AN OVERVIEW OF NEPALI NEWS MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: Assessing Nepali news media, both print and online, is important to scrutinize its strengths and weaknesses with regard to journalistic professionalism and media accountability. Print newspapers have the longest history among Nepali news media outlets, followed by radio and television. The newest medium—online media—has a history of almost two decades in Nepal, but it still needs greater recognition as mainstream media through legal provisions and professional practices. Reviewing various literatures from national and international sources, this article identifies six key challenges (i.e., legal constraints, the digital divide, undue political influence, unprofessional practices, shortage of financial resources, and poor performance of media watchdog) and proposes some strategic interventions to address these challenges. This article argues that the growth of news media outlets in terms of number does not necessarily ensure quality content and outlines three key interventions that can help address the challenges.

Keywords: digital divide, news media, political influence, Press Council Nepal, professionalism

Introduction: An overview of news media

Nepal has a diverse media environment in terms of quantity of media outlets and variety of news mediums, ranging from print to online. Since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Nepal has made significant progress in the media and journalism sector with regard to increased numbers of outlets and wide coverage across the country (Onta, 2001). In this article, I will argue that quantitative growth of news media does not necessarily boost quality performance of these media in terms of employing professional standards and upholding accountability to their public stakeholders.

In the beginning of this article, I will briefly present an overview of the historical evolution of Nepali news media, the current status of news media in terms of quantitative growth, and its circulation and/or coverage within the country. Then, based on literature review and scholarly observation, I will outline major challenges Nepali media faces including legal constraints responsible for impeding press freedom, the digital divide that hinders effective engagement between journalists and audiences, undue political influence on journalism content, unprofessional media practices (including, plagiarism, sponsored content and infringement of privacy), lack
of financial support to sustain media independently, and ineffective performance of the Press Council Nepal, a State-funded media watchdog. The final section of this article proposes three interventions that can address the challenges faced by Nepali media and encourage journalists and media institutions to be accountable with the public stakeholders.

Historical development

Nepal has a long history of news media with several ups and downs that have marked the struggle for existence, press freedom and media professionalism. Rana Prime Minister Janga Bahadur brought a printing press, popularly known as the Giddhe Press, to Nepal from England in 1851 and installed it in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Following the press, nearly a dozen presses were brought in by individuals and installed in Kathmandu valley for business purposes. In 1901, one of the presses was used to publish Gorkhapatra, a weekly newspaper (which became a daily in 1961), as a mouthpiece of the government (Baral, 1975; Devkota, 2000). As democracy was introduced in 1951, hundreds of newspapers were launched, indicating the beginning of a new era in print media. In the same year, Radio Nepal, the first radio station, was established even though its coverage was limited and the availability of radio sets was rare (Devkota, 2000). Meanwhile, several private media professionals established the Nepal Journalists’ Association on 29 March 1956—currently known as the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ)—aiming for professional growth, press freedom and increased cooperation from government mechanisms (FNJ, 2013). The following year, the government constituted a Press Commission that formulated press policies and drafted the first code of ethics of journalists.

During the Panchayat era (1961-1990), a number of state-run media organizations were established, such as the news agency, Rastiya Samachar Samiti (RSS) in 1961,
Press Council Nepal (PCN) in 1971, and Nepal Television in 1985. The Gorkhapatra Corporation, which published multiple newspapers and magazines, and the national broadcaster, Radio Nepal, were already under government control used as a means of promoting the ideals of the régime. There were a limited number of newspapers published by the private sector but they were tightly censored to make sure their information did not go against the autocratic regime (Baral, 1975; Devkota, 2000).

After a popular uprising, multi-party democracy was restored in 1990, and the constitution of Nepal was promulgated in the same year. These developments ensured "a liberal environment enabling an upsurge in the number of independent media outlets" (Media Foundation, 2012, p. 7). The publication of private-sector broadsheet newspapers with large-scale investment introduced a trend toward independent, corporate and professional journalism in Nepal (Onta, 2001). Likewise, local radio stations began to be established in 1997, and private television channels began four years later. The Internet was introduced in 1993, and print media content was first available online in 1995, initiated by The Kathmandu Post, an English-language broadsheet newspaper (Sedhai, 2012). In 1998, Mercantile Communications, a corporate institution, launched nepalnews.com as a platform for newspapers to upload their news content into cyberspace (Sharma, 2007). Moreover, true online news portals began in 2000 with the launch of kantipuronline.com (later renamed to ekantipur.com), which started reporting and webcasting online news content in addition to shoveling newspaper content (Acharya, 2005; Sedhai, 2012).

