

Bhutan Goes Online: A Modern Folktale



2000-01-28

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[Photo: Memorial Chorten, a religious structure in Thimphu.]

Dangbo Dingbo is the customary way to start off a folktale in Bhutan and roughly translates in English to 'once upon a time.' It's also an appropriate way to open a story on how Bhutan first got connected to the Internet — after all, the Internet is a modern folktale in itself. So . . .

Dangbo Dingbo the tiny Kingdom of Bhutan, nestled high in the Himalayas between Nepal, India, and Tibet, was one of the few countries in Asia without any access to the Internet. It wasn't because its people didn't want access to this global network of information, but rather because, in a time-honoured tradition of carefully preserving the country's unique culture and traditions, Bhutan wanted to make sure that such a move would benefit the people.

Gross National Happiness

After all, this is a country where the concept of 'Gross National Happiness', as proposed by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, is offered as an alternative to 'Gross National Product'. And so, after careful consideration, Internet access was introduced to the country's 600,000 citizens on June 2, 1999, the 25th anniversary of the King's coronation — thus heralding the first chapter in the story of Internet in Bhutan.

Of course, all good stories start with an idea, and the idea for Internet access was hatched when the Bhutan Ministry of Communication's Division of Telecommunications met with program staff from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). IDRC, through its [Pan Asia Networking](#) (PAN) programme, promotes the development of communications infrastructure in the least developed countries of Asia by seed-funding existing organizations involved in networking.

PAN activities

PAN has already been instrumental in setting up Internet Service Provider (ISP) services with local partners in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam. PAN also helps local information providers put content on the Internet through 'PINS' projects in the Philippines, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, and Viet Nam. (PINS stands for "Pan Information and Networking Services.") That first meeting in Bhutan took place almost two years before the launch of the Internet, but was the catalyst for the eventual PAN-Bhutan project and the first Internet service provider in the country, called DrukNet.

At first, the idea was to create an internal web-based 'Intranet' with only e-mail access to the outside world. But Bhutan's push to modernize saw the proposal grow into a full Internet service with a permanent connection to the Internet's backbone and additional funding from other sources. The eventual service was funded by the Royal Government of Bhutan and IDRC, along with the [United Nations Development Programme](#) (UNDP) and its Asia Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP). And while Bhutan might have been cautious before adopting the Internet, once the decision was made the whole project was up and running in just three months — in time to coincide with the King's anniversary celebrations. "When it did come, it came with a bang," notes Sangey Tenzing, Director of the Division of Telecommunications.

Initial hesitance

At the beginning, "the government was not suspicious about the Internet, [but] rather hesitant to get into something they didn't know anything about," adds Thinley Dorji, the PAN-Bhutan Project Leader and Joint-Director of the Division of Telecommunications. "It sounded like too much of an unknown. Everyone was talking about it, the world was talking about it, but not many people knew much about it," he says.

"But now that we have it, we have to see that people use it and benefit from it. If people don't benefit from it I think it's just a white elephant — just a whole lot of computers strung together."

Spreading the benefits

One of the ways of spreading the benefits is to equalize the cost of accessing Internet service throughout the country. The Division of Telecommunications provides service to any location with access to a phone line for the cost of a local call. In this way, it hopes that people in rural areas will have the same opportunities to use the Internet as those in cities. While so far the total number of users is small and can be counted in the hundreds, those who are using the Internet are enthusiastic about its benefits and potential.

One of the first Internet customers was Dago Beda, Managing Director of Etho Metho Tours & Treks, one of Bhutan's many private travel agencies. Beda had been making limited use of e-mail even before the arrival of DrukNet by making an international call to an Internet service in the United States, so she benefited immediately from the lower costs. She adds that the Internet has improved communication between clients and other agents, likening its arrival to that of the fax. "When the fax came to Bhutan we thought it was great. It replaced long-distance telephone calls, which were very expensive, and I never believed that something else would come beyond the fax," she says.

Launch day

"Then came June 2nd, when e-mail and Internet were introduced. We haven't had time to really browse. For us, as soon as it was introduced, we were busy on e-mail with all our travel agents telling them that we had it, so every day we have been busy and it's fantastic."

Another early adopter is Yeshey Dorhi, the owner of the country's first computer dealership. Dorhi was one of the first to sign up when DrukNet started, and in July he became the first customer to host a web site at DrukNet. "It's very useful, particularly in terms of information. If somebody wants computer specifications or something that we may not have, we can just access the Internet and give it to them, so from that point of view it's very good."

Education campaigns

To spread its use beyond the country's initial Internet 'pioneers', DrukNet is now embarking upon a series of education campaigns that aim to make people more aware of the Internet and to train them in how to use it. Central to that aim is the Royal Institute of Management, one of the country's leading training institutions for management and technology and a partner with DrukNet in providing training to other institutions, government departments, as well as the private sector.

Another goal is to connect the nation's schools. "What we've now got to look at is sending a lot more computers to the schools, that would get us somewhere," says [Thinley Dorji](#), who adds that the government is examining how this can be achieved. Moreover, the PAN-Bhutan team is also exploring putting existing Bhutanese information and research materials online. Already some government departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, are creating their own web sites, while DrukNet has started hosting local web sites for the national newspaper, Keunsel, among others.

A story in progress

With all this activity, it's easy to forget that Bhutan has been connected to the Internet for less than a year. But so far, it seems the country is continuing its tradition of ensuring that changes — such as those caused by new technologies like the Internet — are used to boost the Gross National Happiness. As for how this story unfolds, we will have to wait for the next chapter.

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[Reference: IDRC Project number 960029]

If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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