



Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

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NEPAL'S CURRENT AFFAIRS: WHERE ARE WE HEADED?*

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There are some discernible patterns in Nepali media coverage. The major focus is politics, with an emphasis on event-based coverage. A reporter attends an event, jots down what is spoken, polishes it slightly, and the media publishes it. There is less analysis and even less fact-checking. Rarely does the media reference contradictory remarks made by a politician. It isn't a hard thing to do either; a reporter who has covered the same beat for years knows what was spoken, what promises were made, and what contradictions exist.

But beyond the large media houses, several new media outlets cater to specific audiences. Some write on indigenous issues, others publish only op-eds. The internet has, in fact, made it easier for people to find news that is relevant to them, but as the most recent Nepal Media Survey notes, television is still the go-to source for many Nepalis. This finding is quite surprising, at least to me. I have not watched television for years now; I don't even own a television set. Interestingly, print media, while still on a downward spiral in terms of popularity, is still trusted, as per the Media Survey. Given the amount and nature of comments that one sees on the social media pages of mainstream

media houses, one would think that trust in the print media is at an all-time low. The survey, however, tells us that they are trusted, and their reputation still counts for something.

The survey also reports that 19 per cent of respondents equate Facebook with the media. So, what should the mainstream media do, given the rise of social media? I do not have a clear answer to the question. As far as I have observed, the mainstream media has not adapted to the social media age. Their pride—being the ultimate authority and a major source of news for many—is partly to blame. The situation is likely to change in a few years as people switch mediums to get information. Mainstream media should probably think of ways to reach out to people who get their news from Facebook and bridge the trust gap with younger audiences. Whether that is actually going to happen is anyone's guess.

I often struggle to see the complete picture, at least when it comes to the news. When reading a piece of news, I ask if it provides the complete picture. I am left with many questions by the time I am finished. Usually, I have to browse through five to ten other related news to get the whole picture. For as long as I remember, it has always been this way. This does not mean that there isn't good reporting being done; it just so happens that the institutional setup incentivizes a certain kind of reporting. A reporter today isn't given enough resources. A reporter is told to attend an event, jot down

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whatever possible and present something that can be published within the hour. The reporter does not have the time to present the whole picture. The pay is equally depressing. That reporting in Nepal is “*jhur*” then should not be surprising. That reporters who are paid the bare minimum to present something, of which 300-500 words will be published, put in the least effort possible should not be surprising.

So, what does that do to us? What happens when the news does not provide the complete picture and when we are used to getting partial information? Perhaps it makes us more complacent, and less willing to ask critical questions. Part and parcel of growing up as a Nepali is that we are always discouraged from asking questions. We have been told not to ask questions and to be happy with the information we have been given. Complacency is taught to us from a very young age. Take the national opinion poll for instance, people feel that corruption has increased, but we are okay with it—there is no anger or frustration.

The fundamental concern today isn't how we do reporting, it's how we engage the audience. Because good reporting isn't enough, it has to be read, it has to appeal to the audience. The news has to compete with 30-second TikTok videos and long-form explainer videos on YouTube. The latter is significantly popular. They might not be a proper journalistic undertaking, but they provide the audience with contextual information and people seem to appreciate it. Despite having the financial resources, including journalists with a wealth of knowledge, the mainstream media has failed to provide something similar. Part of the problem is that the mainstream media is not looking at what works. Instead, they do things their way and

demand that the audience respond.

Media should be seen as something akin to hospitality. There are audiences that we need to cater to because the situation has drastically changed. People no longer need to depend on the print media or established media houses for news. They have multiple choices and retaining audience demands that the media become responsive to the needs of the audience. This isn't an entirely original thought. I learned this at Splice Beta, a media conference in Thailand. Nepali media houses should probably start approaching journalism in that way. There are many ways to go about it. Podcasts and long-form videos can work.

What would I like to see more of in the media? More arts and culture reporting would be a welcome change. This is a personal bias as I'm an arts and culture person. There are so many plays and art exhibitions that should be talked about. They should be talked about more because politics, the state of the economy or people leaving the country aren't the only things happening in Nepal. Young people are engaged in the creation of art, and there is excitement surrounding it. I would like to see editors write about art and culture instead of treating it like a junior beat reserved for an intern or a recent graduate. But editors are more interested in writing political opinions filled with pontification.