Current status

The Constitution of Nepal, 2015 guarantees media rights including freedom of expression and the right to information. Article 17 of the Constitution, for instance, ensures citizens' right to freedom of expression; Article 19 guarantees press and publication rights, and Article 27 safeguards right to information. There are a number of laws and regulations in place to execute and ensure these constitutional rights. For instance, the Press and Publication Act, 1991, the National Broadcasting Act, 1992, the Press Council Act, 1992, the Working Journalists Act-2007, and the Right to Information Act-2008 are the major ones. These legal measures, though not perfect, can be adequate to foster professional journalism in the country.

At present, print media dominates the Nepali media landscape in terms of number of publications; as such, print media plays an influential role in the socio-political milieu. By the end of 2017, a total of 3865 newspapers (i.e., 655 dailies, 30 bi-weeklies, 2778 weeklies, and 402 fortnightlies) have been registered at Press Council Nepal (PCN, 2016a). But only 863 (i.e., 189 dailies, 3 bi-weeklies, 636 weeklies, and 35
fortnightlies) of the newspapers were found to have been publishing regularly (PCN Annual Report-2073/74, pp. 181 and 189). All big news media houses are centered in Kathmandu valley, where at least 14 broadsheet newspapers and hundreds of weekly and fortnightly papers are published and delivered throughout the country. The newspapers published from outside the valley are also mostly city-centric due to the available technical facilities and the concentration of a large population. Among newspapers, Nepali is the predominant language, followed by English, which is popular among educated people. In addition, more than 20 newspapers are published in indigenous languages targeted at their respective communities (Media Foundation, 2012).

Radio is the most popular mass media channel in Nepal, with radio stations collectively covering almost all the parts of the country (UNESCO, 2013). Radio Nepal, the state-run broadcaster, alone reaches over 85% of the total population through its nationwide broadcast network and frequency modulated relay stations across the country (JICA, 2013). Nepal became a pioneer in community-based radios in South Asia in the mid-1990s by licensing Radio Sagarmatha. According to the Ministry of Information and Communication (MOIC), 740 licenses for local radio stations were issued by the end of 2017, among which, nearly 400 stations were in regular broadcasting service (MOIC, 2018). During the same period, the MOIC issued 116 licenses for television broadcasting, among which more than two-dozen channels were in regular operation. Nepal Television, the state broadcaster, covers 72% of the total population and 50% of the geographic area through terrestrial and satellite networking (ITU, 2012). A research report notes that the total coverage of all TV channels may be between 50% and 60% of households in Nepal, but no accurate figures are available from the government agencies (Media Foundation, 2012).

Though the credibility of online new portals is often questioned, they have been a very popular medium in recent years owing to multiple features such as accessibility, interactivity, transparency (hyperlinks), immediacy and inexpensiveness. The PCN began to register online news portals since 2013 as an initiative to make online news media professional as well as accountable to the public. A total of 753 online news portals have been registered at PCN (PCN Annual Report, 2017). Many traditional media outlets have an online presence, through which they often reproduce/distribute already published or broadcast media content. Moreover, several journalists in Nepal usually rely on online media and social media to find news clues or issues and develop them as mature news stories (Acharya et al., 2012). However, social media outlets are still in a development phase, mostly confined to the urban public and techno-savvy people, but they are an “important tool [for journalists] for reporting, and promoting news” (Acharya et al., 2012, p. 25).
Research objectives and methodology

Despite a large number of media outlets and a variety of news mediums—from print to online, what are the major challenges that Nepali media and journalists have been facing with regard to employing professional standards and ensuring quality content by news media and journalists? This article, based on literature review, is an endeavor to find out answers to this key question. It also proposes some interventions that may address the potential challenges that hinder professional performance of media institutions and journalists in Nepal.


Exploring literature from various sources, identifying their relevance and reviewing them would benefit everyone who wants to assess and conceptualize an emerging topic (Torraco, 2005). Traditional media are at the transitional phase because of the growing influence of the Internet and various digital platforms. This sort of holistic and comprehensive literature review can help us identify the current scenario of Nepali news media. The following section deals with major challenges faced by Nepali media.

Key challenges to Nepali media

Despite a long history and robust quantitative presence, Nepali news media have been facing a number of challenges from policy to organizational levels (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Based on the literature review, this study identifies six major challenges that impede professional growth of journalists, news media and media institutions in Nepal. These challenges are discussed as follows:
Legal constraints

The Article 19 of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 guarantees press and publication rights and assures that Nepal’s press freedom is inviolable. According to the article, there will be no prior censorship or service interruption against any media for publishing or broadcasting any news reports, editorial, opinions or features. Similarly, the article also guarantees that no news media will be closed, their registration will not be cancelled and their equipment will not be seized for the offence of printing, publishing or broadcasting any materials. All of these rights, however, are constrained with wide “reasonable restrictions” that are vague and against the spirit of press freedom (Acharya, 2016a).

