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# OVERVIEW



# Analyzing Media Growth

One of the sectors in Nepal that has witnessed a spectacular growth since the Jana Andolan of 1990 is media. While its quality leaves a lot to be desired, the growth in volume of Nepali media needs to be recognized at a time when just about everybody seems to be complaining about this or that mess around us. Several factors are responsible for the growth of media in the 1990s. First is change in the legal regime; second is the increasing involvement of private parties and NGOs in both media production and education; third is cumulative growth in the advertisement market; fourth is the growth in the number of Nepalis who consume media products; and fifth is the imperative of the Nepali language.

*Legal regime:* The Constitution of Nepal, 1990 is a landmark document in the history of democracy in Nepal. It guarantees many personal rights of the citizens of Nepal. Two of these rights secure the citizen's freedom of expression and access to

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The Kathmandu Post, 4 December 1998; this revised text from Onta (2002a)

information. This is a fundamental legal guarantee without which an effective and independent press (both print and electronic) cannot be conceived. Following the promulgation of the Constitution, several acts relating to the media in Nepal were passed. Two deserve mention here: Printing Press and Publications Act, 2048 v.s., and National Broadcasting Act, 2049 v.s.. The first of these guarantees that the property of any properly registered press in Nepal will not be confiscated by the government (as was possible in the Panchayat era) because of what it has printed. The same Act guarantees that except for specific topic or specified conditions, no a priori censorship will be exercised in the case of any printed matter. It also guarantees that the registration of a newspaper or magazine will not be cancelled because of its contents. The National Broadcasting Act made it possible for the entry of the private and NGO sectors in both radio and TV. This Act explicitly requires any broadcasting institution to emphasize programs related to developmental themes such as agriculture, education, industry, finance, science & technology, health, family planning, forest and environmental conservation.

*New participants:* The second factor that is responsible for the growth of the media sector is the increasing involvement of the non-governmental and private institutions in both media production and education. The involvement of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the field of media education dates from the late years of the Panchayat era and in the years since 1990, this involvement has increased, both in volume and depth. Moreover, NGOs now produce serious reports for print, radio and video media. For the case of print, the work put out by the Centre for Investigative Journalism of Himal Association and the Women's Feature Service of Sancharika Samuha Nepal are worth mentioning. Radio Sagarmatha (FM 102.4) is a good example for the case of radio.

Since their investments in media hardware (eg printing presses, radio transmitters) are guaranteed against confiscation, the private sector has invested significantly in both print and radio hardware. Private sector investments in print, significantly in the form of broadsheet dailies and weeklies, have already resulted in successes and drawn new entrants in the field, some of whom have failed and exited from the market. Within print media, investments in the magazine genre have increased too, although only few extraordinarily successful examples exist at the moment. Full-fledged private sector investments in radio (FM) have increased since 1998. These private sector initiatives have created a new radio market and have broken the monopoly of Radio Nepal. It is also expected that private sector investments in television will grow in the near future.

*Growth in advertisement market:* The third factor behind the growth of the media sector in Nepal is the cumulative growth in governmental, non-governmental, and private sector patronage of different media via paid advertisements. Space devoted to advertisements in successful media products, often in the form of extra pages full of advertisements, is enough testimony of this fact. While it is not too easy to analyze exactly how the advertisement market is growing in print, radio and TV, informed people suggest that the print advertisement market alone is growing at a rate of about 25%. The new radio advertisement market must be growing at a significant rate.

*Growth in media consumers:* The fourth factor to consider is the growth in the number of Nepalis who, for various reasons, consume media products at an unprecedented level in the history of Nepal. Part of the explanation for this is the increase in the number of literate Nepali citizens. Another reason to consider is that for more and more Nepalis each year, some form of media is becoming an integral part of their life. For an estimated 15-20

per cent of the population, consuming some media product is now becoming a routine fact of life. The reasons behind this are numerous but includes fashion, growth of popular culture, professional compulsions, and reliance on the media for development- or politics-related information. Whether this consumption makes them a better informed citizen or enables them to participate in their own development is something we can not categorically determine at the current state of our knowledge.

