

Conflict Resolution: A Population-Centric Approach to Manage Regional Instability

Real-Time Social Media Analysis of the Standoff in Bhutan



ENODO
GLOBAL

“Bhutanese national identity has been galvanized by the China-India standoff over Doklam.”

Overview:

Social media is now able to shape public sentiment and populations’ perceptions of current affairs, which disrupts formal statecraft and traditional geopolitical maneuvering by governments and international organizations. The current standoff over Bhutan’s Doklam plateau demonstrates how different forms of social media provide the Bhutanese people a platform to shape the power dynamics between the Chinese, Indian, and Bhutanese governments, which ultimately enables them to influence the outcome of the crisis.

ENODO Global’s population-centric approach provides an innovative framework to actively monitor and manage the fluid nature of contemporary conflicts. To demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach, ENODO conducted a real-time social media analysis of the ongoing crisis in Bhutan. ENODO analyzed key topics, themes, and narratives found in Indian, Chinese, and Bhutanese Twitter hashtags, Facebook Live videos, blogs and political cartoons. ENODO’s analysis revealed how social media amplifies public sentiment concerning key events and its accumulative effect on Bhutanese perceptions of the Doklam standoff through online discussions.

Key Findings:

- Social media has strengthened national identity among Bhutanese people worldwide, which creates a powerful force to re-shape Bhutan’s voice in the current conflict
- Social media, political cartoons, events, and controversial editorials by journalists in print media provoke fear, frustration, and anxiety among the Bhutanese people
- [Social Risk](#) factors heighten political instability and impair traditional political discourse, which creates heightened conditions for regional instability
- Citizens utilize social media as an active platform to express concerns, which disrupts formal statecraft between nations

Real-Time Population-Centric Analysis

ENODO examined information obtained from various social media outlets concerning the Bhutan crisis from July 3rd to August 18th, 2017. ENODO examined a dataset comprised of over 25,000 Tweets, 351 political cartoons, 127 Facebook Live videos, 20 blogs from Indian and Bhutanese media, and 12 magazine covers from leading Indian and Bhutanese periodicals. ENODO applied topic modeling and sentiment analysis to the data to monitor changes in public perception based on messages and key events. Findings from the analysis were used to identify the underlying Social Risk factors that fuel anxiety and social tensions within Bhutan’s population.



“Political cartoons and print media wars between Chinese and Indian media heighten anxiety among Bhutan’s social media users.”

Our analysis revealed that social media amplifies the voice of Bhutan’s people, creating a real-time, virtual, and dynamic public platform that constantly shapes the course of the conflict. The analysis uncovered that shared perceptions of key events linked to the standoff strengthened Bhutanese national identity. Active monitoring of Bhutanese public perceptions found their cultural identity is being threatened – a perception that exacerbates social tensions and erodes Bhutan’s internal stability. Similarly, the Bhutanese have developed a collective fear closely tied to a potential India-China war and a repeat of China’s occupation of Tibet in 1951. Analysis of online discussions, including the Twitter hashtags #ChinaIndiaStandoff, #China, and #India, revealed an erosion of the public’s faith in a peaceful resolution by the two larger powers.

Events that may appear insignificant or unrelated to the conflict can cause serious backlash and have compounding effects over time. For example, hours after Indian boxing champion Vijender Singh defeated his Chinese opponent and forfeited his title for peace, hundreds of Twitter users created new hashtags, including #IndiaProud and #BattleGroundAsia, to rally support for India over China. In another example, Xinhua News (China’s official press agency) released a [video](#) two days after India’s Independence Day. The video mocked India’s policy toward Doklam, which was met with significant negative [blowback on social media](#). Figure 1 provides a timeline that depicts how events have triggered Bhutanese social identities that compound fear, galvanize public sentiment, and increase tensions over the crisis.