However, the constitutional spirit of the press and publication rights has not been strengthened with strong legislations and clear regulations. For instance, the Press and Publication Act, 1991 requires every newspaper or magazine to be registered by local authorities. The Act also prohibits publishing anything that undermines sovereignty or jeopardizes security, peace and harmony, and also prohibits the publication of material considered contrary to decent public behavior. Similarly, the National Broadcasting Act, 1993 authorizes the government to regulate the broadcasting of materials on a wide range of topics that might be considered disruptive or deleterious and allows the government to revoke licenses for breaches of the Act or any applicable rules.

Neither the Right to Information Act, 2008 nor the Working Journalists Act, 2007 has been implemented in the true spirit of the Constitution (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008). Since there is not a single law that directly addresses online media issues, cases against online media and journalists are prosecuted as per the Electronic Transaction Act, 2008 that strictly limits the right to freedom of expression ensured by the Constitution (Acharya, 2016a). Similarly, the government issued the Online Media Operation Directive in June 2016 to regulate online news portals. Media stakeholders, however, severely criticized the Directive since it mandated government authorization against the spirit of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 that advocates obstruction-free media operation and allows the authority to shut down news portals if they failed to “register or renew the website annually, publish materials deemed to be illegal or immoral, or spread misinformation or [their] reports lack[ed] authoritative sources” (Acharya, 2016b). As a consequence, the Directive is neither active nor cancelled but in the process of necessary improvement to satisfy media stakeholders. Nepal’s new Muluki Civil (Code) Act and Criminal (Code) Act, which came into effect on August 2018, have threatened press freedom envisioned in the Constitution (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). The law prohibits anyone, including journalists, to release
private information (such as, recording or listening to conversation between people, and taking photographs) without prior consent of the subject(s). Each offence can be fined by up to 30,000 Nepali rupees (equivalent to US $300) and/or imprisonment up to three years. Similarly, the Criminal Code strictly bans pornographic materials in any forms, and consequently, more than 25,000 pornographic websites have been blocked as a part of the government initiative aimed at restricting sexual violence across the country (Gurubacharya, 2018). Stakeholders speculate that government authority may hinder other websites on the grounds of containing obscenity and pornographic content.

**Digital divide**

Nepal is affected from the digital divide, which refers to a gap between people who possess personal computer and have access to the Internet and those who do not. Scholars (Dewan & Riggins, 2005; Hargittai, 2002; Paré, 2005; Yu, 2006) contend that the digital divide is a multi-dimensional concept that is related to access to, skills in, usage of and motivation to information and communication technologies including computers and the internet. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001) broadly defines the term "digital divide" as "the gap between individuals, households, businesses, and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities" (p. 5).

Based on the OECD definition, a person can be affected by the digital divide due to his/her socio-economic status (such as income, education, attitude, culture) and technological capabilities (i.e., skills and usability). Similarly, a business company or even a country can suffer from the digital divide due to the lack of strong information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure – hardware, software, network and organizational services required for the operation and management of the ICTs – and availability of affordable services. Nepal can be a typical example of a country with digital divide, in which Internet penetration rate is less than 20 percent of the population4. There is a lack of broadband high speed Internet, and most users access

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4 Nepal’s Internet penetration statistics is contentious because of the contrasting claims from the international sources and the national authority. A report of the Internet World Stats (2016) indicates that Nepal’s Internet penetration rate is 19.9 percent of the total population. The World Bank’s (2016) report shows even lower figure – only 17.6 percent population of Nepal have Internet access. However, the Nepal Telecom Authority claims 54.42 percent of the Nepali public – that comprises all users of both fixed and wireless broadband services – are accessible to the Internet (NTA, 2016).
the internet through mobile devices (NTA, 2016). In addition, there are frequent power cuts (also known as "load-shedding") for hours that prevent users from accessing online media content. The above statistics are enough to imagine the true picture of the digital divide and internet access in Nepal.

Most media companies, government departments, and private corporations have a static web presence. This means most of the web pages in Nepal have search-and-inquiry facility, providing basic information, downloadable forms and some selective documents, but there is no online transaction facility to pay fees or receive money. Government agencies, in general, do not update their websites regularly, and official websites do not carry adequate information (UNESCO, 2013). A notable trend of the majority of traditional media in Nepal is that they shovel already published/broadcast content on to their online portals or vice versa (Acharya, 2014). For instance, the Kantipur national daily can publish content already available on its news portal, ekantipur.com, or vice versa without due credit. People in remote districts and rural areas cannot effectively use the Internet because it is very slow, ineffective and expensive (if available at all). Furthermore, the low rate of literacy, lack of technical knowledge, and unavailability of computers and electricity in those areas are other fundamental factors that prevent the audience from accessing online media (Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013).

