must accept that the virtual world is a real world.

ICT is a vehicle, not a sector. We need to look at ICT as the “empowerment” of people and society. This is why ICT is more important as content than technology. It is now the basis for progress in every sector. This is why ICT is a critical element of the information society. MOIC presents ICT in three basic formats:

Infrastructure

Even as Bhutan improves connections outside the border and becomes a part of the digital world we have an ambitious mission for internal connectivity. Architecturally, we are looking at a network of fast broadband connections from Thimphu to the 20 dzongkhags through fiber optic cables. The connection from dzongkhags to the geogs and then villages will be made through a variety of technology including wireless technology. These “spokes” lead to knowledge centres that we call Community Information Centres in the dzongkhags, geogs, satellite towns, and eventually villages to function as information hubs to serve rural communities.

Most government content should be disseminated through the broadband network. Here we need to streamline the services and clean up the overlaps that exist in terms of planning and implementation. For example the concept of CIC has been planned before as the GICs, MCT, MIC. Post offices, banks, and other services like telecom and power could also be duplicating their presence in rural areas.

The explosion of mobile phone use is an important part of the network, reaching out to remote parts of the country with the potential of closing the digital gap.

Skills (referring to systems and human capital)

Bhutan is committed to e-governance. The goal of good governance, a pillar of GNH, does not change. ICT makes it more possible than it has ever been. Today, we need to use ICT to transform government systems by re-structuring them.

The world has attached “e” as a prefix to every form and every aspect of governance. We understand that e-governance is not guaranteed by infrastructure but by the ICT systems that are developed, installed and, most important, used.

DIT has developed a number of systems that are now being introduced to different ministries. These include the Office Procedures Automation OPA that is being transferred to a number of government organisations.

Office Procedure Automation (OPA) to improve the efficiency and transparency of the government

1. Agricultural Marketing services to empower our agrarian population by providing them real time prices for their produces.
2. Common e-Platform: which will facilitate, and accelerate the development of many more Public Services using ICTs
- The Ministry is also working on other services which will soon come online:
 1. Bhutan Bio-Security System: which will enable BAFRA to provide their certificates at a substantially reduced time online
 2. IntraGov Portal: which will facilitate better communications and interaction between Government organizations
 3. Thrimsung Crime Information System: which will modernize the Royal Bhutan Police and connect all Dzongkhag Police stations together
 4. Security Clearance System: which will reduce the time taken to get a security clearance certificate from around a week to less than a day
 5. Web based Zhiyog Personnel Information System which will speed up and improve the management of Human Resources in the Civil Service
 6. Hospital Information Management: which will improve the delivery of health services by the National Referral hospital

7. Education e-Portal: which will enable Teachers and students better interaction using the improved communication facilities of the Internet
8. Online Audit Clearance: which will enable government personnel to apply for audit clearance without needing to submit paper forms to the Royal Audit

We are aware that developing the systems is the easy part. If they are not used they become a waste of resources. Objectives goals outcomes more important than procedures. Security also becomes an important issue as we introduce new technology.

MOIC's experience, even by testing these systems in the ministry itself, is that low digital literacy, the absence of a computer-based work culture, and traditional mindsets, will be problems. But there is also a new acceptance of technology and we see that more government organisations are willing to learn if there is someone to teach.

In an era where citizens of progressive countries are given new dignity by accessing government services in their own homes, Bhutan can at least adopt the technology and the systems that will make some of the known commitments real, for example, transparency accountability, efficiency. ICT also makes governance more inclusive.

More important, as we see from the list, public services are not government oriented but citizen centric. It is a government response to citizens' needs. ICT being a cross-sectoral enabler the civil service functions can converge to establish a "no wrong door" policy.

Creativity

In 1998 the digital national telecom network connected the 20 dzongkhags and major towns. Internet services were introduced in June 1999 with the establishment of Druknet, the first Internet Service Provider (ISP) in the country. While we have a tendency to try to persuade ourselves that we are newcomers in the development process, the concept of time has changed. Ten years is a long time in the digital era when change has become much more rapid.