*Imperative of the Nepali language:* The cultural politics of the Panchayat regime had relied to a large extent on the promotion of the Nepali language as a fundamental marker of the Nepali identity. Its educational and other program had promoted Nepali at the cost of other languages spoken inside Nepal. While this did historical violence to the local cultures and languages and dialects of Nepal, the Panchayat's language policy resulted in a Nepali population that overwhelmingly speaks with each other in the Nepali language. When the environment for media growth became congenial, media promoters and producers cashed in on this fact although it is also true that the more democratic environment has made it possible for the production of media in other languages, however small their volume might be at the moment.

This growth in media volume now needs to be accompanied by an overall quality growth. For this to happen, new investments will have to be made in media education to produce a more competent work force. Formal and informal support groups could enhance the capacity of working journalists. Finally, successful investors need to share their financial success with their staff and writers. Otherwise their complacency will make their institutions unable to survive the impending competition, all of which might not be visible at the moment.

# Kathmandu's Monopoly

The growth in print and electronic media in Nepal since the political changes of 1990 does not necessarily mean that media as an institution has served the cause of democracy in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. Nor does it mean that media institutions themselves are fully democratic. There are several structural characteristics of Nepali media that bear upon its potential as a vibrant force for the democratization of Nepali society. Some of the more important features – spatial concentration of production, ownership pattern, minority representation in the workforce and educational attainment of the media personnel – deserve to be studied more carefully. Here I analyze just the first feature.

*Kathmandu-centric:* Almost all of nationally influential print and electronic media in Nepal is produced in Kathmandu. The total print run of all the daily and weekly newspapers produced from Kathmandu on any day of the week has now surpassed the 300,000 mark (although we do not know the exact figure given

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The Kathmandu Post, 23 February 2001; original title 'Media: Breaking Kathmandu's Monopoly'

the absence of a proper audit bureau of circulation). Some of the most influential fortnightly and monthly magazines sell anywhere from 15,000 to 50,000 copies per issue. Due to increasingly better road networks and the advent of private airlines, the Kathmandu-produced print media reaches different parts of the country more easily today than even five years ago. However Kathmandu media establishments are still very poorly served by their stringers in different parts of Nepal because hardly any investment has been made to enhance the latter's individual and network capacity. Regional print media centres do exist in places such as Butwal, Biratnagar, Narayanghat, Pokhara, Tansen and Nepalgunj but no newspaper or magazine produced from any of these cities has been able to create a national presence. Most regional newspapers have a circulation of less than 2000 and the best one or two sell about 7000 copies. The private institutions producing these regional newspapers are rather weak in terms of financial management and editorial skills. Also newspapers from Kathmandu have a direct and immediate link to national and international news sources which the regional newspapers lack.

State-owned Radio Nepal, with headquarters in Kathmandu, is the only radio medium that broadcasts to most of Nepal in Short Wave and Medium Wave. Until about a year ago, independent FM Radio stations were concentrated in Kathmandu only but that situation has begun to change with the establishment of several stations outside of Kathmandu. However just like in the case of print, the organizations running these radio stations outside of Kathmandu are institutionally very weak. Television too is Kathmandu-based. Hence from a production point of view, nationally influential media in Nepal is highly centralized in Kathmandu. This kind of spatial concentration means that the Nepali media represents the Kathmandu establishment point of view on almost all issues. Despite slight differences in political



orientation and analytic capacity, there is a consensus on how the Kathmandu media reports its subjects, namely, by playing it safe between the various political, financial and intellectual elite camps. This should be a cause for alarm to anyone who is interested in generating the conditions in which a diversity of orientations and points of view (both intellectual and spatial) can be served by a truly pluralistic and democratic media in Nepal.

*Breaking Kathmandu's hold:* In order to break Kathmandu's hold in nationally significant media production, print media products and institutions outside of Kathmandu must consolidate themselves. For this to happen, small-time publishers and editors located outside of Kathmandu, now working separately with very limited financial and social capital, will have to learn ways to work with each other in innovative ways. This would mean establishing cooperatives to overcome the financial crunch in the investment sector and working with media training institutions (such as Tribhuvan University, Nepal Press Institute, etc.) to overcome skill limitations of their personnel. In addition, media managers and editors outside of Kathmandu also need to think hard and long about ways to improve the regional coverage and circulation of their newspapers and magazines. If they were successful in doing this, it would force Kathmandu news organizations to do a much more competent coverage of regionally important issues. To do that, they would have to make investments on people and regional institutions, which in turn, ironically enough, would end up bolstering other region-based journalism in Nepal.