Recently, there was an editorial about how Nepalis should not criticize our prime minister. When an editor of a newspaper, whose job is to criticize the most powerful people in the country, argues that people restrain themselves, there is certainly a problem at the top. People should be allowed to criticize powerful people; it is our right to free speech. Such editorials provide the basis for concentrated efforts from the government to limit speech. It isn't just one newspaper either; another newspaper argued that TikTok should be banned. There are no justifications for newspapers to on the one hand, support free speech but also favor a ban on social media. One can even construe it as an indirect collusion between the newspaper and the government; the former's intention driven by a desire to maintain monopoly over the audience's attention by arguing for a wholesale ban on a platform that threatens their existence.

Every media house today is criticizing the Social Media Bill but, in the past, they have also argued for strong regulation of social media. What is even more worrying is our silence on the wholesale ban on pornography. It has been banned since 2018 but



we have never had a conversation about it, perhaps because it is something we think is shameful. The government banning pornography was its way of testing the limits on how far they can go banning access to certain kinds of content; when no one spoke out about the ban, they went a step further and banned TikTok. The social media bill should be seen in light of this context. A context that is terribly underreported today.

The bill isn't the first time the government has tried to limit free speech by regulating/controlling social media. Within a span of 6 years, the government has tried to control free speech in the name of social media regulation thrice. Events like these need to be seen in a continuum because they are connected; after all, this is how autocracies and dictatorships emerge. Rights aren't curbed suddenly; gradual and concentrated efforts are made to test the limits. The media has a responsibility to provide contextual information to the people; yet, the coverage of the Social Media Bill misses the larger context. I am pretty sure that if the bill isn't passed, the government of Nepal will try the same move in two years. The reporting of the issue, then, should not be limited to a single isolated event but should provide the reader with history, the many attempts that have been made in the past. Context helps unearth intention.

If media houses report in such a manner, people will trust it. There has been good reporting in the recent past. People have been tried in court because of reporting. Barring a few exceptions, by and large, people have trusted and seen the impact of a well-framed news piece with adequate context. People have celebrated it; the media houses, however, have not. Never has one media house institutionally celebrated good reporting done by another media house. At the same time, they have never criticized a bad piece of reporting either. The latter is important, media reporting should be a separate beat in and of itself. But in Nepal, the media operates on a *"you scratch my back, I scratch yours"* model or more appropriately, *"you don't scratch my back and I won't scratch yours."*

Nepal is touted as the freest country in South Asia when it comes to press freedom. But are we more informed because of it? Are our citizens aware and informed than the rest of South Asia? I don't think so. We haven't used our free speech and press freedom well. We don't use it to report on larger South Asian issues. Most of our major media outlets don't have bureaus in other countries. Some media houses have the financial resources to send

reporters to neighboring countries. Journalists are also willing to go too, but it rarely happens. The only exception is the ground-level reporting from Gaza. But let's not forget that it happened because the Israelis agreed to cover the costs. The Nepali media can cover issues from the rest of the neighborhood that their local media probably can't, but our interest in the neighborhood is non-existent at this point, except for opinion pieces written from our armchairs.

So, what should the media do? Should it cater to audiences like a hospitality business or take a stand? Cater is perhaps the wrong word but media houses do need to understand what readers want. Readers want accurate and reliable information that provides them with the whole picture. Often, how the information is presented matters. What I have been doing so far with Kalam Weekly is what you would call old-school reporting; I write long-form pieces and invite the audience to sit with it for 15-20 minutes. It makes sense for me to do it; I am not a big media house, and my audience is limited. I have a niche that I respond to, but when one talks about media, in its most generic form, its audience is larger. It must understand what they want and respond accordingly. With that said, it should also not veer into yellow journalism. The people did not want click-bait news by themselves. One can argue that the media started experimenting with clickbait news and stumbled upon a behavioral response which they then reinforced. Catering to the audience does not mean that the media compromises on its integrity; it's just a way to provide information in a manner that the audience responds to.

Amidst all this, there is hope. Young people have created a following on YouTube by trying to explain issues in a way that people will understand. That is what journalists want to do, to understand things and to present them to the people. A lot of these YouTubers are young and hopefully, they will evolve. I have talked to a few of them and they are open to suggestions; they want to do things better and they should be encouraged. Some of them are doing actual video reporting, they are going on the ground, they are talking to people, they are collecting opinions and it's great. I don't think that the future is Routine of Nepal Banda; it's probably something like these YouTubers making explainer videos -- young people trying out new ways to provide people with accurate information.

