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**EMERGENCE OF TELEVISION
PUBLICS IN NEPAL****Intense Participation of Audiences
as News Sources, Critics and Fans***Harsha Man Maharjan*

This chapter investigates the relationship between audiences and the public in the context of a television programme from Nepal. Many scholars (Dayan 2001; Livingstone 2013; Ségur 2020) have tried to understand this relationship in different ways. For example, Daniel Dayan (2001) argued that television public are ‘always almost’ so we have to qualify it. He even divides a public into the public assumed by television channels, the public that watches programmes and the public which is a fan. However, in the changing context, Sonia Livingstone (2005) argued that it is hard to differentiate a public and an audience and hence suggests going beyond the binary thinking in terms of the two categories. She proposes this way of understanding because means of mass media have become ubiquitous, and they are embedded in all aspects of societies. Unlike in the non-digital world where audiences were discouraged to participate in content production, in the digitally networked world audiences are encouraged to participate. In this regard, the participation paradigm of audience studies (Livingstone 2013) focuses on the performances and practices of audiences that help understand how audiences engage and negotiate with each other using media. Nevertheless, some scholars have pointed out that participation has been co-opted by the market. Hence, they suggested examining the intensities of participatory practices by differentiating participation, access and interaction (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013). They thought that researchers need to focus on the cultural and political participation highlighting their intensities.

In this context I have a modest aim in this chapter. I want to understand the making of a television public in Nepal by analysing everyday cultural practices of audiences and focusing on intensities of participation. I engage with the debate of audiences and the public in the sub-disciplines of media studies, namely audience studies and fan studies. I agree with Livingstone that it is difficult to differentiate between an audience and a public. As digital technologies have become ubiquitous

and access to the Internet is increasing, anybody who is interested in television programmes available online can access these programmes and can become their audience. Obviously, as Dayan (2001) argued, programmes often construct their own public or 'make-believe public' and audiences become a public when they decide(s) 'to join or go public' (Dayan 2005, p. 57). I think it is better to understand the audiences who not only consume media but also deeply engage with the content such as by writing commentaries, sharing them, providing information or trying to get their problems solved through media programmes, and loving or hating, critiquing news-makers. To make sense of the public, the idea of participatory intensities becomes useful. In their conversation, media scholars Henry Jenkins and Nico Carpentier (2013) tried to understand different interrelated concepts such as access, interaction and participation. Carpentier (2011) has shown that these three concepts are different in terms of the involvement in the decision-making process. He defines access as having a presence in media production whereas interaction between audiences and content, and participation are to be involved in the decisions related to media production and in media organizations. He includes production, circulation and curation under participatory culture, but Jenkins wants to include different kinds of interpretation 'which are dialogic and collaborative' under participation and argues that absolute participation is 'untenable goal' (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, p. 276). So I have focused on different types of interaction and participation of audiences individually and collectively to make sense of the television public in Nepal. I am aware that both scholars are discussing participation in the context of participatory democratic practices and power politics, whereas I am using participation in cultural aspects of audiences trying to bring change through action and meaningful debates through/in a television programme.

This chapter is a case of a news and current affairs programme aired on a television channel in Nepal. In 2016 New24 Nepal started *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* (Straight Talk With the People), a 'premier program with Rabi Lamichhane' containing recorded reports and live conversations with related actors and audiences. The programme was broadcasted live on News24 television channel and Facebook simultaneously and then uploaded on the YouTube channel of the television station. Though this programme was started to amplify 'concerns, complaints and questions' of the people aiming to make society accountable, later it also focused on the exemplary activities that promote social welfare and humanity. Gradually this programme became popular among the Nepalese who had migrated to different places of the world especially gulf countries as it covered the issues related to their problems. As the programme emphasized popular issues, the host, Rabi Lamichhane, created his fan followers who trust and deify him. Perhaps so, in 2019 News24 Nepal had the highest number of viewers on YouTube among the 11 top TV channels in Nepal (Gill 2019a). The TV channel aired 642 episodes of this programme from December 2016 to January 2021. This study only covers this period. After January 2021, the host and the team left the television channel, and a new host resumed the work. In October 2021, Rabi Lamichhane started *Sidha Kura*

on his own TV channel, Galaxy 4K. However, in June 2022, he left journalism and joined politics by announcing his own political party (Nepal Press 2022). Studying this programme is important as it has huge fan followers, and it also encourages audiences to participate in this programme by sharing their information and problems.

This chapter suggests that we can understand the television public as the meaningful and intense participation of audiences in the forms of committed news sources, critics and fans by drawing ideas from Henry Jenkins and Nico Carpentier (2013). Many of these news sources were news subjects too. They shared their own stories by calling the television station or visiting the TV office. Having their stories in the programme really matters. Sometimes airing such stories seems to have become issues of life and death for these sources. The critics often watch the programme critically and raise their voices when they realize that the code of ethics of journalists is not being followed. Some of them even filed complaints to the Press Council Nepal, a government entity which adjudicates such complaints in Nepal. Generally, fans are of two kinds. One kind of fans not only supports the journalists online but also is ready to organize and participate in the rallies organized in the real world. Another kind of fans is critics who support the journalists but also criticize the activities and behaviour of the diehard fans. Here I have divided fans into four kinds: social workers/social activists, diehard activists in the real world, online supporters and critics. The chapter further suggests that these three kinds of public have emerged in the backdrop of post-conflict Nepal where different state organizations such as police, courts and embassies had not fulfilled their responsibilities properly creating a vacuum, and many of these public believe that the television programme is filling this vacuum.

