

Putting media apps to good use

Thinley Zangmo and Tashi Namgay

In 2008, the country saw a lot of changes that will be remembered in the Bhutanese history. His Majesty the Fifth Druk Gyalpo was crowned, the first ever elections for the National Assembly took place beginning the rule of democratically elected government, and the Constitution was endorsed and signed.

In the same year, both broadband and mobile Internet services were introduced for the first time signaling the start of a new era in the field of communications technology. No longer did one have to use the ancient dial-up modem system that took hours to surf the web.

Global technological innovations were changing the world. In 2004, Facebook was launched and Twitter in 2006. Then iPhone was released in 2007 and then came first Android phones.

The advent of smartphones, social media mobile apps and easy access to mobile Internet services had a profound impact on the Bhutanese society, changing the way people communicate with each other.

Today, there is an estimated 200,000 Facebook users in Bhutan and it is increasing by the day. The same figure or more can be applied to the growing popularity of other social media mobile apps such as WeChat,Viber, WhatsApp, Skype, Line and Instagram, among others.

Recently, a student studying in Australia, Pema Wangmo, created a group in WeChat, a popular mobile text and voice-messaging app, with the hope to connect with her cousins and long-lost friends back home. Just over a week, the group saw more than 20 members from all parts of the country. The group is active with more than a hundred voice messages sent in a day. To keep track of what they talk about, they have divided days for different programmes.

For example, on Tuesdays, the group sings Tsangmo. Competition there is serious indeed. On Wednesdays, the members can sing tunes of any genre and, on Fridays, the group conducts debate on topical issues.

Pg.4>>

Putting media apps to good use

From Pg. 1

"It's a great platform for me to connect with my family and cousins back home. The great thing about such mobile apps is even an illiterate can use it," Pema Wangmo said. "By talking with them this way, I don't feel like I'm far away from home."

Another member of the group, Ugyen Wangdi, who is working as a firefighter in Thimphu, said it's an opportunity for him to showcase his passion for singing. Whenever he has free time, Ugyen sings his heart on WeChat, which his friends and cousins appreciate.

Another WeChat user, Tobgay, a teacher, said he is able to update his friends and family and keep them informed about development activities that are happening in their village.

"Whenever we hold events such as rituals, building a new lhakhang or requesting for donations, we update everyone through WeChat," he said. "It's easy, cheap and effective."

Tshering Wangmo, a college student, uses the same platform to discuss her next move in the Clash of Clans (CoC), a popular mobile gaming app.

"We share pictures and ask for tips to move on to advance in the game," Tshering Wangmo said. "It's a great way to meet other CoC's clan members and join the group, not only in Bhutan but worldwide. That way we can defeat our enemies and win rewards."

While mobile apps are used to connect with others for various purposes, there are organizations such as Tourism Council of Bhutan that also uses mobile apps to discuss issues with the members and stakeholders. The recent issue that the group discussed was Paro Taktshang remaining closed every Tuesday for visitors.

There are also others, especially youth, who are not hesitating to express their views through such social media apps.

A college student, Tshewang Dorji, keeps himself updated with local and international news through such platforms. It has been more than a year since he downloaded Twitter in his smartphone. He is always seen sending tweets to his more than 50 followers.



Smile! It's selfie time



One is never alone with a smartphone around

I can openly tweet about anything and everything. It gives me the freedom to share how I feel everyday, Tshewang Dorji said. "It's a great place to keep oneself updated."

The increasing popularity of mobile apps has a massive impact, mostly a positive, added Tshewang Dorji. "We get to learn many new things and meet new people everyday. It also gives us the platform to write anything and feel free about it."

Kinley Pem, a private employee, is also a serious user of mobile apps. She is always active on WeChat and Facebook. The recent issue she discussed openly online was on the slaughterhouse. "Through such platforms, it helps me form an opinion and express it freely. I think it's an individual's prerogative to speak what they want to unless one doesn't personally attack someone."

But there are also others who have had problems with others on social media apps. A government employee, Tenzin, recalled an incident when he met a woman through an app. They started talking everyday. They became more than just friends. Later, he found out that the woman was married.

"Soon, her husband started calling me and we had a fight over the phone. The woman had lied to me all along," Tenzin said. "These are some of the lessons we learn through such platforms as well. Not always pretty."

However, the problem is when people distribute non-consensual sexual materials through such apps, Tenzin added. "Many don't hesitate to share it to their friends and soon it goes viral. It is demoralizing not only for the woman in the clip but for everyone around."

We need to educate our people, especially youth, on the power of social media and mobile apps. It can either save or destroy a life, said Tenzin.

While social media has its perks, it also has its challenges. To harness the potential of social media to do well and mitigate its dangerous effects, the Department of Information and Media under MoIC has come up with several guidelines under the Social Media Policy.

For citizens:

- **Be a good citizen** - Respect the Constitution, all laws, and other people's rights, including intellectual property, trademarked names and slogans and other copyrighted material
- **Be responsible** - Always act in a constructive manner and exercise good judgment
- **Be transparent** - Be open and transparent about who you are, who you work for, who you represent or who you may be speaking on behalf of
- **Be accurate** - Ensure that what you post is true
- **Be considerate** - Never post malicious, indecent, vulgar, obscene, misleading or unfair content about others, your organization, your friends or your competitors
- **Be careful** - Do not disclose sensitive private information about yourself or others. Do not post confidential or proprietary about your organization. Beware of trolls and scammers