With respect to radio, the first thing that needs to happen is that the state's control over Radio Nepal must be decreased, gradually or totally. While allowing competitive program production in Kathmandu to other parties who should not have to pay to Radio Nepal for producing and airing good content (as

they have to do now), existing regional stations of Radio Nepal must be opened up to non-state sector for programming. This scheme should especially promote programming in various regionally significant languages. With respect to independent radio licenses, the government must be pressurized to ensure that a significant number of these stations are located in rural Nepal, especially in those areas of the country now served only by Radio Nepal (amongst native radio broadcast). As in the case of print, those aspiring to open and run FM stations outside of Kathmandu will have to figure out ways to bring together the financial and management resources of different institutions, and work with other institutions that already exist to help such ventures. Without such a working model, weak independent FM stations will not serve the cause of media diversity and democracy in Nepal.

It goes without saying that the challenge to break Kathmandu's monopoly on influential media in Nepal must address issues other than just spatial location. However, they deserve to be discussed separately.

# The Absent Majority

There are several structural characteristics of Nepali media that bear upon its potential as a vibrant force for the democratization of Nepali society. These include spatial concentration of production in Kathmandu, minority representation in the workforce, ownership pattern, and educational attainment of the media personnel. In the previous essay, I elaborated the Kathmandu-centric nature of our media and made some suggestions regarding how Kathmandu's monopoly over nationally significant media could be broken. In this essay, I discuss minority representation in the workforce. By the term 'minority', I indicate the disproportionate absence of women and members of specific caste and ethnic communities – namely, dalits and *janajatis* – in the mainstream media workforce in Nepal. These mutually non-exclusive categories constitute a majority of Nepal's population, but their representatives are absent in the newsrooms and management of mainstream media.

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Journalists in Nepal tend to be overwhelmingly male and from the Bahun, Chhetri and Newar (BCN) caste groups. The percentage of women reporters and editors, both in print and electronic media, continues to be small. Surveys done in the past have indicated that women constitute about 15 percent of the workforce in print editorial departments. However a recent survey has suggested that this number is even smaller. In the second half of 2000, a team of researchers from the Kathmandu-based Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR) and Martin Chautari did a survey of 114 print publications in the Kathmandu Valley and 22 other cities of Nepal. These researchers found out that women constitute about five per cent of the workforce in the editorial department (which the survey construed as consisting of all editors, reporters, desk and layout staff). Similarly, women constitute less than five percent of the regular columnists. Amongst top management positions (constituted by the chairman, managing director, director, circulation chief and marketing chief), a few women head marketing and circulation departments but they constitute a tiny percentage of their overall workforce cohort. Hence, despite much talk about “gender and development” for the last twenty years, the owners of most media organizations have done very little to increase the number of women in their editorial and management staff. Some feminist organizations (such as Sancharika Samuha and Asmita) have succeeded, to a certain extent, to put examples of pro-women analysis in the mainstream media through print feature service or radio programming. But even their best effort has not been enough to effectively address the disproportionate absence of women in all media organizations.

Similarly, one rarely finds members of non-BCN groups in the editorial or management departments of mainstream media. In the 104 mainstream publications surveyed by researchers (10 of the 114 publications were omitted in this part of the survey

because they were specialist dalit or *janajati* publications) dalits constituted less than two percent each of the staff of editorial and managerial departments, and less than one percent among regular columnists. *Janajatis* constituted about 14 percent of the editorial staff, 22 percent of the managerial staff and 12 percent of the columnists. But if you exclude upper caste Newars (all Newars have been included in the *janajati* group) from these calculations, all the three statistics regarding the participation of ethnic Nepalis in mainstream print media would be around 10 percent or less. Hence we can conclude that there is very little participation of women (half of the estimated 23 million population in 2001), dalits (about 15 percent), and ethnic minorities (about 40 percent) in print media in Nepal. Although similar surveys for the case of radio and television in Nepal was not done as part of the above study, suggestive data generated for dalits and *janajatis* in radio show that the scenario is not very different in the electronic media.

