

Pratyoush Onta, Shekhar Parajulee, Devraj Humagain, Komal Bhatta, and Krishna Adhikari, eds. 2005. *Radio Patrakāritā: FMmā Samācāra Sambād*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

The frequent news bulletins and lively talk shows that we hear in FM radios in Nepal today did not start overnight. There is a history of struggle to broadcast news in FM. In the erstwhile controlled media environment of Nepal, FM stations toiled a lot to give the listeners what they wanted to hear. There were legal, socio-economic as well as organisational hurdles on the way. We get to know about these hurdles and the struggles to overcome them in this book which is a compilation of various studies on news and talk programs in FM Radios in Kathmandu and Pokhara. The chapters have been researched and written by a set of Martin Chautari researchers and radio journalists.

From interesting and unusual experiences of radio broadcasters to the inside story of news and current affairs production, this book gives a detailed account of radio journalism in FM stations. The study has tried to follow three approaches to news production as reviewed by media scholar Michael Schudson (2000): a) political economic; b) social organisational and c) cultural. These three categories are dealt with in an appropriate manner by the researchers. The history and growth of the FM radio sector and its legal and policy aspects are accurately and substantially analysed in chapters one and three respectively from the political economic approach. An overview of the existing literature on FM radios in Nepal, a

brief discussion of the three approaches to news production and a summary of the research findings are presented in chapter two.

As pointed by Devraj Humagain, the legal and political aspects of FM Radios are important in order to understand the environment in which they function. Journalism in radio has been shaped by the National Broadcasting Act passed 12 years ago. Humagain's detailed analysis and critical study of the Act is not only informative but equally interesting to read. His first chapter on the history of FM radio gives a very detailed account of the growth of the sector. It describes the dilatory tactics of the government in issuing licences. According to Humagain, FM stations now exist in 22 districts of Nepal and are owned by companies, NGOs, cooperatives and locally elected bodies. He also discusses the important organisations and individuals who have promoted FM radios. Given the level of detail deployed in this chapter, it can be a little wearisome to read at places but its rich information sets the background for the rest of the book.

Chapter three gives an overview of the policy and the hostile regulatory environment in which the FM sector has had to operate in Nepal. Humagain discusses the license fee that FM stations have to pay to the government based on the power of their transmitters. FM Radios are categorised by its owners as commercial and community/non-commercial but that classification is not recognised in the Broadcast Act and the stations do not pay their license fee accordingly. This shows either ignorance or the irrationality of the concerned authorities. Another valid point raised by Humagain is the provision in the Act that requires independent radio stations to devote one fourth of their time to relay the national broadcast of Radio Nepal. Although this has not happened in practice, the intention seems to be to curb independent broadcasting in a significant way.

In chapter four, Binod Dhungel describes what King Gyanendra's regime tried to do to control or shut down the operation of FM radios after February 2005. He argues that the actions of the royal regime impeded the free flow of information in the form of news and current affairs programs. This had an adverse impact on the income of radio stations leading them to lay off journalists in large numbers. He also argues that the withdrawal of public service advertisements by the government had a negative impact on the economics of FM stations. He further points out that the government tried to close FM radio stations by accusing them of supporting Maoist activities through radio programs. The arguments in this chapter are well supported with documentary

evidence, interviews with those involved in the running of various radio stations and Dhungel's personal observations as a radio producer.

Dhungel's largely political economic approach can be read in conjunction with the experiences described by Ghamaraj Luintel and Sriram Poudel in chapters six and seven. Luintel's writing comes as a fresh and delightful read bursting with his experiences in the making of *Hālcāl*. *Hālcāl* is another term for news or happenings and is the title of the NGO-owned Radio Sagarmatha's news bulletin in Kathmandu. Weaving interesting facts with humorous anecdotes, Luintel provides a very informative and interesting account of what *Hālcāl* contains and how it is produced. He also discusses the experiences of learning through mistakes and describes how Radio Sagarmatha coped during the 2001 royal massacre and after the royal takeover. His chapter gives a clear picture of what working in a radio newsroom means even to those who have never seen such a newsroom. The conversational style of his writing is pleasant to read when compared with the academic style adopted by Chautari researchers.

