

CoronaNet

Research Project

Researchers' Working Paper Series
No. 01/2021

Compliance and Culture: Bhutanese Government Usage of Social Media in the Fight Against COVID-19

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Suggested Citation:

Parker, E. & Del Greco, A. 2021. "Compliance and Culture: Bhutanese Government Usage of Social Media in the Fight Against COVID-19." Working Paper No. 01. CoronaNet Research Project. <insert doi>



Hochschule für Politik München
an der Technischen Universität München



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CoronaNet is part of the PERISCOPE Consortium, a project funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme (Agreement No. 101016233)

Compliance and Culture: Bhutanese Government Usage of Social Media in the Fight Against COVID-19

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Publication Date: <date>

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PERISCOPE Project

Leibniz Research Alliance 'Crises in a Globalised World'

CoronaNet is part of, and has received substantial financial support through, PERISCOPE, a consortium of 32 universities and research institutes across Europe, investigating the behavioral and socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 to increase resilience and preparedness for future pandemics and other large-scale risks. PERISCOPE has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101016233. Additional funding support has been provided by the Chair for International Relations (Prof. Dr. Tim Büthe) at the *Hochschule für Politik* (HfP) at the Technical University of Munich (TUM), NYU Abu Dhabi, the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER), the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (a member of the Leibniz Research Alliance Crises in a Globalised World), the Data4COVID19 Africa Challenge, and the Just One Giant Lab OpenCovid19 Initiative.

The CoronaNet Researchers Working Paper Series

The CoronaNet Working Paper Series encourages CoronaNet researchers, who are mostly students volunteering their time, to go beyond the crucial work of gathering and coding information about COVID-19-related policies and hone their research and writing skills by conducting their own analyses inspired by the CoronaNet data. The working papers are the capstone of a program which offers research assistants the opportunity to explore research topics of genuine interest to them, acquire and practice the requisite skills to analyze the CoronaNet data, learn more about the dataset to which they have contributed, practice their academic writing skills, and collaborate with their peers in research and writing. To this end, the program entails seminars on research methods and academic writing, detailed introductions on the publicly released CoronaNet data structure, and tutorials on conducting quantitative analyses of the data. In addition, CoronaNet principal investigators provide oversight and feedback on paper drafts while Working Paper Series coordinators organize the program series. The papers in this series are thus *not peer-reviewed* but provide an opportunity to learn about preliminary findings that arise out of the CoronaNet database.

CoronaNet Research Project

The CoronaNet Research Project (<https://www.coronanet-project.org/>) gathers, systematically codes, and makes publicly available information about government policies put in place in response to COVID-19. It is led by researchers at the Chair for International Relations at the Hochschule für Politik at TUM and TUM School of Management, NYU Abu Dhabi, University of Southern California, Nazarbayev University, Universidade Brasilia, the Hertie School and the Fors Marsh Group. The project relies on the help of experienced staff researchers who serve as regional and country coordinators, and is made possible by more than 500 volunteer researchers from around the world.

Abstract

With every state around the world grappling with the devastating effects of COVID-19, one small success story has been the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, whose rapid shutdown of the country and strong citizen compliance limited confirmed cases to under 1,000 as of April 1st, 2021. Bhutan has, for a relatively technologically uninclined country, ran a comprehensive and engaged social media campaign to ensure compliance with its myriad COVID-19 safety measures. In this paper, we seek to illuminate how the Bhutanese state's social media campaign has fostered compliance by utilizing industry best practices in a culturally specific way. We will begin with a discussion of the unique aspects of Bhutanese geography, politics, and culture, followed by a brief overview of the existing literature on COVID-19 measure compliance. We will then review the literature on social media best practices, and describe how they have, or have not, been put into practice by the Bhutanese state. Finally, we will conclude with suggestions for further inquiry.