The overwhelming presence of Bahun, Chhetri and Newar males in the world of Nepali media means that concerns and voices of women, dalits and *janajatis* are not adequately represented in all media products and institutions. These mutually non-exclusive categories constitute a substantial majority of the population of Nepalis. In other words, the demographic constitution of Nepali media institutions does not correspond even remotely with that of the Nepali society. What is even worse is that most mainstream media institutions and elected officials of professional bodies of journalists do not even consider this absence of the majority to be a problem! Hence it is proper to ask how effectively media can champion the cause of democracy in Nepal when it has thus far failed to address the lack of democratic representation in its own organizations. This structural trait limits the functional capacity of our media institutions to be a full pro-democratic force.

So what is the solution? Since access to mainstream media is often very difficult or denied, feminists and activists promoting dalit and janajati causes have often found it easier to start their own alternative low-circulation publications, mostly magazines. Even though they have not been able to publish a consolidated minority-agenda setting publication thus far, these alternative publications transgress the dominant public domain with minority concerns. They also provide on the job training to minority media persons.

In addition, to challenge the BCN status quo, activists will have to target mainstream media organizations for their shameful demographic record and force them to alter their recruitment policy. At the same time, more women, dalits and *janajatis* must be encouraged to join media as a profession. Appropriate training, either on the job or prior to it, must be a part of the package of facilitation. Concerned activists should engage with media training programs regarding recruitment of trainees from the underrepresented communities. They will also have to build up appropriate networks to facilitate the entry of non-BCN rookies into the media profession. Some form of positive discrimination on their behalf in educational institutions must be supported. The latter will help prepare competent media personnel from the underrepresented groups and the former will increase their access to relevant work environments.

# Education and Effectiveness

What roles do formal educational achievements of our media personnel play in the link between media and democracy in Nepal? In other words, if media as an institution is to form a formidable force for the democratization of Nepali society at large, then what should be the desired formal educational achievements of our media persons?

To begin with, I acknowledge that there has been a long-standing debate on just how formally educated journalists must be to do their work effectively. In the US for instance, there are many instances of high-school dropouts having become nationally known reporters in print, radio or television in the first seven decades of the 20th century. While some not so highly educated journalists did become star reporters in the closing decades of the last century, they were increasingly the exceptions rather than the rule. Today, it is rare for an American journalist not to have finished college, most likely with a liberal arts degree. In many instances, reporting is

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done by communicators with specialized degrees (at the masters or doctoral level) in the natural sciences, medicine, law, finance, public policy, technology, and other similar subjects.

The subject matter that is to be communicated via mass media to the general public has become relatively so much more complex that to do a competent job, a journalist must have undergone a rigorous general training in college followed by specialized courses on the concerned topic. That is why it is no strange to find economists with PhDs, doctors of medicine, or lawyers working as full-time reporters and editors in the newsrooms of all three traditional media in America. In fact one could find much the same situation for the nationally significant English language print media in India (I do not know the scene for the case of media in other Indian languages).

But what is the situation in Nepal? No comprehensive data is available about the education levels of journalists working in Nepal at the moment. However, there are indicators that suggest that the general educational levels of journalists have been rising. Many of the most competent reporters of the private broadsheet dailies, the influential magazines and independent radio stations have at least a BA level education, if not an MA. Many of the influential media houses no longer hire reporters without a BA. Some of the more educated young journalists could have opted for other professions but are now choosing to become journalists, giving the profession a new credibility as a career option. Despite this positive trend, it is also the case that an overwhelming number of journalists in Nepal have never completed a bachelor's degree, let alone a higher specialized degree. Moreover, the number of journalists trained in the research methods of the social sciences is still very small in Nepal. Lack of exposure to such methods can be attributed in part to the poor state of social science teaching in our colleges.



