

Standard Operating Procedure for Sharing of Public Information with the Media

1. Purpose

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) recognizes the importance of information in today's knowledge-based society and towards creating a Shared National Consciousness. It is critically important to disseminate and make accessible the information concerning the Government agencies' work or information generated through its various programs as widely as possible to the public.

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is developed for the media spokesperson, media focal, and media dealings for all Government Agencies to guide them in sharing public information with the media. It provides a framework to guide agencies in sharing public information appropriately with the media while maintaining a balance between the need to grant maximum access to information and Government agencies' obligation to respect the confidentiality of information. It also improves transparency and accountability in government and public trust as well as fosters greater collaborative and positive relationships with the media and image building of government agencies and their policies and programs.

The SOP outlines the practical purpose, procedures for the request of information from government organizations, processing of requests, timeframe, and roles of media focal and media spokesperson of agencies.

2. Applicability/Scope

This SOP applies to all the personnel who are permanently or temporarily assigned to the task of sharing public information in agencies including the media spokesperson, media focal, and all those officials involved in sharing information.

3. Access to Information

- 3.1 The RGoB shall be guided by openness and make information relating to its functions and responsibilities available to the media, which may be in written, visual, oral, electronic, or any other material forms;
- 3.1 Primarily, the information shall be made available on the websites and social media accounts of agencies, or through their press release or report. Information that is not available on these platforms may be made available to the media upon request.
- 3.1 Any information made available to the media should be in line with the exceptions to providing access to information as listed in Section 4 (Exceptions).

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4. Exceptions

- 4.1 While the RGoB commits to providing access to information, the implementation of this SOP will be consistent with the relevant laws and practices, keeping in mind information sensitivity, classification, and handling. Agencies may not disclose information that is designated as confidential, and information to be designated confidential includes:
- 4.1.1 Documents produced by agencies that are received from or sent to third parties under an expectation of confidentiality;
 - 4.1.2 Documents whose disclosure would pose risk to the safety or security of individuals, violate their rights, or invade their privacy;
 - 4.1.3 Documents whose disclosure is likely to endanger the security, sovereignty, unity, and integrity of the State;
 - 4.1.4 Documents whose disclosure would affect the proper conduct of any operation or activity of the agency;
 - 4.1.5 Internal interoffice or interoffice documents, including draft documents, whose disclosure may affect the agency's decision-making process;
 - 4.1.6 Documents that are covered by legal privilege or related to internal investigations;
 - 4.1.7 Commercial information whose disclosure is likely to harm the financial interests of agencies or parties involved; and
 - 4.1.8 Information whose disclosure is likely to undermine the policy dialogue with the agency's collaborating partners or other parties involved.

5. Information Sharing Process

5.1 Request for Information

- 5.1.1 All requests for information from the media should be directed to the Media Focal which functions as the access-to-information desk of Government agencies;
- 5.1.2 Every agency's website shall have the following contact details:
 - Postal address:
 - Phone:
 - Email:
- 5.1.3 The Media Focal shall review all requests to determine whether they are made pursuant to this SOP;
- 5.1.4 All communication with the media shall be channeled through the Media Focal unless otherwise specified; and
- 5.1.5 In the event that a request for information is sent to a specific officer within the agency and not the Media Focal, that official shall be required to forward the request to the Media Focal as soon as it is received. In this case, the time limits required to respond to the media shall start from the day the request Media Focal receives the request from the official.

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5.2 Time Limits

- 5.2.1 The Media Focal will send an acknowledgment of receipt to the media within a few hours or latest within one (1) working day of receipt of the request. The acknowledgment will inform the media that the request has been received and is being considered and that the Agency will endeavor to respond within another working day. *Priority is to be given to the requests for information about matters related to active or recent incidents; If the media requires detailed information the agency will endeavor to respond within 5 working days.*
- 5.2.2 If it is not possible to provide the requested information within the above time limits, the Media Focal will inform the media of the reason for requiring more time and the date for sharing the information concerned.

