To add or not add: that is the question?

(An argument for socially inclusive newsrooms)

by Pratyoush Onta

How members of variously different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious communities can co-exist amicably as citizens in any defined space is probably one of the most fundamental questions of our time. In multicultural societies, the question of co-existence between different groups gets immediately tied up with the institution of media. This is because of the importance of the public sphere that exists between the state and the individual citizen. As the media's ability to mediate in the lives of people increases, media institutions and the form and content of their products can create, exacerbate or ameliorate gender, ethnic, political and cultural relationships in both national and sub-national spaces. Hence the politics of media representation and the media's ability to reproduce or challenge various types of social inequalities have assumed importance for social scientists worldwide.

Media representation is tied to many factors that influence the act of content production. As I am only concerned with journalism, and not the media industry as a whole which now contains a large entertainment segment, let us look at some scholarly perspectives on the production of journalism's mainstay – news.

The production of news has been of serious concern for those who have been studying the media for over a half century. Different scholars, who have studied the media from various perspectives, have employed a multitude of approaches to study the process of news production.

According to a useful overview written by the American scholar Michael Schudson ("The Sociology of News Production Revisited [Again]" in *Mass Media and Society* edited by James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 2000), these scholarly approaches can be categorized broadly within three perspectives.

The first perspective is that of "political economy that relates the outcome of the news process to the structure of the state and the economy, and to the economic foundation of the news organization."

The second perspective is derived from the work on the sociology of social organization and professions and it "tries to understand how journalists' efforts on the job are constrained by organizational and occupational demands." There are at least three strands within this perspective. One views news as the social production of reality through the interactions between reporters and government officials and politicians (sources) and through its 'play' in the newsroom between reporters and editors with various duties. The second views news as "the social manufacture of an organizational product" and hence it argues that it "can be studied like other manufactured goods." This organizational theory does not give primacy to the agency of individual actors but instead focuses on how organizational constraints determine news irrespective of personal intentions. In contrast, the third view insists that news construction is influenced by the

"social backgrounds and personal values of media personnel" and advocates a diverse newsroom to reflect the diversity of the population served by the news.

According to Schudson, the third perspective "emphasizes the constraining force of broad cultural traditions and symbolic systems, regardless of the structure of economic organization or the character of occupational routines." As a concluding remark, Schudson adds that no single approach in isolation can provide a complete account of the news making process and a "future sociology of news production has to integrate them."

Given this multiplicity of perspectives amongst international scholars on how news is manufactured, it is no surprise that there is no consensus regarding the need for diversity in the newsroom with respect to its links with content production. A reason for this is the inability of the international research fraternity to clear the doubts of those who are not yet convinced that the newsrooms need to be diverse to serve a diverse media audience. For instance, one view often repeated by male editors in Nepal is that they do not need the physical representation of women, janajatis, dalits, and madhesis for their products – newspapers, magazines, and programs in radio and television – to be inclusive. In other words, they say that men can write about women, non-janajatis can write about janajatis, and so on. It is not that they do not have a point. Representation of other people's realities is at the heart of the enterprise of journalism and some social sciences.

By contrast, those who have advocated for inclusive newsrooms in Nepal have either evoked some strands within the literature on sociology of news or resorted to notions of equality and social justice to make their argument. For the former, useful strands in the above-mentioned three perspectives on the sociology of news have been loosely integrated. First, the political economy approach has been useful in looking at the sociology of missing women, janajatis, dalits and madhesis in media ownership in Nepal. One could argue that the erstwhile unitary nature of the Nepali state dominated by high caste Hindu males from the middle hills forms the political economic foundation of the media industry in Nepal and, accordingly, structures the composition of its newsrooms.

Second, advocates of inclusion have taken comfort in one strand within the social organizational model which claims that personal social/cultural connections and values do matter in the production of news. For instance, in an article published in *Media Adhyayan 2* in 2007, Tanka Upreti makes this argument explicitly while looking at the state of social inclusion in the TV industry in Nepal. Given the high inefficacy of organizational and occupational policies and routines in our country, Upreti argues that news is constructed on the basis of individual decisions, connections and values. Hence the social background and subjectivity of the individual journalists present in the newsrooms greatly influence the journalistic content that is produced.

Third, the "constraining force of broad cultural traditions and symbolic systems" reproduced by high caste, Nepali speaking, Hindu males not only influences the contents of news but those involved in the news-making process - women, janajatis, dalits and madhesis. This case has been made most explicitly by those who have inquired into the very low percentage of women in Nepal's newsrooms. When all these three strands have been put together, it is no wonder that many have argued against the overwhelming presence of Bahun, Chhetri, and Newar males in the world of Nepali journalism; it means that concerns and voices of women, janajatis (other than Newars), dalits and madhesis who are largely missing in the newsrooms are not adequately represented in the news and

related contents. This is the basis for their call for a more inclusive journalism profession in Nepal.

However, there are also other bases for opposing social exclusion in the media profession. Some who advocate for inclusion base their call on equality, equity and social justice and not necessarily on the links between who is present in the newsroom and in the contents of news. Internationally, this kind of advocacy was first put on the media map by members of the racial/coloured minorities in the US and Europe during the 19th century. In more recent times, it is the position advocated by feminists. During the 1970's, feminists identified the small number of women in the media profession as the first priority for change, and they called for an increase in the number of women from various social backgrounds (race, ethnicity, class, and regions). It was then said that women's physical presence must increase not only in the reporting and production sections of media organizations but also in management positions. This, it was then thought, would automatically make the media women-friendly and enable women-friendly contents to emerge, the latter being their second priority for advocacy.

But the world turned out to be more complicated than that. Based on the experience of several countries, where the rise in the number of women journalists – to more than 50 percent in journalism schools and more than 40 percent in the workforce – did not necessarily make the media women-friendly, the expectation from the 1970's was subsequently revised. The rise in the number of women in the media is now desired simply because it is the right thing to do from a position that supports equality, equity and social justice. This same logic can also be found in the feminist media movement in Nepal (here I refer to publications by researchers at *Asmita*) and in the advocacy trajectories of those championing for the presence of more janajati, dalit and madhesi journalists in our newsrooms.

In countries such as the U.S., where the commercially driven media have very little competition, there is yet another logic that calls for social inclusion in the newsrooms. For commercial media to be successful in courting a diverse array of both advertisers and consumers, its journalism has to be trusted by its consumers. Advocates of this view argue that socially diverse consumers can not trust journalism coming out from newsrooms that are offensively not diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity. Hence even to survive in a cut-throat media market, American media institutions have had to diversify their workforce. While this logic is not as overwhelming in Nepal as it is in the U.S., some social inclusion advocates here have stressed that it is an increasingly important factor given the fact that the middle-class with disposable income for media consumption is becoming more socially diverse.

These arguments for a socially inclusive media need further debate in Nepal. Are you interested?

Onta co-edited the book Socially Inclusive Media *(in Nepali, published by Martin Chautari) in 2008*

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