In addition, most journalists whose working language is Nepali have a very poor command over English despite having BA or MA degrees. This inability restricts their effectiveness as communicators when due to poor access to resource materials and texts only available in that language, journalists can not keep themselves up-to-date with critical developments in the fields they cover. While media houses they work for might provide them with free access to the Internet, the dominance of content in English in the Internet will push their attention away from the serious homepages to the entertainment chat rooms. As a result journalists cannot perform with the same level of expertise as professionals from the other disciplines. This becomes clear when media persons become unable to cross-question experts from other fields while doing specialist reporting.

Hence we can conclude that the limited formal educational levels of Nepali journalists significantly stunt the potential of Nepali media as a force for democracy. To make matters worse, non-media professionals (from various disciplines) have not yet cultivated a culture of working with media institutions. The potential for such work is especially being underutilized in the case of independent public service FM radio stations like Radio Sagarmatha. Where, for instance, are our lawyers who would explain the intricacies of our legal regime to the relatively less literate masses over radio? Or the doctors or the engineers who could do the same for their respective professions? The remuneration offered by media institutions is only one of the many reasons why these professionals have not opted to work for the media.

What must be done? A better-educated media workforce is definitely desirable in our country. However, until the general educational environment in our colleges and universities improve significantly, we can hardly do much to change the present situation

apart from interventions of the remedial variety. Nevertheless, avenues are open for new investments in our formal colleges to produce better-trained journalists. Formal three-year BA programs in Tribhuvan University (such as the one available in Ratna Rajya Campus) could do with lots more media training infrastructure. Such programs should also be available in campuses located in other parts of the country. NGOs engaged in media education must also make similar educational opportunities available in non-formal environments. This would mean making the kind of 10-month trainings provided by Nepal Press Institute or Media Point far more rigorous than what they are at the moment. Enhancing working knowledge of English of the journalists must also be part of this effort. In addition, formal and informal support groups could upgrade the capacity of working journalists. Furthermore the remuneration scales for competent media personnel must be upgraded. This is needed to prevent them from migrating to other lucrative professions.

Independent radio stations and feature departments of print media must solicit a working partnership with professionals from other trades and disciplines. This will partly compensate for the lack of expert knowledge amongst journalists and also familiarize non-media professionals with the workings of media institutions. This kind of practice will, in the long run, help to build pro-democratic networks across professions and disciplines in Nepali society at large. These and other measures will surely make our media more of a force for democracy than it is at the moment.

# Investigative Journalism

During the Panchayat-era, print media-watchers used to blame the then existing oppressive press laws for the poor state of investigative journalism in Nepal. It is 1997 now. Seven years into a new political dispensation, five years after the enactment of a generous set of laws that guarantee widespread press freedoms, and four years after the first private-sector broadsheet dailies arrived in the market, some analysts say that Nepali investigative journalism has not recorded any substantial progress. Well, they are mostly right! What do we need to know to understand this state of affairs?

Revisiting the late Panchayat-yug: Apart from the two broadsheet dailies owned by the government, many weeklies that were backed by various banned political parties constituted the main body of the print press in Nepal during the 1980s. Even while operating under severe legal and other constraints, these oppositional weeklies provided a consistent forum to counteract

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what one scholar has called the ‘counterfeit reality’ of post-Referendum Panchayat presented by the government owned media. While the official press never reported the work of various mafias, journalists used the popular weeklies to expose their nefarious activities. This brand of fiery investigative journalism was best embodied in the work of Padam Thakurathi who was almost assassinated for his exposés of the doings of the so-called *bhumigat giroha* (‘underground mafia’).

Even as Thakurathi and his lesser-known colleagues showed how individuals could seek the truth in times dominated by technologies of counterfeit reality, the successes of this brand of journalism were limited. While it cultivated a taste for political journalism amongst Nepal’s increasingly larger reading public, it did not do much to foster the skills necessary to make investigative journalism a widespread phenomenon in Nepal. The then existing draconian press laws clearly prevented the development of institutions dedicated to this subject and individual efforts, in the main, were concentrated more toward direct oppositional writings against the Panchayat than towards learning the analytical skills necessary for this trade.

The private-sector boom: When *Kantipur* and *The Kathmandu Post* showed up in the Nepali press world in early 1993, media-watchers pronounced that the days of the Nepali weeklies were numbered. When other private broadsheet dailies joined the first two during the mid-1990s, it was then said that this type of competition would foster an environment for quality journalism. It has now become clear that the pronouncement of the death of nationally known weeklies was premature. Instead their numbers have increased and the most popular ones continue to sell over 15,000 copies each week.