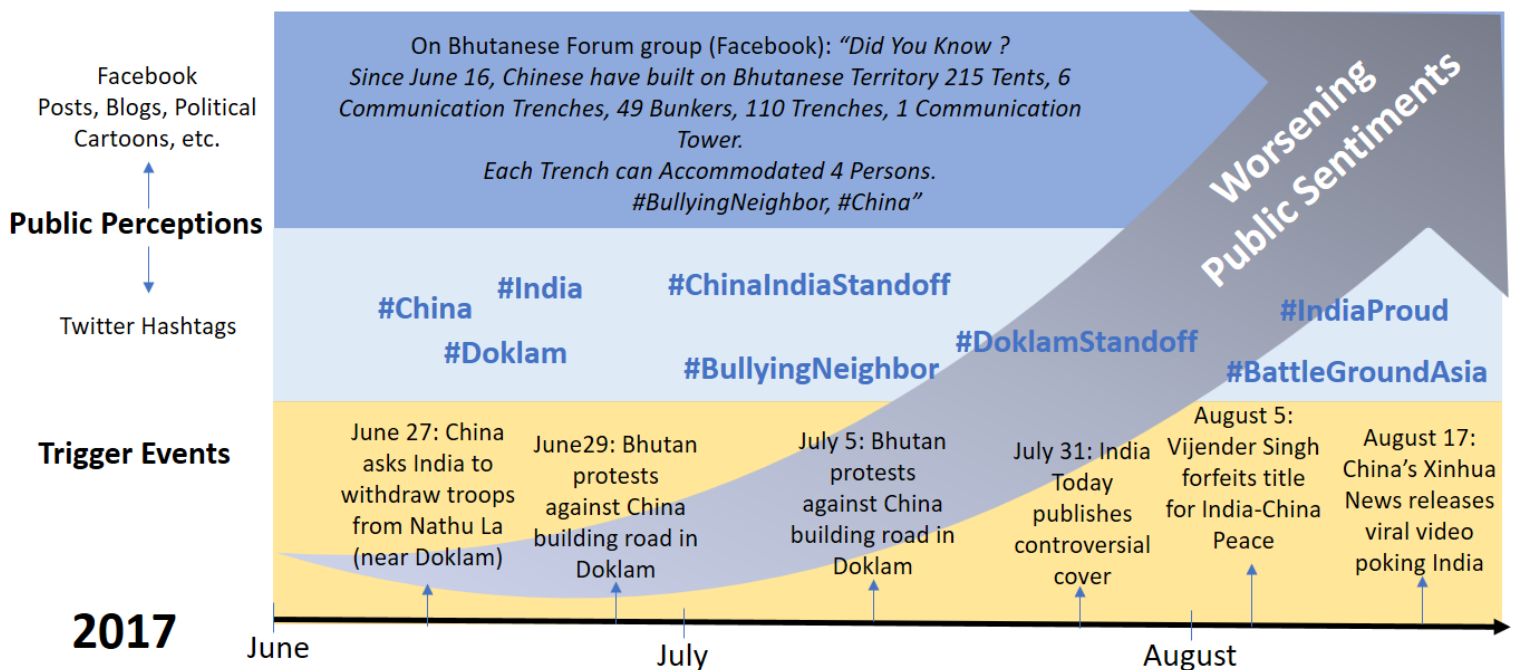


Figure 1.



“Some expressed fear of China, imagining a repeat of the Chinese annexation of Tibet.”

Political Cartoons



Figure 2.

In addition to online media, ENODO analyzed political cartoons to deliver an innovative technique to measure public sentiment. In response to the crisis, Indian and Bhutanese journalists have depicted Chinese policy, and at times, India’s geopolitical maneuvers, as self-serving and potentially harmful, in order to appeal to Bhutanese citizens. For example, one cartoon featured Doklam caught between the bi-lateral diplomacy of India and China, to emphasize the innocence of and threat to the much smaller country. In another cartoon, the representation of a fight between Indian Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping illustrates the disconnect between official government news sources that portray a cordial relationship between the leaders. In reality, diplomatic relations between the two are much more fragmented. Additional cartoons represent Chinese leaders as oppressors and Indians as potential protectors, which symbolizes the Bhutanese fear of a Chinese takeover as well as their hope that India would intervene.

Analysis also revealed that both Indian and Chinese magazine periodicals heightened awareness and generated immediate responses on social media. For example, *India Today* recently featured a Chinese map portrayed as a chicken (without Tibet) and Pakistan as a smaller chick on their magazine’s cover. This image produced an immediate reaction from the Chinese print media that quickly countered with an image of an Indian map (including Bhutan) filled with the colors of the Chinese flag. Social media users on Facebook Live from India and Bhutan expressed immediate concerns to this proxy war between Indian and Chinese media. They quickly responded to posts by media news websites using emoticons (e.g., “sad,” “angry,” and “upset”) to symbolize their own emotions, which heighten Social Risk factors worsening the crisis.

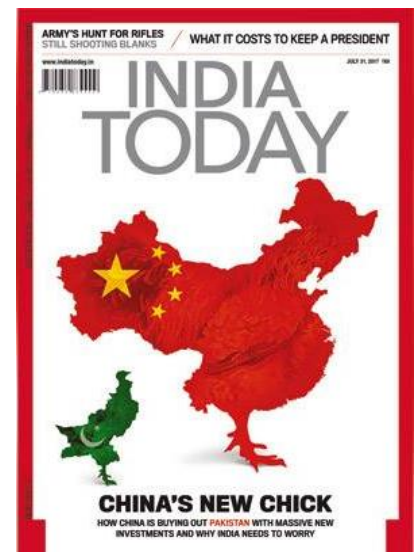


Figure 3.