In the next sections after methodology I will discuss the three kinds of the public of television in Nepal: news sources, critics and fans. To understand these categories in a better way, I have divided the fans into social workers, and fans who participated in rallies in the real world, online supporters, and critical fans. In the final section I will dwell on the television public in Nepal.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods such as content analysis and in-depth interviews. It focuses on discourses and narratives by analysing television programmes and other materials.

Data was collected by watching videos available on YouTube. First, I watched special episodes of this programme like the 1st, 100th, 200th, 300th, 400th, 500th and 600th.¹

As these episodes showcase the important cases that the programme has covered every year, I was able to know the cases I can discuss in the research. Then I checked the other episodes that dealt with these cases. I also watched one episode related to Press Council Nepal's concern about the programme and other episodes

related to Rabi Lamichhane's alleged connection to the suicide of his former co-worker. After figuring out these cases, I looked for news reporting and other materials available on the Internet on these cases.

Besides these episodes, I have analysed other materials. Since I wanted to understand the behaviour of fans, I have also analysed 25 fan groups on Facebook in June 2021. To know their behaviour better, I joined each group, but at that time, the new programme had not started so I focused on the history of these groups and tried to locate growth instead of interaction. I also watched 45 video songs about Lamichhane uploaded on YouTube. Many of these songs were produced by commercial music producers. I have interviewed three journalists who worked in the programme, a person who handled the help desk and an admin of a fan group. I talked with one journalist who was working with the team to know the background information of the programme. I interviewed two journalists Yubaraj Kandel and Rabi Lamichhane in the office of Galaxy 4K. These recorded interviews were for about one hour. I conducted an interview with a person who worked at the help desk to know how this desk functioned.

Committed News Sources, Critics and Fans

This section discusses the different kinds of public that have emerged in Nepal. Broadly they are of three kinds: committed news sources, critics and fans. One can call these people news sources, but I have used 'committed' news sources because these people share their problems. One of the aims of these sources was to get their problems solved. Critics are the audiences who question 'unethical' journalistic practices. Fans mainly support the programmes and adore the journalist.

Public as Committed News Sources

One category of television public is news sources who want to share the information with journalists. Many of them share their own stories to solve their own problems. These audiences contacted the journalists or visited the television station because they believed that the media could solve their problems. There were different ways audiences could interact in the programme. From the beginning the TV channel had made a page on its website where audiences could send their questions, curiosities and concerns in text, audio or visual.² In fact, the television channel also launched its app on Android in 2016. It also made available a toll-free number which the audience could use to call freely. As reported by online news media, within one and a half months, the programme received more than 2,000 complaints from audiences (Thapa 2017).

When the programme team realized that audiences had many problems which did not need to be dealt with in the television programmes, a help desk was created around 2019. According to a person who handled this desk from 2019, they received about 100–50 calls from audiences every day related to issues like foreign employment, domestic violence, government services and family matters. Interestingly,

many cases of fraud got solved without airing them on the programme: the people who committed fraud were ready to return money after the representative of the help desk called these people.³ The public had high hopes for the television programme as other state organizations such as courts and police did not fulfil their responsibilities. Based on the importance of their problems, these committed audiences were allowed to speak online later in the programme if needed. In fact, many issues that television programmes covered first were noted down at the help desk.

One such interesting case was related to Kabita Tamang. She had sent a message through Skype, an audio/video calling app, seeking help at the desk. In 2017 Kabita Tamang was rescued from Bagdad, Iraq, where the Nepal government had banned its nationalities from working along with Afghanistan, Syria and Libya in January 2016 (Sharma 2016). The way she approached the programme showed that she wanted to participate in the programme by sharing her problems. In an interview she discussed how she came to know about the programme. According to her, when she realized that she had reached Baghdad unknowingly, she was desperate to return to Nepal. She even contacted many journalists from Nepal through YouTube, but nobody helped her. Later on the YouTube channel of CanadaNepal, she saw an interview with Rabi Lamichhane, who informed that he had started the programme and would help people in need. Then she started to follow the Facebook page of the journalist. When she watched the programme, she found that usually male foreign migrant workers shared their problems. Hoping that her problem too would be covered and solved, she asked for help. Based on her message, she was requested to speak live on the programme.⁴

Her live message was aired during episode 19 on 27 January 2017. In this video call which lasted about four minutes, she informed that including her, there were six women who were sold in Iraq for USD 13,000 each. She also said that they had to work for 13 hours and stressed that their owner demanded USD 13,000 or else had threatened to send them back to the office, where she had seen some women being raped. After listening to her, Rabi Lamichhane told her that he would help her. During the live programme, he said this to Tamang in Nepali:

I can say this. With the resources we have, the faith our audiences have on us, and the inspiration that our audiences gave us through different messages, we dare to say that we will help you. We will also help many women like you and others who are suffering and have been deceived. We will try to help you from somewhere. Those who should have heard have put something in their ears (and are not listening). We will try to take this thing out (from the ears) and make them listen. This program is dedicated to people like you. This is our promise to you.⁵

After giving this promise, the programme team worked silently with Shakti Samuha, an NGO which worked on the issues related to the trafficking of women. As reported by the news agency Kyodo (2017), Shakti Samuha contacted Iraqi authorities and later her employer, Iraqi police sent her back to her office, and then she

was flown to Dubai and later to Kathmandu, Nepal on 19 March. So she was able to return to Nepal about two months after she shared her problem in the programme.