What is significant is that, after 10 years of Internet, our minds have not really changed. The Internet has not been accepted in the most critical systems of the government. In government purchases, auditors still do not accept the prices listed by manufacturers. Bhutanese officials attend seminars and workshops and undertake many study tours but learn only the terminology and bring back limited changes. Why? The attitude is that “This is for them. We are not ready yet.” Meanwhile other countries have seen that technology comes suddenly, with dramatic impact.

The power of ICT is that it enables creativity in work. This creativity needs to be translated into the loose processes that Mckinsey promotes and the government theoretically accepts. Bhutan can jump several generations of innovation and creativity by being daring.

Creativity means the flexibility and innovation that frees people from routine and repetition and cumbersome processes that were developed for a different time.



CULTURE – THE CREATIVE ARTS

Evolution

In Bhutan, as in many other countries, culture has been perceived to be the basis of national identity. We see culture as the soul of the nation. In its broadest sense, culture has been defined as the way we live, work, learn, and entertain.

In the context of Bhutan's evolution from a feudal society to a modern nation state, culture has been interpreted as being synonymous with religion. This was inevitable because the design of Bhutanese civilization was drawn from Buddhism. The threat perception of a small state did enhance this emphasis on religion as the basis of culture and, therefore, as the essence of national identity.

This approach served Bhutan well and also helped preserve Bhutanese culture. But the past two or three decades have shown that our perception of culture also needs to evolve. Bhutan needs to re-think its approach to cultural evolution and, therefore, create the acceptance of a broader perception of culture. We see two directly related trends today: a conservative approach to cultural preservation by promoting traditions; at the same time we see a neglect of new culture that reflects our new realities.

We face basic questions: is the painting of a thangka spiritual practice or is it art? Isn't the discotheque Bhutanese culture when thousands of Bhutanese youth spend their time in nightclubs? In interpreting Bhutanese culture as largely spiritual heritage we appear to have neglected some important modern cultural institutions, like libraries. Likewise, the emerging visual and performing arts.

Contemporary culture

MOIC sees the need to merge the creative element of contemporary culture into the information society in terms of development planning. This would include the performing arts (dance and music, and theatre) and some visual arts (painting), and literary creations (scripts, books, library). The applied arts (design) are already integrated with the media.

Creativity requires support particularly when it is not commercially orientated. The beauty of this form of creativity is that it is driven by individual commitment, marked by originality and quality, uniqueness. They are experimental and innovative. They need recognition, exposure, education and training, certification, scholarships, research grants, enforcement of copyright, etc.

GNH requires that intangible talents are respected and that culture is celebrated in its diversity. Artists, artisans, dancers, musicians, actors, painters, sculptors, writers need recognition. They need to be driven by individual passion/vision, skill and talent.

The aim is to promote the creation of dynamic and diverse contemporary culture - to express our national identity. Bhutanese culture must be portrayed in the media.

Virtual Bhutan

Today, the development and promotion of culture is strongly geared for tourism. The government's primary target must be the young generation of Bhutanese as an important audience for all cultural activities including museums.

MOIC has initiated a digital library that has grown into the concept of a culturally strong virtual Bhutan. This will not only reach out to potential tourists and the growing Bhutanese diaspora, but involve Bhutanese youth in Bhutan. If today's generation does not come to the dzongs the dzongs must go to them. The idea is that different aspects of Bhutan's cultural heritage – festivals, songs and dances, historical monuments - will be installed in the cyber world where Bhutanese youth spend much of their time.



CONCLUSION

Thus MOIC becomes a ministry of creative clusters as the media, ICT, and the arts converge to form a vibrant information society. The task of building a shared national consciousness is the central mission but the information society is an important player in nation building, given its impact on the culture, society, economy, and politics.

The information society becomes a basis for change in lifestyle and, therefore, the evolution of culture and national identity. As citizens are given more access to information they are better informed and better able to take part in government and politics, the essence of democracy being the empowerment of the people. For Bhutan, the development of cultural industries, that include ICT and the media as viable elements of a modernised private sector, is a necessity, not an option. ICT is also the best tool to reduce pollution of all kinds and de-congest population centres.

These are the four pillars of Gross National Happiness as identified by the government.

The information society is redefining society and the work place for Bhutanese citizens. We leverage creativity and skills to identify and overcome challenges in a world expanded by technology. We create a more sophisticated society. We create a world where ideas are welcome and the only limit is imagination. Citizens realize that work is not a job but a purpose.