Keywords: social media, compliance, coronavirus, Bhutan, Facebook

Compliance and Culture: Bhutanese Government Usage of Social Media in the Fight Against COVID-19

Introduction

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated communities worldwide. Much research and effort has gone into studying different governments' and communities' response to COVID-19, both to apply immediately and to develop best practices for future pandemics. One relative success story on the global stage has been Bhutan, a small, landlocked Himalayan kingdom, with a population of only 850,000, that has had under 1,000 confirmed cases and only one death from COVID-19 as of April 1st, 2021 (Ministry of Health, 2021b; CIA, 2021). While a strong and early governmental response to COVID-19 has helped Bhutan, obedience from its citizenry has been essential. The Bhutanese state's comprehensive use of social media helped drive healthy compliance rates. The primary goal of this paper is to establish that social media has been a powerful tool for the Bhutanese government and to explore why this strategy may have worked better in Bhutan than in other, previously studied, countries.

Compliance and Bhutanese Culture

Of course, a number of different variables have contributed to Bhutan's success — their small population, their somewhat authoritarian nature, and knowledgeable leadership count among them. With very limited infrastructure to treat COVID-19, Bhutan was motivated to impose strong measures at the beginning of the pandemic such as the closure of their international border and a mandatory 21-day quarantine period for those entering the country (Dorji, 2021, p. 443). The Bhutanese Prime Minister and Health Minister both have backgrounds in public health, allowing for a more thorough and effective response, with Bhutan's World Health Organization Representative stating that Bhutan has an advantage in fighting COVID-19 because "the decision-makers understand the general principles of emergency preparedness and disease outbreak response" (Sharma, 2020).

One important cultural dimension of Bhutan is the citizens' sense of community and love for their King. The government in Bhutan has implemented strict policies which may not be as popular in other countries. One reason they are able to do this, along with transparency and clear communication, stems from the country's sense of community. Bhutan uses a truly unique system to measure success; instead of using GDP, the country measures itself in Gross National Happiness, the tenets of which shape the country's policies and actions. Some of these are to

be expected, such as living standards, education, health, and good governance (Dorji, 2021, p. 442). However, the government also measures and tries to improve things such as cultural diversity, resilience, psychological well-being, and community vitality. Community vitality has been reinforced in multiple ways since the onset of the pandemic, including religious figures supporting the government's actions, the adoption of the mobile app used for contact tracing, and donations equivalent to over one million U.S. dollars from religious institutions and citizens. The sense of community has been cited as a reason for Bhutan's success by both its WHO representative and individual citizens (Sharma, 2020). Bhutan's more communal nature might be helpful in establishing a different framework for analyzing trust in government and compliance than those previously used.

The still-nascent body of literature on COVID-19 measure compliance supports the unsurprising finding that trust in government regulates obedience. Bargain and Aminjonov's study of European countries recently found that countries with high political trust saw significantly greater reductions in non-essential activities during the early stages of the pandemic, while essential activities (grocery shopping, etc.) remained steady (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020, p. 14). Although Bargain and Aminjonov measured pre-COVID trust and did not account for changing trust over the course of the pandemic, it can be safely assumed that increasing trust via social media will have some positive effect on citizen compliance. By contrast, Clark et al. (2020) states that trust in government is relatively unimportant for voluntary compliance (p. 79). The findings in this paper do show correlation between stronger trust in government and rule following, or compliance; however, the most important factors were belief in health procedures for avoiding COVID-19 and health importance, or how important health is to the individual. Interestingly enough, both studies focused on European countries, which tend to have more individualistic cultures, as defined and refined by Hofstede over several decades. This paper calls into question the saliency of these findings when applied to more collectivist countries, including those in East and Southeast Asia.¹ For Bhutan, we argue that a social media campaign emphasizing transparency and stressing collective

¹ Bhutan has an individualism/collectivism score of 52 indicating a neutral assessment. This is approximately in line with neighboring countries, and significantly lower than scores in major Western countries – United States (91), United Kingdom (89), Germany (67), France (71) (“Compare Countries,” 2021). Of course, this flattening of cultures into six dimensions has faced criticism, but it follows that individuals in a more collectivist culture would be less influenced by individual risk in their COVID-19 measure compliance behavior.

responsibility was an effective strategy to influence its citizens towards responsible decision making.