This case is important as others also followed her route and were able to return to Nepal sharing their problems in the programme. The case of Kabita Tamang was also important for the team because it was one of their early success stories. In May 2017 a brother came to know that his sister who was working in Kuwait as a domestic worker was being tortured by her employer and she had taken shelter in another place. After he could not get help from the immigration office and others, he approached the television channel.⁶ With assistance from the embassy and other Nepalese living in Kuwait, she could return to Nepal on 29 July 2017.⁷ Similarly, during the 163rd episode of the programme aired on 26 December 2017 a woman who was supposed to work in Dubai had reached Baghdad, Iraq, and called through Skype that she was sold for USD 13,000 like Tamang, and she had requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kuwait embassy to rescue her but nobody paid attention to her plight. Then she requested Rabi Lamichhane to help her.⁸ Within two days she was rescued, and she came live on the programme being anonymous on 30 December 2017 from the shelter.⁹ On 10 February 2018 she returned to Nepal within 44 days after she shared her problem in the programme.¹⁰ From 2016 to 2021, the programme team repatriated more than 120 such women to Nepal (Rawal 2021).

The above cases are related to individual problems, but they also covered issues of groups. A group of about 40 people from seven villages from Terai visited the television station in December 2017. They had visited the television station after their efforts in the local area did not yield results. During the programme these people shared that they had taken loans from Shyam Sah, teacher and landlord, but he took advantage of their not being educated and inflated the amount when papers were made.¹¹ A journalist who covered the news mentioned that after the television covered the issue, other national media too covered it.¹² Later the team visited Terai to cover the issue and aired that programme on 20 January 2018. Then they came to know that Sah, a loan shark, had exploited the people not from seven but from 25 villages. Many of them had received documents from the court to pay the loan, and some had even fled the villages as they could not pay the money. The news highlighted that if they had taken the huge amount as claimed in the papers, their homes would not have been in bad conditions.¹³ In fact, the programme followed this issue 12 times till September 2019. The police caught him many times, but he was set free. He was caught on the allegation of sexual harassment again in September 2019.¹⁴

The cases discussed in this subsection allow us to understand the post-conflict situation of Nepal. Many audiences did not believe in state machineries such as police and courts which provide justice. So the comments written under the videos on the YouTube channel of this programme showed that the public believed the TV programme was the abode of justice. In fact, the old maxim 'If you don't get justice, go to Gorkha' was converted into 'If you don't get justice, go to *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga*'.¹⁵

Scholars have discussed the role of sources in journalism studies (Carlson 2016). Generally, this term means ‘the people who reporters turn to for their information, often officials and experts connected to society’s central institutions’ (Berkowitz 2020). Often after following such sources journalists write news. For instance, Brown et al. (1987) found that US newspapers used male government officers as news sources which did not promote pluralism. News media had to get information from these sources as news had to be produced efficiently. Officials that have close connections with journalists also help in exposing wrongdoings and corruption of the government in South America (Waisbord 2000). We can assume that this situation has changed as journalists have access to different sources using different digital platforms. Due to such platforms, journalists can contact more sources, and sources can also contact journalists. The relationship between journalists and sources has become dynamic. In fact, sometimes sources can post their stories on digital platforms. However, the above cases show that the impact of airing their problem from news media is more important than them doing the same through their own social media accounts.

These sources also fall under the public because they engage with the news media deeply, and they desire to make their problems public. That means sometimes the chances of informing their stories to the news media also depend on their problem being solved. For some this was the issue of life and death. Interestingly many of these committed sources approached as it seems they saw that the news media was able to solve their problems. These cases are important as audiences thought that this programme took their side and provided justice to them (Ginosar and Reich 2020).

Public as Critics

The second category of television public is critics. These critics are not satisfied with the news media. Often they question the method of journalism the team of journalists does. They demand that the team follow the code of ethics. In the case of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga*, from the beginning a certain group of people did not like the ‘unconventional journalism’ the team followed. This group of audience includes journalists and people who care about traditional norms of journalism.

One such person was Dil Nishani Magar, a journalist and writer. He was one of the early persons to raise the point that Rabi Lamichhane acted as if he was the police or court by giving judgements. This becomes evident in the case of Ashtami Gurung who was found dead in Dubai. Her family member shared her video to Lamichhane that she made before she committed suicide. During the programme aired on 26 November 2017 he said this before playing the video in Nepali:

I don’t have courage to tell in detail about this, just saw it before I entered the studio, the Nepali *cheli* (women) who is in the video is no more in the world, but we will strive to give justice to her, because in this video she is saying that ‘my supervisor raped me’.

After airing the programme, he added: 'It is a murder. We will go to its depth till the victim does not get justice. One family lost a dear one and they were kept in the cloud'.¹⁶ The team gave priority to the case and did reporting from Gorkha, the hometown of the deceased. The programme aired on 28 November contained a long report about the visit. In the field the team met her mother, father, brothers, and sisters. Rabi Lamichhane even called Nepal's ambassador in UAE and requested him to work to bring the person who committed the crime to the book. At the end of the video the host said to her mother: 'Don't cry mother. We will find the killer of your daughter and bring him to the book, and then I will come to meet you again. Take this as the word given by your son.'¹⁷ The team also visited Dubai carrying the phone Gurung used and took videos, to know the truth. It aired the programme live from Dubai on 5 December. Dil Nishani Magar was not happy as Rabi Lamichhane acted as if he was the embassy. He even shared in an interview that the ambassador thought that Rabi Lamichhane did not know how the embassy functioned.¹⁸ Magar was not happy also because he came to know that Rabi Lamichhane was staying in Nepal on a visit visa; he had not renewed his work permit, and he went to Dubai using his US passport. Magar made this fact out. Then during the programme aired on 7 December, Rabi Lamichhane informed that he was planning to renounce his US citizenship and had forgotten to renew his work permit.¹⁹ The fans of Rabi Lamichhane chastised Magar online for sharing such views. The case of Magar is interesting because he has publicly introduced himself as an audience member of the programme, not a fan of the journalist (Magar 2020).