5.3 Review Process

- 5.3.1 After acknowledging receipt of a request, the Media Focal will send the request to the appropriate officials in the office responsible for, or capable of, providing the information requested. The Media Focal must mention in the request to the appropriate officials the date when the request was received and the deadline to respond to the media;
- 5.3.2 The officials responsible for providing the information will, by consulting the head of the office concerned, ascertain whether the requested information exists and if it can be shared;
- 5.3.3 If the information is available and can be shared, the officials responsible will provide the requested information to the Media Focal immediately, which will be shared with the media by the Media Focal;
- 5.3.4 In case it appears that the information is confidential and falls under the list of exceptions to information sharing, the Media Focal or the officials responsible will approach the Legal Officer for guidance on whether the information should be shared with the media or whether an exception should be made;
- 5.3.5 If a document contains both confidential and non-confidential information, part of the such document containing only non-confidential information may be shared with the media;
- 5.3.6 Agency may partially or wholly deny a request for information in accordance with the exceptions reflected in this SOP and other relevant documents, or if the request is deemed an excessive demand upon the agency's resources;
- 5.3.7 Where the request is denied in whole or in part, the official responsible or Legal Officer will advise the Media Focal of the decision, including the reason for the decision. The Media Focal will then communicate this to the media; and
- 5.3.8 The Media Spokesperson shall make the final decision on the request for information.

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5.4 Record-keeping

A record of each request received will be maintained. The record shall indicate:

- 5.4.1 The name of the requestor/media, the date of receipt of the request, a brief description of the nature of the request;
- 5.4.2 The date of acknowledgment of receipt;
- 5.4.3 The responsible office and or officer to whom the request was forwarded for review, and the date on which this was done;
- 5.4.4 As applicable any additional time within which to provide the information to the media; and
- 5.4.5 If the matter was submitted to the Legal Officer for consideration of an exception and if so when;

6. Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 Agency

- 6.1.1 Every agency must designate/appoint at least one Media Focal and one Media Spokesperson. The Media Focal can be the Chief of the Policy and Planning Division of the agency or any competent Officer from the agency; whereas, the Media Spokesperson can be the head of the agency, or any other senior officials that the agency shall assign this position;
- 6.1.2 The positions of Media Focal shall be approved by the Agencies' Human Resource Committee;
- 6.1.3 The head of agency as the official Media spokesperson can talk with the media as and when requests are received;
- 6.1.3 The agency shall involve the media focal in all its important meetings, Conferences, Consultations, and Forums;
- 6.1.4 Any responsible Departments or Officers in the agency can be asked by the Media Focal to provide the information which relates to the requests; and;
- 6.1.5 The departments within an agency will provide information within their line of work in accordance with this SOP.

6.2 Media Focal

- 6.2.1 Act as the main point of contact for the media and receive all requests for information;
- 6.2.2 Acknowledge receipt of information requests;
- 6.2.3 Maintain records of information sharing with the media;
- 6.2.4 Verify and confirm the existence of the information requested;
- 6.2.5 Undertake an initial review to confirm whether the information can be shared;
- 6.2.6 Coordinate with the Media Spokesperson for information-sharing arrangements with departments and divisions and provide the information to the media;

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- 6.2.7 Give priority to the requests for information about matters related to active or recent incidents;
- 6.2.8 Engage with the Legal Officer in cases where an exception may apply and ultimately relay either the information itself or the reasons why the information should not be given to the media, as may be required;
- 6.2.9 Communicate with staff members within the agency and schedule press conferences and interviews with the media;
- 6.2.10 Prepare and send out press releases or briefings;
- 6.2.11 Constantly build relations with the media or press;
- 6.2.12 Ensure that the agency is properly represented in the media by monitoring news stories and content and contacting journalists to correct inaccuracies; and
- 6.2.13 Appoint a deputy during periods of absence and delegate responsibilities;
- 6.2.14 Attend all important meetings of the Ministry.

6.3 Media Spokesperson

- 6.3.1 Represent in public and the media by speaking on behalf of their agency;
- 6.3.2 Give interviews to journalists or producers, appear on television, radio programs, and other media platforms;
- 6.3.3 Ensure that communications are coherent across all platforms;
- 6.3.4 Guide the Media Focal on sharing information with the media;
- 6.3.5 Makes the final decision on all the media dealings and information sharing; and
- 6.3.6 Confirm that the information shared with the media is relevant and correct.

6.4 Legal Officer

- 6.4.1 Involve in cases where the requested information may be considered an exception under the SOP; and
- 6.4.2 Guide and advise the Media Focal and the Media Spokesperson while handling such requests.

6.5 All Employees

- 6.5.1 Ensure that the information is shared within the purview of law and in line with this SOP; and
- 6.5.2 Share any information to the Media Focal requiring dissemination.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

- 7.1 The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment shall monitor the implementation of this SOP.
- 7.2 Where necessary, the Ministry shall provide assistance for the interpretation and implementation of the SOP; and

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7.3 The Ministry shall review and update this document as necessary. Such a review will be undertaken in consultation with agencies and relevant stakeholders.

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