Social Media

There is an ample and constantly-growing body of literature surrounding the use of social media, including its use by governments to disseminate information, invite discussion, and facilitate trust and transparency between citizens and governing bodies. Much of the research in this field is performed at the local rather than the national level, analyzing the social media behavior of municipalities or counties. Given Bhutan's small population, however, this may prove useful. At just over 850,000 residents, the kingdom has a smaller population than many of the municipalities and counties in question. One prevailing finding from this body of literature is that Facebook is the primary social media tool governments use to communicate with citizens, (Agostino, 2013, p. 233; Bonsón et al., 2014, p. 320; Bonsón et al., 2015, p. 52; Graham & Avery, 2013, p. 1) and this certainly follows in Bhutan. Beyond this simple fact, the literature offers several insights for increasing engagement and transparency. Ferro et al. (2013, p. 95) posits that government social media operates best when there is an existing history of bidirectional communication between citizen and government. Meanwhile, Bonson, Royo, & Ratkai (2015, p. 57) demonstrate that citizens are more interested when allowed to interact with content and make wall posts themselves. Finally, there is also a significantly positive effect on engagement for video and picture posts as opposed to pure text, which the Bhutanese government has been shown to do many times (Hofmann et al., 2013, p. 392).

Although there are certainly parallels between Bhutan's social media strategy and that of other governments and organizations, Bhutan presents what Bunty Avieson calls a "unique media matrix" (Avieson, 2015). Avieson (2015, p. 2487) describes Bhutan's proclivity towards social media as a function of its being a largely oral culture, in which newspapers and the written word are not as valued. Although Bhutan's various governmental social media accounts do make use of heavy amounts of text sometimes, the shareability and interactivity of Facebook is perhaps closer in line with Bhutanese culture. Avieson (2015, p. 2488) also reports fairly high levels of digital literacy for a relatively technologically undeveloped country - with in excess of 90% of the population owning mobile phones as of 2013, and Facebook and Twitter enjoying substantial popularity. Discussions on Facebook and Twitter are also prone to spreading, through word of mouth, to the illiterate and technologically uninclined (Avieson, 2015, p. 2492). Given that Bhutan does not have a strong business sector, public service

announcements on Facebook, radio, and television drown out advertisements (Avieson, 2015, p. 2493). This has allowed for the easy dissemination of numerous videos and infographics developed by the Bhutanese ministry of health and other government apparatuses. Many text-based appeals to the public, varying from promoting mental health hotlines (Ministry of Health, n.d.b) to discouraging the harassment of COVID-19 patients, (Ministry of Health, n.d.a) and depicting healthy indoor activities for families to do during quarantine. This holistic approach and very active governmental role in public health permeates Bhutanese media in a culturally specific way.

The Bhutanese Government's communication to their citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown similarities to correspondence and strategies written about by Winnick et al. (2005). In this article, the authors discuss compliance in the medical field, specifically with a focus on a patient-physician relationship in pediatrics. Although the context is different from a pandemic, there are parallels that can be drawn between a government offering health advice and a health professional doing the same. Some aspects that potentially increased compliance and family confidence were "familiarity of the pediatrician and the office staff with the patient, family, and treatment program... consistent response to questions... and reinforcing follow-up" (Winnick et al., 2005, p. 719). Familiarity with the Bhutanese government can be examined in two regards: first, that as a hereditary monarchy, the citizens have both grown up with and watched the current King grow up. In an article from a Bhutanese news source, the "Bhutanese people[s] eyes brimmed with tears," also stating that "words do not bear the capacity to express our gratitude to His Majesty's selfless leadership" (Denkar, 2020). Facebook comments under the daily social media posts by the Ministry of Health, along with occasional posts by the King himself, show the citizen's gratitude and love for the King, replete with extensive use of the heart and praying hands emojis. Second, as previously mentioned, the Ministry of Health, Prime Minister's Office, and the King's Facebook pages all contain many posts pertaining to COVID-19, which could increase familiarity with the government officials and with the prescriptions for staying safe during the pandemic. Along with this, the government has provided a consistent response to questions, with mental health hotlines, phone numbers, and Facebook groups for various zones with their own COVID-19 statuses. The Facebook groups are a great utilization of social media in this context, as it gives people a sense of community in their specific group (Thimpu, 2020). Furthermore, these groups can provide a consistent response to questions which should increase healthy behavior and, according to Bonsón et al. (2015, p. 57), increase citizen interest by allowing them to make and share posts. Facebook

posts by the Ministry of Health also tend to include “follow-ups,” or constant reminders about prescriptions for those who are not in high-risk zones or in contact with COVID-19.