Some people who thought that *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* did not follow the 'good journalism' practices filed complaints against Rabi Lamichhane in the Press Council Nepal. For example, on 18 February 2018, Laxman BK filed a complaint in Press Council Nepal highlighting that Rabi Lamichhane entered offices and houses without taking permission to make misleading news which has created trouble for the general people. He also raised the issue Dil Nishani Magar made public. He particularly said that Rabi Lamichhane was a US citizen and was staying in Nepal without permission. Further he added that foreign journalists were not allowed to do journalism in the media sector in Nepal, and the Department of Information gave different press passes to such journalists, but he had not followed the rule. BK requested Press Council Nepal to investigate these issues.²⁰

So the Press Council Nepal started to collect information about Rabi Lamichhane from different government offices. First, on 23 February 2018 it sent a letter to the Department of Information to know if a press pass had been issued to Lamichhane. The department replied that no press pass had been issued to him. Then the Press Council Nepal wrote a letter to Rabi Lamichhane on 16 April 2018 regarding this issue, to which he answered that he was not a foreigner and had taken a work permit from the Ministry of Labour, but it was time to renew the work permit. He even said that he was not a journalist or had not become one yet. More than this he mentioned that high officials of Press Council Nepal were involved in blackmailing people about which he had been doing a study. He also said he would believe lifelong that the person who compelled people to suicide was a hypocrite and he

would not give priority to send replies to the letters dispatched by the Press Council Nepal but would act to get rid of such persons. He even questioned the veracity of the complainer and ended the letter requesting not to give trouble to his team. Though he did not give any particular name, he was accusing Kishor Shrestha, acting chair of the council.

Then the Press Council Nepal continued its investigation. It sent a letter to the Department of Information asking whether he was treated as a journalist. Based on the list of people working as journalists that the TV channel had submitted, the department informed that he was a journalist. Then the council sent a letter to the Department of Immigration about his visa status and received a reply that he had a visa as a non-tourist, dependent on his relative, so he did not have rights to work. Later as an answer to a similar question, the Department of Labor informed that he had not taken the work permit. The Press Council Nepal made these issues public on 20 June 2018.²¹ Next day *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* covered these issues and presented all activities as a pretext to send Rabi Lamichhane back to the US and mentioned with 'pride' that he had already returned the US citizenship on 18 May 2018 to the US embassy at Kathmandu. He also mentioned that though the Department of Immigration reported to the Press Council that Rabi Lamichhane did not take the permission to work in Nepal, the same department had sent a letter to the Home Ministry on 4 January 2018 to renew the work permit. He also informed that though the joint secretary of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology first told the permit could be given to him, later the official informed him that there was no need to have foreigners in the media. In the programme it was suspected that Kishor Shrestha influenced these government organizations to write such letters. Then supporters of Rabi Lamichhane started to write status chiding Kishor Shrestha, using vulgar language.²² During such a fractious relationship between Rabi Lamichhane and Kishor Shrestha, on 28 June 2018 *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* aired a special programme on Kishor Shrestha highlighting his alleged role in the suicide of actress Shrishka Karki, the highest number of complaints filed against his newspaper *Jana Aastha* and the red passport issued in his name.²³

From outside this case may seem like a fight between two journalists, but it is also a case of media criticism. The criticism of the public on journalistic practices is an important aspect of media accountability systems (Bertrand 2003). This public not only carefully watches the programmes but also puts their grievances and also files their complaints when needed. They were concerned that Rabi Lamichhane and his team did not follow the code of ethics of journalists and the rule of law. They often don't give facile comments. In a way they are like fans who carefully watch journalistic practices, but they don't deify the journalist.

Fans as Social Service Workers/Social Activists

As *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* aims to change societies or solve problems, many people were moved by the issues covered by this programme or the initiatives of Rabi Lamichhane and his team. The fans/audiences who helped in such causes

can be called social service workers or social activists. They provide, collect and distribute funds to the concerned people.

Even in the case of Kabita Tamang who was rescued from Iraq, after her issue was aired in the programme, many audiences suggested ways to bring her back to Nepal by writing comments on the YouTube channel of News24 Nepal. One person wrote in Nepali:

I am sad to know that Kabita sister is in Baghdad. I am also in Iraq in Kurdistan, Erbil. Though I am here, in Bagdad there are few elder sisters. Please contact this number. My number is +964751181####4.²⁴ Since they are in Baghdad for a long time, they will be able to suggest some ways or help you.