“Social media, blogs, and other online channels create a virtual public platform to voice opinions and shape public perceptions.”

Social Risk Factors

Information from traditional media sources (e.g., print newspaper, television news) and official government media is disseminated amongst the Bhutanese population through various social media outlets. However, regular citizens have begun to leverage online platforms to promote their own views. In this way, social media has enabled political outsiders, even ordinary citizens, to advocate for their own foreign policy goals. This relentless stream of ideas and information produces continuous changes in public perceptions that trigger emotional reactions and heighten Social Risk factors. Social Risk factors found with Bhutan include perceived threats to Bhutanese identity, fear of war or annexation, and uncertainty regarding Bhutanese sovereignty.

Threat to Bhutanese Identity: Bhutan’s cultural code of etiquette known as *Driglam Namzha*, a system of official behavior and customs, is being threatened as a result of the ongoing crisis. Discussions on the Facebook group Bhutanese Forum regarding *Driglam* are connected to concerns over the protection of “citizens’ honor,” the erosion of the Bhutanese way of life, as well as perceived disrespect towards both Buddhism and Bhutan’s revered King. The Bhutanese now view China’s incursion into Doklam plateau as a direct threat to the future of *Driglam Namzha* and all that the Bhutanese hold dear. As a result, Bhutanese Facebook users are calling on fellow citizens to strengthen their *Driglam* against any external threats that jeopardize the preservation of their way of life.

Fear of an India-China War: The Doklam crisis has exacerbated Bhutanese fear of an annexation by the Chinese and weakened the public’s trust in a peaceful resolution to the standoff. Heightened Bhutanese fear of annexation is closely tied to the memory of China’s annexation of Tibet in 1951, which is reflected in Twitter hashtags #ChinaIndiaStandoff, #China, and #India. For example, in the Facebook group “Bhutanese Forum,” one user posted a cartoon showing a large scale depiction of Chinese leader Xi with tanks and guns standing in front of Bhutan, represented by a small human figure. The post ended with hashtags, #BullyingNeighbor and #China to signify the severity of situation.

Questioning Bhutan’s Independent Voice: Segments within the Bhutanese population question the power of Bhutan as a proactive diplomatic dealmaker. Messages on Bhutanese news websites, blogs, and Facebook posts show a general level of frustration over the country’s overreliance on India to broker a deal with China and the absence of a direct diplomatic channel with China. For example, the newspaper with the greatest influence in Bhutan, *The Bhutanese*, published an op-ed, “*Bhutan is neither a ‘vassal’ nor a ‘protectorate,’*” arguing for an independent Bhutanese voice to resolve the standoff without Indian assistance.



“Population-centric analysis provides a nuanced interpretation of the Doklam dispute and serves as a powerful conflict resolution tool for the Government of Bhutan.”

Conclusion

Bhutanese concerns over perceived threats to cultural identity and of a Chinese annexation, coupled with increased nationalism, have made the Bhutanese people more engaged in foreign policy discussions. Social media platforms now serve as virtual public forums where continuous information flow and real-time reactions to events shape public perceptions, trigger emotionally charged reactions, and heighten preexisting Social Risk factors. These forums have created solidarity amongst Bhutanese citizens, which enables them to mobilize online around shared beliefs, challenge traditional diplomacy between governments, and advocate for a resolution more inclusive of public sentiment.

International crises, such as the Bhutan stand-off, are no longer exclusively governmental affairs. Increased public engagement and the fluid nature of global information dissemination reinforce the need to evaluate contemporary conflicts through a population-centric framework. Real-time social media analysis captures the voice of the people, amidst the dynamic nature of rapidly changing social and information environments. Such an approach provides stakeholders a means to interpret, monitor, and manage public perception, enabling governments to:

- Understand how social media influences identity and shapes public perception regarding important topics, events, and government policies,
- Identify the key topics, themes, and narratives that dominate online discussion and incorporate these findings into foreign policy decisions
- Pinpoint the Social Risk factors and population grievances that amplify social tension and instability and take steps to address and mitigate each
- Recognize factors that disrupt traditional diplomacy, including social media and increased civil engagement, to proactively engage with citizens and prevent disconnect between leaders and populations



ENODO
GLOBAL

ENODOGLOBAL.COM | INFO@ENODOGLOBAL.COM

This electronic representation of ENODO Global, Inc. intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of ENODO electronic documents to a non-ENODO website is prohibited and are protected under copyright law. ENODO retains all rights to the information contained in this document and assumes no liability or fault for any material contained in this document, or derived from its subsequent use, whether directly attributed, implied, or inferred by any users of this submission.