The experiences of starting and producing news in Kantipur FM is detailed by Sriram Poudel in chapter seven. From the very first line- 'Notice about a lost buffalo!' it clearly ascertains the effectiveness and accessibility of FM in the Kathmandu valley. There are several instances where Poudel successfully highlights the compromises that news had to undergo because of various factors controlling their broadcast. Poudel's experience of not being able to broadcast news on the royal massacre highlights the then reality of media control. He also tells us about the funding situation for news and talk programmes in his station (which can be related to other radio stations as well). News is regarded as expensive to produce whereas entertainment shows that only include playing songs and phone-ins are relatively cheap to produce. And on top of that, listeners are attracted to the entertainment shows which generate more advertisement revenue for the station than the news oriented shows or news bulletins themselves.

In chapters five and eight, Krishna Adhikari discusses the practice of news in FM stations in Kathmandu and Pokhara respectively. He describes how news is manufactured, namely, the process it undergoes before being broadcast. He says, even if the radio stations were started with a different motive, they have ended up broadcasting political news. For example, those who started Kathmandu Metropolitan City's *Metro FM* had thought that they would broadcast news and information on the efforts being made on daily revenue collection, sewage, water, road,

electricity, footpath, temple conservation etc., in Kathmandu but in practice it too ended up broadcasting political news. This has been the case with other radio stations as well.

It has become a general practice to read news straight from the newspapers in the FM radios. Some stations give the names of newspapers from which they read out the news while others do not. Adhikari has raised questions about whether FM stations should be allowed to do this. Though it is considered ideal to at least give credit to the paper once, he found that it is not the case all the time. Adhikari's chapters give us a lot of details even as one wishes that he had done more analyses based on them.

Though talk shows and discussion programs are as old as news bulletins in FM stations, the studies in this book argue that they are still in their infancy when it comes to journalistic performance. According to researcher Shekhar Parajulee (chapter ten), the lack of research in talk shows in FM stations in Pokhara is indicative of two facets of FM broadcasting culture: (1) lack of time given to presenters and (2) lack of seriousness of the presenters. Much the same could be said about the same category of programs in Kathmandu's FM radios which have been examined by Komal Bhatta in chapter nine. Bhatta analyses talk shows in several stations critically and points out that there is a lack of teamwork in the production of such programs. He also argues that stations have not invested adequately to produce such programs.

Chapter 11 makes us aware of the situation of Tamang language programs, in particular talk shows. Pratik N. Tamang, a radio presenter himself, uses his experiences and those of his fellow Tamang language broadcasters to describe the state of affairs. He argues that programs in Tamang have influenced a young generation of Tamangs to be proud of their language and have bolstered Tamang music and other cultural production. However, he says much of this production has relied on the voluntary labour of enthusiastic Tamang broadcasters who the FM stations have been reluctant to hire as employees. He also stresses that there should be much better coordination between Tamang ethnic organisations and broadcasters.

Overall, the book is successful in highlighting the important issues related to news and talk programs in FM radios in Nepal. It serves as a full guide to FM news broadcasting (from its inception to this date) and also highlights the issues that so often get overlooked by those in FM radio broadcasting such as the importance of volunteers and crediting sources. Empirical research has been carried out comprehensively and

chapter narratives read well for the most part. Media researchers and students can benefit hugely from this book, not only because of its data-heavy contents but also because the book is written in Nepali. In addition there is an extensive bibliography which is very useful for other researchers.

However, having worked for Radio Sagarmatha for over four years, I found that the book does not provide adequate analysis of some relevant issues. First, it does not tell us if there are differences between the news broadcast by community and commercial radios and if so, what accounts for that difference. Second, the book is not sensitive to the fact of gender disparity prevalent in FM radio stations, especially in the departments that produce news and discussion programs. Such departments are generally male dominated, although some female journalists are starting to show up as serious producers. They should have been interviewed. Their perspectives on news production and the FM radios as a whole would have added value to the analysis presented in this book. Third, though management issues in FM radio stations are only briefly mentioned, I feel that they play an overwhelming role in the health of radio stations. Hence they deserved a more thorough analysis than given here.

Finally it can be concluded that although the FM radio sector has overcome many barriers in order to reach its present stage, the field is still immature. There is a lot more that can be done to improve the state of radio journalism in Nepal, research-based analysis such as that contained in this book being one of them.

Reference

- Shudson, Michael. 2000. The Sociology of News Production Revisited (Again). In *Mass Media and Society*. Third ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, eds, pp. 175-200. London: Arnold

Deepa Rai
Cardiff University