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אוניברסיטת בר-אילן (ע"ר)
הפקולטה למדעי הרוח
הספריה ללימודי מידע

The affect of the information era on an isolated society: Bhutan Kingdom as a case study / Gofer Amiram

Abstract:

The research aims to examine whether the introduction of internet to the Kingdom of Bhutan has brought changes in the operation of government and/or social organizations in the kingdom. Bhutan was chosen as a 'case study', which is an individual form of qualitative research.

This is the reason for choosing Bhutan: In recent years the kingdom has been going through a radical change, from a feudal, traditional and closed agricultural society, to a democracy. It is coping with modernism in all aspects of life, and in addition, a few years ago, the government decided that Bhutan will become an information society via the internet. At the beginning of this process, my research intends to enquire whether Bhutan is succeeding to keep its society and culture, in spite of the potential for uncontrollable change.

In the chapter on reviews of literature, the effects of modernism, the cultural changes and the extinction of languages in societies that experienced rapid change were examined. Later on, the ways isolated societies cope with external influences were examined and also the effect of the post-industrial era on modern societies.

In the review of literature about Bhutan, present influences and changes taking place in the kingdom were surveyed. The focus is on inspecting the changes that Bhutan is going through, as a result of the introduction of internet, in three main areas: health, education and government.

According to the literature, it appears that big changes occurred especially in these fields: improvement of the medical infrastructure, improvement in life expectancy, inclusion of most of the population in an educational framework, expansion of the internet infrastructure and tightening of the connections between the government and the citizens.

Collection of the findings on Bhutan was done from a distance, out of the country, and without direct contact with the citizens except via forums and social networks. The research describes the situation in Bhutan by means of a few methods:

1) Meta analysis of research in the fields of medicine and health, education, government and law.

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2) Content analysis of Bhutanese internet sites, forums, blogs and social networks.

3) Content analysis of Bhutanese newspapers.

The research concept was formulated together with the accumulation of data. No assumptions or presumptions were made in advance, but questions were asked that indicated to where the research was leading.

The hypothesis questions were:

1) In what way is internet used in the field of health and medical services?

2) What is the influence of the use of the internet on distance study and on the education system in schools?

3) In what way do governmental bodies in Bhutan utilize internet to promote national projects?

4) Do private internet sites, blogs, forums and social networks affect society in Bhutan?

Investigation of the findings elucidated a few facts. Free health services and the use of the internet raised the accessibility of advanced medical services to the citizens, and expanded the accessibility of quality medical information to the medical staff. The number of hospitals and clinics has grown to the hundreds, and they are spread all around the country, and the possibility of widespread professional communication was opened up to the medical staff.

On the other hand, the relationships between the physician and the patient changed; the authority of the field doctor vis-a-vis the patient is negatively affected, as the local doctor became a kind of mediator between the patient and the specialist located at a distance.

The conclusion is that spreading a broad, fast and stable internet infrastructure around the country is an essential component in raising the level of public medicine, especially because of the poor road network.

In the field of integrating internet in education, it was found that as a result of the use of the internet, the distance learning that has existed in Bhutan in the last fifty years developed greatly. The ability today of the student and the teacher to access diverse sources, is immediate.

However, the teacher's position in relation to the student changes. The teacher is no longer the sole authority and source of knowledge as in the past.

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During the shift to democracy, a big change occurred in the governmental system. (In Bhutan today the regime is a constitutional monarchy). Following the spread of the internet and its use by both government and citizens, the governmental system became more transparent for the citizens. Bhutanese own hundreds of thousands of cellular systems through which they can contact government agencies, via forums, e-mails, blogs and social networks. The agencies pass information and messages to the citizens, who frequently react critically to their conduct. Embarrassment is evident in the agencies' reactions. The present situation, new to Bhutan society, is probably irreversible, and a continuing change in relationship between government and citizens can be expected in the future.

There is no doubt that the internet is a key player in the changes that are happening in Bhutan. It accelerates processes and changes the social formations in the kingdom. In the three areas which the research examined, we see today the beginnings of processes which we assume will expand and grow. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency in Bhutan to conserve the traditional culture. To this end much thought and activity is invested, especially in the fields of education and traditional medicine.

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