Some people were ready to collect money to help her as shown in the television programme after she was rescued. Ankit Sha wrote, 'I am ready to help but \$ 13000 is such a big amount for me. Anyone plz tell me how we can help her and others facing this terrible situation'. Another wrote: 'Why don't we create a go fund me account and pay the amount so that they can come home'. In fact, in her interview later, Kabita Tamang mentioned that she contacted some people in Iraq who told that they would help her, but they had not received their salary at that time. Even in the case of Ashtami Gurung who committed suicide in Dubai, many people collected money and sent it to her family. For example, being inspired by the calls of Rabi Lamichhane, some people were interested in helping Ashtami Gurung's family. One was Isha Gurung from the UK, who had collected NRs 120,000 with people from UK, the United States and Africa by 18 December 2017.²⁵

An interesting case of the participation of this category of audiences is the collection of money to make houses for the Musahar community in Saptari district. A flood triggered by heavy monsoon rainfall from 11 to 14 August 2017 damaged these houses. In episode 105 aired on 12 August, the plight of people was shown, and the host requested to help those people.²⁶ According to Rabi Lamichhane, after they aired the programme live from the field many people sent money in his name to make the building through IME though he had not asked for such help.²⁷ He went to the field and hosted the next programme focusing the flood on 15 August. During the programme he informed the audience that he had received the money and was planning to do something for the most-affected community.²⁸ On the programme aired on 22 August 2017 the information about the people who sent money was mentioned. It also highlighted that News24 Nepal in collaboration with a bank had created an account to collect money as New24 Janata Bank Bipat Rahat Kosh (New24 Janta Bank Disaster Relief Fund).²⁹ The television started to get more money. As mentioned in episode 300 hosted on 13 November 2018 from Saptari, the team collected NRs 19,447,772, prepared 52 houses and handed 42 of them to the community.³⁰

A group of audiences who want to solve problems are a part of the television public in Nepal. This applies in the case of other media too. Often during national disasters news media collect donations and give their collection to affected people.

For example, the Foundation of Kantipur Media Group collected NRs 44.3 million for the 1,755 individuals and organizations who were affected by the earthquake in 2015 through the Kantipur National Crisis Assistance Fund (The Kathmandu Post 2015). This was possible as audiences believed in the foundation. This is also true in the case of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga*. As this programme broadcasts problems of people, the public of television wants to support these people. This was possible due to trust and good will that the television has among its audiences (Lewis, Holton and Coddington 2014).

Interestingly in many instances the host had not asked to help others, but these audiences were happy to do this voluntarily. It is this reciprocity that also created huge fan followers of the host. This has also to do with the constructive role of journalism (Aitamurto and Varma 2018). By focusing on people who were experiencing problems of general people, the team of the programme was helping in solving such problems.

Fans as Activists in Real World

Since televisions make the issues public, some members of the public are ready to do or die for journalists. In the field of fan studies, they are often treated as irrational and fanatics. There are a few cases in *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* when audiences came to the street to voice their support for the team of the programme.

Such participation of audiences was seen when the police took action against two journalists working in the TV programme when another journalist Shalik Ram Pudasaini who had worked with the team committed suicide. This journalist was found dead on 5 August 2019 in a hotel in Chitwan. He had blamed two journalists Rabi Lamichhane and Yuvraj Kandel, and a woman for abetting him to commit suicide in two videos he made. In the suicide videos, he claimed that Lamichhane blackmailed and collected money by doing journalism and noted that he with his colleague Kandel planned to report about his affair with the woman to tarnish his image (Gill 2019b). Weekly newspaper *Jana Aastha* (2019) edited by Kishor Shrestha wrote news based on these videos on 14 August 2019, and this video was made public online on the very day. On 15 August the police arrested these three people in Kathmandu and took them to Chitwan that very night. On 16 August, the district court allowed the police to keep them in custody for further investigation. On 20 August, the court again ordered a remand of five more days. On 26 August 2019 the two journalists were released on bail, while the woman was freed without bail. Then two journalists filed a petition in the high court that the bail be quashed, and on 19 January 2020, both the journalists were acquitted due to the lack of sufficient evidence (Rimal 2020).

After two journalists were arrested, people thronged the police station in Chitwan on the next day and demanded the instant release of the journalists. On 15 August, Lamichhane and his team were planning to air a programme about the case, but the two journalists were arrested around 7.00 pm after they did not agree

to hold the airing of the programme. They were arrested just before the programme was going to be aired. So on that day, the television aired its 417 episode for 4:20 minutes showing the empty studio with a tweet of Lamichhane in Nepali:

Even if the person who has made the allegation has died, the person who has been alleged is alive. Only one allegation of the deceased becomes true, and there is the stringent punishment. I will inform you after some time. After listening to all the allegations, I realized he had big confusion.³¹

By this the programme highlighted that Lamichhane wanted to support the legal investigation.

For about 11 days these supporters demonstrated and demanded that the journalists be released without condition. It was reported that seven security people sustained injuries when the supporters pelted stones on 17 August during the clashes between Lamichhane's supporters and the security forces. During the retaliation, 15 protesters were taken into control by police but were released later. The supporters were unhappy as the district court granted the five-day remand (Republica 2019a). While many people demanded the release, there was a group of people who called for justice for the deceased by staging protests (Republica 2019b). On 18 August both the groups protested again, but the supporters of Lamichhane were outnumbered in the protest (Shrestha 2019a). Amidst such protests from both sides, on 20 August, the court again extended the remand of five more days. Gradually the supporters also organized protests in other cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara demanding the immediate release of the three people in custody (Shrestha 2019b). These protesters thought that the state framed him though he was innocent (Shrestha 2019b). They were convinced that it was murder, not suicide, and the Chitwan mayor (daughter of former PM Prachanda), the deputy superintendent of police (DSP) of this city (Dan Bahadur Malla, former bodyguard) and a journalist Kishor Shrestha were trying to take advantage from the incident and to ensnare Rabi Lamichhane. The court recorded the statements of the three and then released them on 26 August 2019.

