

Editorial Power and Manipulation

On 11 November, coinciding with the birthday celebrations of His Majesty, the Bhutanese media saw yet another development with the debut of *Bhutan Now*, the flashy English language magazine from the owners of *Bhutan Times*. It was a praiseworthy endeavour to be able to bring out such a magazine and, as one of the contributors, I was also eagerly waiting to see the publication. My excitement however was short-lived as, upon seeing my article *Grappling with Change*, I discovered it was significantly rewritten giving it a new voice. The editor has altered my narrative, changed the emphases, dropped some points, and in the process added quite a number of errors and ahistorical and misconceived remarks, all without even informing me. Let me demonstrate this with an example.

The opening sentence of the article goes: '*Two worlds collide when characters from a 12th century myth trade jokes with a tourist from the west*'. In the paper I sent them, I have neither mentioned that Ura Yakchoe story is a 12th century myth nor that the clown character comes from it. I have no grounds to make such remarks. Since I have no evidence for a reasonable dating, I left it undated. Similarly, I have made no allusions as to whether the story is a myth. I think it is not right of us to pass such judgements over age-old traditions. Furthermore, I do not believe the two worlds are colliding or that there is any trading of jokes between the clown and tourists in the festival, as the opening line would have us believe. But this thoughtless sentence was put in my mouth by the editor, and worse still, placed as the opening line. Many other cases of this sort appeared throughout the article.

This incident is negligible seen on its own but it raises for us much greater concerns about the limits of editorial power and ethics of publication. The issue is particularly pertinent in the aftermath of Abi Khaomo's story produced by *Bhutan Times*. What right does the media have to make up stories and opinions? There is no denying that the editor has the prerogative to make stylistic improvements and impose his house rule for all articles to be published but for the editor to assume the liberty to change other people's words to the extent of distorting their opinion and message is outrageous, to say the least. It is also a usual procedure for journal publishers to provide final drafts to the authors before publication, especially if editorial changes have been made. But *Bhutan Now* ignored my requests for the proofs.

Surprisingly, I was not alone in receiving this kind of treatment. In a flurry of complaints, another contributor to the magazine also accused *Bhutan Times* of intellectual dishonesty and sloppiness for publishing her article without sending her the proof of their changes. She also pointed out that *Bhutan Times* violated her privacy publishing her personal email address without her consent, and that many photos were published without due credits. Are these mistakes then merely due to lack of professionalism or an intentional scheme of manipulation?

The changes in my article were certainly deliberate manipulations, probably with a good intention. However, in spinning my words and attributing me new lines without even informing me, the editor has gone beyond his editorial prerogative. Baffled as I was, I lodged a written complaint and as can be expected, the response came in the form of a lukewarm apology. *Bhutan Times* explained that things have been overlooked in the rush to prepare the next issue. But is this acceptable? Can we let a

national paper continue with the same irresponsible attitude and neglect of intellectual propriety? I think it is time for all of us to help our media services mature into a responsible and professional organ of the nation for what they say has far reaching implications on our societies. For now, this complaint on my part is one modest contribution towards that constructive process.

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