Bhutanese state social media has also emphasized transparency as a key part of their COVID campaign. In 2010, a now well-cited article by Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes posited that “social media shows early promise as a tool of transparency and openness” (Bertot et al., 2010, p. 268). Many governments, however, have not followed through on social media’s potential in this area in the intervening decade. Recognizing that trust and transparency regulate compliance, Bhutan has proven to be an exception. Updates from official government social media were frequent and extremely specific - for example, the Prime Minister’s office posted on September 10 about a specific farmer’s market closing in the capital of Thimpu (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020). Other posts commemorate the only death (Ministry of Health, 2021a), address specific misinformation (Prime Minister’s Office, 2021), and give daily updates on case and vaccine numbers (Ministry of Health, 2021b), always to several thousand likes and ample activity in the comment section. The active engagement on social media - with likes amounting to up to a full percent and more of Bhutan’s population - demonstrates how attuned the technologically-savvy of Bhutan are to their government’s Facebook. The localized nature of the announcements keeps them, as well as those they speak to, well-informed of both regulations and the dangers surrounding COVID-19.

Opinion pieces in Kuensel, one of the most popular news sources in Bhutan, have stated that Bhutanese people should remain optimistic as they are “working hand in hand and showcasing strong national solidarity, guided by unstinted devotion and love towards our King and the country” (Wangmo, 2020). These factors guide us towards one of the most important social media campaigns from the Ministry of Health: “Our Gyenkhu,” which means “our responsibility” (Dorji, 2021, p. 443). This campaign is stated on many posts by the Ministry of Health, as well as some previously mentioned infographics. The point of the campaign is to remind the public of their responsibility to keep themselves and others safe in the pandemic. While this strategy could be dismissed as ineffective, according to Clark’s previous study which prioritizes one’s own health to predict rule-following behavior, Bhutan’s community values and devotion to the King have shown that this can be an effective strategy. For example, one post was made during the beginning of a lockdown in the capital city of Thimphu, where the Ministry of Health reminds the country to stay safe by washing hands and practicing social distancing. The Ministry goes on to say “The virus does not discriminate... Let’s not make this happen in our beloved country. It’s Your Gyenkhu to protect and save yourselves and your dear

ones” (Ministry of Health, 2020b). Other posts simply say it is “Our Gyenkhu” when talking about regular safety regulations to follow (Ministry of Health, n.d.c). Yet these same posts encouraging distancing and hand-washing also contain resources for seemingly tangential issues. With more and more people staying home, the government provided mental health (Ministry of Health, n.d.b) and domestic violence (BBS, 2020) resources in anticipation of those becoming larger issues. This holistic approach not only builds trust but instills a sense of collective responsibility. While this strategy may not prove as effective other countries, in Bhutan, the aforementioned community values have prevailed thus far.

Conclusion

Because of Bhutan’s unique geographical, cultural, and political characteristics, it is difficult to draw hard conclusions from a simple study of their practices. However, we can lay out general recommendations and open the door for further inquiry. The case of Bhutan indicates that cultivating a strong and engaged social media presence can be useful for compliance. Bhutan’s social media both follows industry best practices (specific, graphics-heavy) and presents itself in a uniquely “Bhutanese” way. For this reason, it is hard to make specific recommendations, but we recommend that states attempt to cultivate a strong and informative social media presence on the local scale, emphasizing the health and happiness of the immediate community, as Bhutan has been able to do for their entire country. We also suggest a large-scale comparative analysis on how social media engagement influences COVID-19 measure compliance. We believe that further insights could be made which can inform the way governments communicate with the public during crises and during times of stability.

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ISSN: XXXX

CoronaNet is an international research collaboration between the Chair of International Relations at the HfP/Technical University of Munich (Prof. Dr. Tim Büthe), New York University Abu Dhabi, Nazarbayev University, Universidade de Brasilia, the University of Southern California, the Hertie School and the Fors Marsh Group.

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