Interestingly, the police and media used terms such as 'mob' or 'crowd' to denote the supporters of Lamichhane. Many of them were diehard fans, who seemed to have believed Rabi Lamichhane would not do wrong. Speaking at the zero hours of the house, a lawmaker of the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP), Maheshwar Jung Gahatraj, equated these fans as 'hooligans'. It was reported that he 'condemned the ongoing protest in support of Lamichhane and termed it as illegal, unusual hooliganism and havoc in the society'. He added: 'I strongly condemn the ongoing unlawful, unnecessary and uncontrollable hooliganism against the arrest of Rabi Lamichhane in the death case of journalist Pudasaini' (Nepal 2019). These people smashed the windscreen of the police van. It is clear that the lawmaker presented these fans as a group which was obstructing the fair investigation. The protesters organized rallies and other programmes demanding the instant release of the journalist.

In fan studies literature, scholars have discussed fan practices and rituals from the perspective of their activeness and creativity (Jenkins 2014). These fans are

often presented as diehard supporters. In the Indian case, Aswin Punathambekar (2012) shows how celebrity and television fans are related to national and regional politics. Through the case of the participation of Amit Paul, a contestant from Meghalaya in *Indian Idol 3* in 2007, the researcher has shown how the fans of Paul organized rallies and collected funds to promote him, and these fan activities evoked the feeling of national identity. In the case of Rabi Lamichhane, many of his fans went to Chitwan to show their solidarity with the journalists. They organized rallies chanting slogans and meetings in which fan leaders spoke, and singers sang songs supporting Lamichhane. We don't know how many fans participated in these programmes. However, they participated in different activities of sociability that made them a part of the public. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the parliamentary and provincial election that took place on 20 November 2022, Rabi Lamichhane won his constituency in Chitwan with a huge margin of 34,170 votes (The Kathmandu Post 2022). We can guess that many of these voters were a part of his television fans.

Fans as Critics

Though there is a group of fans who were active in both online and offline activism for Rabi Lamichhane, another group of fans were not diehard like others. This became evident in the case of the videos made by the journalist Shalik Ram Pudasaini. *Jana Aastha* edited by Kishor Shrestha broke the news that Pudasaini had made such video before he committed suicide. In this news the information of the woman who was 'compelled' to die was not revealed. Later online news media *Nepal Aaja* put a video joining two videos on its YouTube channel on 14 August 2019.³² While doing this the news media had mentioned that it had made some family matters secret, and if the police asked for the details, the videos would be submitted. That means the total video was not made public.

After watching the video many fans could not believe that the journalist committed suicide. They claimed it was a murder. However, some fans countered the views of diehard fans.

Few fans even made videos by pointing out flaws in the suicide video made available online. One such video was uploaded on Kalidas Channel with the title 'Salikram Pudasaini Exclusive Video Mistakes' on 18 August 2019. This video mainly raised a few issues such as the video started from the middle, two videos had been edited, there were some people inside the room where the video was shot, and at the end when he greeted all by joining two hands to do namaste, somebody might have carried the phone.³³ A user, Padam BY NP, suspected that somebody was giving electric shocks to the journalist, so he could not speak and sit well. Kriti Shrestha Rajbhandari wrote:

This is 100 percent murder not the suicide. We can clearly see he was forced to read the written material. At last we can see that he is greeting with his two hands, and there is someone who is taking video.

However, there were few audiences who watched the video critically and wrote comments accordingly. For example, Seaalu Maharjan wrote in Nepali: ‘I guess he has kept his phone (mobile) on his leg (lap) because while he was greeting us the phone was moving a little bit and if someone else had carried it this would not have happened’. At the end he added: ‘(I am not taking anyone’s side, I am saying what I understood) #peace’. Some fans highlighted that the videos were taken in the selfie mode by pausing from time to time so the backgrounds changed. For example, Suraj Thapa Magar pointed out that the video was edited. He added there were some low noises because of the paper he was carrying. He ended the message with this information: ‘Mobile phones can be kept on the blankets as we often do when we talk with girlfriends/boyfriends in beds. Don’t talk nonsense. Let us support Rabi but don’t give unbelievable arguments’.

As audiences debated for and against the video it uploaded on YouTube, *Nepal Aaja* online³⁴ also had to clarify that there were two videos. It also made the whole two videos public without editing to prove that it did not have other intentions than the public interest. The first video contained highly personal issues related to their marriage life. As mentioned in the verdict that dismissed the charge against the three people, the forensic report proved that videos were authentic (Voice of Nepal 2020).

The above examples show that fans can be critical. In the field of fan studies, some scholars have highlighted that we need to study about the negative emotions of fans such as hate and dislike (Click 2019). Researchers have given priority to this sort of behaviour as uncivil communication like cyberbullying and trolling have increased in the digital world. As mentioned by Click some of these fans tried to differentiate themselves from others who they termed ‘dupes’. This was also seen in the case of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga*. These critics believed that the suicide videos were authentic.

Fans as Online Supporters

Many fans didn’t participate in rallies and physical programmes. They participated in online activities. Mainly they wrote comments supporting the activities of television programmes. Some of them started fan groups on Facebook, and many audiences joined these groups. Others even made videos praising Rabi Lamichhane’s courage and activities.