It has also become clear that the increased number of broadsheet dailies by themselves will not foster investigative

journalism here. The reason for this is related to their huge investment needs and the small size of the political-financial elites in Nepal. Investors who put their money in producing broadsheet dailies should be ready to digest a loss of at least one crore rupees per year for the first two or three years of their operation. Who in Nepal can come up with this kind of money? They are financial elites who are politically well connected. Hence, despite the expectation that this boom might be propelled by the pure logic of profit-driven markets, one has to conclude that its real economics has to be sought not in the accounting of how many copies of the newspapers are sold, but more in terms of the social and political capital the investors are able to wield as a result of their investment.

The intricate nexus between the investment requirements of these dailies and the social logic of Nepal's elite political-financial worlds can be seen in the way in which their institutions are organized: they have relatively strong management teams but their editorial teams are rather weak. Hence despite individual capacities of the journalists and despite an occasional investigative report done at the initiative of an individual or a team of journalists, these newspapers have been unable to enhance the quality of investigate journalism in Nepal. As long as the need to butter the political-financial nexus remains the primary agenda of the investors who support these papers, the relatively weak editorial parts of these institutions will not be able to support individual investigative efforts that might embarrass one or another member of their larger financial-political investor set. Hence in their present state, the increase in the number of broadsheet dailies will have little bearing on the development of investigative journalism in Nepal.

What about the weeklies and magazines?: Since the financial requirements for a weekly or a magazine are comparatively small

(in the tune of ten-fifteen lakhs rupees per year), theoretically speaking, they should have become the chief forums for investigative journalism in Nepal by now. That they have not become so requires some explanation. The popular weeklies have not been able to shed their *Panchayat-kal avatars* as mission papers. Their popularity is dependant upon the taste for political journalism amongst Nepali readers and the way in which variously factionalized political parties have used them as their publicity fronts. Coverage of broad social issues is minimal and we are yet to see weeklies that are bold enough to totally break away from their previous political affiliations.

Free of this *panchayat-kal* baggage and a result of the process by which desktop and offset publication technologies became affordable here, various new magazines have joined the Nepali print media market in the post-Jana Andolan era. The reasons for their lack of success in this field (along with those of the weeklies) must be sought in the absence of institutional and individual analytical capacity to carry out the job. In the genre of serious magazines, the preponderance of *bichar-pradhan* (“thought-based”) magazines is not difficult to understand given our Gorkhe propensity to deliver ones two *paisa* worth of *bichar* on any topic under the sun. But *bichar* pundits do not serve the cause of investigative journalism well. Ask them to engage in any type of research on contemporary issues, ask them to come up with analyses that are based on solid empirical research, then you will begin to understand why even magazines relatively free of the financial-political constraints have not been able to substantially improve the quality of investigate journalism here. A disastrous conflation of journalists who have little or no training on the methods of social science inquiry and editors who are themselves handicapped when it comes to providing in-house training to otherwise capable neophyte journalists, ensure that

the growth of investigative journalism remains stunted even within the magazine genre. Where then lies our hope for a better future in this area?

The next frontier: I predict that three factors need to come together before we will see an investigative journalism “take-off” in Nepal. The first is form: since the weekly newspaper form is too closely associated with a taste for certain type of political journalism, the next frontier for investigative journalism will be provided in the magazine format by an institution that is relatively free of the financial-political nexus discussed above. The second factor will be the establishment of institutions that support such type of work, both financially and editorially. Such institutions will probably have to be organized autonomously in the private or non-profit sector as has already happened for other genres of print reporting. These institutions should be able to mobilize good social scientists and journalists to train younger journalists in the methods of social scientific inquiry. The last and most important factor will be the availability of journalists who want to train themselves as good investigative reporters covering special niches of the social field. They should realize that many opportunities for self-training exist in Nepal today. They should also realize that investigative journalism does not only mean digging up a case of abuse of power but also that it means reporting about broader social trends and processes that influence today’s Nepali social worlds.