We can look into different cases to show the discussions of fans. Due to its importance, here I discuss the case of Ashtami Gurung who was found dead in Dubai in 2017. After the news was aired on 26 November 2017, one user wrote: ‘The person who raped Ashtami should be kicked. Only then the spirit of Ashtami would get peace’. Another user wrote: ‘Rabi is one of the great people who can feel other’s pains and take them to his heart. I salute Rabi sir. State has to help him by providing strong security’. Audiences from UAE, Bahrain, shared their emotions via engaged comments and urged people to watch the show claiming its relevance

as they faced issues with respective embassies.³⁵ In fact, a user had approached the embassy after his employee did not allow him to return to Nepal to look after his family after the earthquake in 2015. Many people were disappointed after they came to know from the programme aired on 24 May 2018 that the accused was given a clean cheat. A group of audiences pointed out the Nepal embassy's incompetency. One said in Nepali:

I want to say something about Ashtami Gurung Rabi sir. There is no point in talking to the ambassador. They do nothing even when we pressure them while we were there. What would they do when we leave them there? How powerful are embassies of other countries? They do whatever for their workers. There is no use of Nepali embassies.

Similarly, another person said in Nepali,

If a European or an American woman was raped there, the court would have given verdict in her side. What to do? As she is from a poor country, today the perpetrator who gave pain to our cheeli (woman) was acquitted. Shame on our country. How we can be proud of our country. Is it enough to just jump by calling oneself Vir Gorkhali being drunk?³⁶

Many seem dissatisfied with the decision of the court. This kind of debate has become possible due to the affordance of digital technologies. The earlier discussion shows audiences could participate and express their views on the issues covered in the programme.

Likewise, there were about 25 Facebook groups that supported *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* especially Rabi Lamichhane in 2021 having thousands of members. Very few of them were started with an aim to help Rabi Lamichhane and the team. One such example is *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* created in August 2017. When I checked it in 2021, it had 680.3K members. The group had three objectives: (a) to pass the information of problems to concerned places and seek help, (b) to promote (information of) women and men having problems, and (c) to pass serious issues and cases to New24 Nepal. Some of these groups also collect donations to solve the problems covered in the programme. During a chat with me in August 2021, an admin of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* (Online Nepal) group, who lived in Poland, said that the group not only shared the programme among its members but also collected such donations and gave them to social activists like Isha Gurung or Jwala Sangraula.

Interestingly many of these groups started with different interests, and lately they were converted into groups related to the television programme. The case of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga* (Rabi Lamichhane) having 210.1K members is interesting. It was started as *Kanchanpur Khabar* (Saptari) in November 2017. Till October 2018, its name was changed 12 times. In March 2018, its name was 'Nepali in

Europe' and then this name was changed to 'Nepali Online News' and then 'Troll Nepal'. The main purpose of these groups is to promote news and videos related to Nepal to their groups. We can assume that these groups were mobilized when the police arrested the three people for abetting suicide.

There is a group of fans who prepare media content related to the celebrity journalist. Analysis of YouTube shows that till December 2021 about 45 music videos had been made on Rabi Lamichhane. Among them about ten were made before he was arrested. All videos praise Rabi Lamichhane for being courageous, for reporting about corruption and for helping people in need. One of the early videos was made and uploaded in December 2017 on the website of TikTok Nepal (perhaps the name of the channel was different in the beginning). It was uploaded after the issue of his US citizenship had been raised. This video highlighted that many people liked his programme and worried about him. It also praised the journalist for helping people who were having problems in foreign lands. For example, a video titled "Rabi Lamichhane Jindabad" made by Shubharambha Digital Music in July 2018 and uploaded on YouTube is interesting.³⁷ The video praised Rabi Lamichhane for working untiringly and urged him to not let them fall. It not only mentioned that many believed he was a god but also wished that those who criticized Lamichhane would be haunted by spirit. One of its singers informed in a Facebook live that she believed Rabi Lamichhane was the superhero in Nepal. The trend of making videos increased after he was arrested. Many of these videos challenged the established fact that the journalist Pudasaini committed suicide, highlighting the opened window in the room where he was found dead, the bruises in his dead body and the respect he showed to Rabi Lamichhane a month before he committed suicide. Using the footage from rallies and programmes organized by the supporters demanding his release, these videos presented Lamichhane as an innocent journalist who was arrested.

Scholars have discussed the passionate and playful participation of fans belonging to television programmes in terms of fan democracy. For example, Liesbt van Zoonen (2004) has mentioned the emotional and imaginative interaction of fans. In the case of *Sidha Kura Janata Sanga*, the video makers, fan groups and audiences of this programme performed such activities.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that three categories like committed news sources, critics and fans are important aspects of the television public in terms of the intensity of their participation. News sources provided the necessary information for journalists. Critics publicly criticized Rabi Lamichhane for not following the code of ethics or the rule of law. Some of them even filed complaints to the Press Council Nepal. These critics often criticized him for doing unconventional journalistic practices. Fans could be social workers, the diehards and the critics.

Using empirical cases from Nepal, this chapter suggests that we have to understand the emergence of the television public in the post-conflict contexts. When

other systems such as the police, courts, embassies and government offices don't work properly, many sources rooted faith in journalist Rabi Lamichhane and his team. Many public believe that Rabi Lamichhane was a god who worked on their side, and he would fight with anybody for their causes. This feeling is evident in the comments written by the public and music videos made praising him. Even critics appreciate Lamichhane and his team for their courage to help those who were in need. Many fans respect him as a god who left his luxurious life in the United States to make their lives better.

These categories highlight the intensity of audience participation and interaction. As mentioned, in the digital world, anybody can be an audience. To be the public is to have shared understandings and do activities related to sociability and performing publicly. They are deeply involved with the issues covered by the television programme. They are not accidental audiences who don't care about the journalists and their mission or television programme and its objectives. They engage in hot debates, support, criticize, and critique news programmes and the journalistic activities.

These three categories are parts of the public sphere. News sources often act because many of them see that the TV programme team can solve similar problems like them. Many of them join the debates about the programme on social media platforms. The comments these audiences wrote and the music videos they made have increased deliberation for and against Rabi Lamichhane and his team.

Yet these three categories are not mutually exclusive. Fans could be committed news sources. They may share their problems with the programme team. When they are dissatisfied, they may become critical. Fans who are active online may participate in activities in the 'real' world.

The chapter aimed to give a larger picture of different kinds of television public in Nepal. I am aware that more studies are needed to understand each category in detail to get a nuanced understanding of these categories. We need further research to get a sense of television fans such as social workers and the activities of Facebook fan groups. Lately we have seen debates regarding such social workers and charges of corruption among them in Nepal (Kunwar 2021). This aspect of philanthropy needs more examination. Increasing Facebook fan groups also requires scholars' critical inquiry.

Notes

- 1 All episodes are available here: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi
- 2 See the website: <http://web.archive.org/web/20171017045642/www.news24nepal.tv/>
- 3 Pabitra Thapa, interview, 24 September 2021.
- 4 New24Nepal. Sujendralai Ke Garne, Gagan Thapako Jimma, Iraqbata Studio Aain Kabita (What Should We Do to Sujendra, Responsibility of Gagan Thapa, Kabita Arrived Studio From Iraq). 8 April 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBgmsxAK57s&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=878&ab_channel=News24Nepal, accessed on 17 February 2023.

- 5 New24Nepal. Feri Ghus Lindai Karmachari, Bechiyekei Cheliko Iraqbata Guhar (Officials Taking Bribe Again, Women Sold in Iraq Seeking Help). 24 January 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQNfxtZ9UzY, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 6 New24Nepal. Kin Ruye Kulman? Uddharko Parkhaima Kuwaitma Nepali Cheli (Why Kulman Wept? Nepali Woman in Kuwait Waiting for Rescue). 9 May 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9CvONSKH_k&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=864, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 7 New24Nepal. Kuwaitbata Arki Cheliko Uddhar, 'Thuka' Thukera Pida Dineko Anauntho Katha (Rescue of Another Women from Kuwait, Strange Story of a Person Giving Trouble by Spitting). 29 July 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsTI6DaU-Fw&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=834, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 8 New24Nepal. Bal Byapar Garne Balbalika Kendra Prashasanko Niyrantran (Children Organization in Control of Authority for Selling Children). 26 December 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6VKu4XD3Xs&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=766, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 9 New24Nepal. Iraqma Bechiyekei Chheli Surakcchit, Naya Jivan Payeko Bhandai Aain Live (Woman Sold in Iraq Safe, Said She Had New Life). 30 December 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pilPikWakTg&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=763, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 10 New24Nepal. Iraqbata Rundai Livema Aayeki Chheli Studioma, 44 Dinma Iraqbata Safal Uddhar! (Woman From Iraq Who Became Live Weeping in Studio, Rescued Successfully From Iraq in 44 Days). www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpoe2R6iyA8&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=747, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 11 New24Nepal. Jali Tamasukbata Sat Gaun Thagne Shyam Pardeshi, Barha Barshaki Chhori Pathaye Tamashuk Chatine Shart! (Shyam Pradeshi Cheating Seven Villages With Forged Documents, Said Would Tear Documents If a 12-Year-Old Daughter Sent to Him). 28 December 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPEQG9R_ISY&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=765, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 12 Yuvraj Kandel, interview, 20 September 2020.
- 13 New24Nepal. Saat Hoina Pachis Gaun Thageka Rahechhan Shyam Pardeshilem, Sidha Kura Team Pugyo Sarlahi (Not 7 But 25 Villages Cheated by Shyam Pardeshi, Sidha Kura Team Reached Sarlahi). 20 January 2018. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tGeb8g8Q0&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=755. last accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 14 New24Nepal. Baraahaun Patacko Follow-up Reporting Pachhi Samatiye Shyam Pardeshi (Shyam Pradeshi Caught after 12 Follow-Ups). 3 September 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4ZLhzmS90I&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=505, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 15 New24Nepal. Ashtami Gurungko Ghar Khojdai Gorkha Pugyo Hamro Team, Atmahatya Garna Badhya Parneko Khoji Tibra! (Our Team Arrived Gorkha Looking for Ashtami Gurung's Home). 28 November 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=0W7ez_1GBxI&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=672, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 16 New24Nepal. Mobilema Bhetiyo Video Message, Atmahatya Haina Hatya (Video Message Found in Mobile, Murder Not Suicide). 26 November 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGGU1ooqEEQ&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=778, accessed on 17 February 2023.
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- 24 Due to privacy concern, the exact number has not been revealed.
- 25 Anything Important for You. 2017 Isha Gurung Live. 18 December 2017 www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJmfx23pP-E, accessed on 17 February 2023.
- 26 New24Nepal. Deshbhar Badhipahiro, Sidha Kurama Grihamantri Live, Sabinalai Sataune 35 Hajarmai Chhutyo (Rain and Landslide Over the Country, Home Ministry Live in Sidha Kura, Person Tormenting Sabina Released from Jail). 12 August 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU4VGVWBl-hc&list=PLe4tVQoTSSrA_GFYayAKNrRHOClwM0IUi&index=823, accessed on 17 February 2023.
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