Political influence

Nepali media has suffered from the undue influence of various political parties. In the past, political mission journalism was practiced during the Panchayat regime by a number of media outlets that opposed the regime (Baral, 1975). At present, the trend of political polarization among media institutions is increasing because each political party wants to groom loyal journalists so that political agendas of their interests can be sensationalized. Many journalists also want to be united under a political flag so that they can bargain for higher opportunities (such as board members in the Press Council Nepal, media experts in different ministries) that include political appointments in different government organizations. As a consequence, most journalists in Nepal have become members of different political media wings, such as the Press Union, Press Chautari Nepal, and the Press Center Nepal. Regarding the impact of the fluid political scene of Nepali media, the International Fact-Finding

5 Two political media clubs i.e., Press Chautari Nepal and Press Center Nepal are in the process of merger and to be named as the Press Organization Nepal because their political parties Nepal Community Party (UML) and Nepal Communist Party (Maoist Centre), respectively were merged as the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in 2017.
Mission writes that there is "a sense of increased partisan polarization in a section of the press, and there [are] discernible efforts [through policy or other inducements] by the government and political parties to control the media" (IFAMMN, 2012, p. 9).

Moreover, general election of the FNJ most often looks like a political campaign, as candidates representing different political media wings are most likely to win the election. There is a high level of political influence among FNJ members, and a number of them come from non-journalistic backgrounds. The International Media Mission observes that the privately owned broadsheet dailies in Nepal are largely independent, but most of the small-scale media outlets are "close to or even identify with and pledge allegiance to different political parties" (IMMN, 2008, p. 19). As a consequence, some journalists are more focused on political activism than on contributing to professional excellence and ethical norms. Similarly, the undue influence of political parties on media organizations and journalists has "diminished the ability of media to provide unbiased coverage of and facilitate a dialogue on the complex transition underway in Nepal" (IMMN, 2008, p. 9). Kharel (2014) believes that most journalists in Nepal do not always work for a professional cause; rather, they are "working as party functionaries through the all-pervading political unionism that infects every aspect of organised life" (para. 6). Moreover, state-funded media (including two daily newspapers, the national radio network, two television channels, and a news agency) are closely allied with the ruling party in government (Kharel, 2006; IMMN, 2008). Kharel notes that government-owned media are "operating in a manner similar to official media" (2006, p. 158). Undue political influence is perhaps the stark professional challenge for Nepali journalists that might influence working journalists to work for political interests by compromising journalistic values and integrity.

Unprofessionalism

News media in Nepal have suffered from various unprofessional practices including plagiarism, sensationalism, and misinformation. The Anuja Baniya case, for example, was highly publicized with regular follow-ups in April 2012. Baniya falsely claimed that she had returned 9.1 million Nepali rupees found on a bus to the rightful owner, and the media reported it as a true story, without proper verification. There are many other examples of falsified, distorted and sensationalized news reports that diminish media credibility in Nepal (Media Foundation, 2012). Similarly, a number of broadsheet-daily newspapers headquartered in Kathmandu (i.e., Kantipur, Nagarik, Annapurna Post and others) published a full-page advertisement of locally produced soaps sold without packaging and containing animal fats in January 2017 on the front
Unauthorized (or plagiarized) content use from one media outlet to another is another common phenomenon in Nepali media (Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009; Kharel, 2006). For instance, local radio stations and television channels use newspaper or online media content without permission (sometimes without credit as well), and modify the content as if it were their own. In addition, there are a number of issues that Nepali online media need to address and improve upon in order to uphold professional standards; these include hasty and unverified news breaks, biased or misleading presentation, use of secondary or anonymous (i.e., counterfeit) sources, sponsored content, partisan influences, disclosing identities of victims of sex crimes, infringement of privacy and copyright, failure to admit mistakes, and removal of critical comments or opinions from news portals (Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009; Kharel, 2006).

Online journalist and researcher, Acharya (2005) argues that online news portals are giving very little priority to ethical considerations, and are "hampering the accuracy of the content due to overemphasis on speed and immediacy" (2005, p. 4). A number of unprofessional practices on digital platforms, such as sensational, sexually arousing content, are mainly intended to encourage multiple clicks through the use of sensational or titillating content or fake news as a means of generating clicks, and, thereby, earning revenue from the Internet sites, such as (Google AdSense). Therefore, journalists and media institutions may not pay much attention to upholding journalistic integrity and maintaining accountability on digital platforms.

**Investment and sustainability**

Investment and sustainability are two interrelated issues, which can affect professional or qualitative performance in the media. The post-1990s political and legal reformations encouraged large-scale investment in the media and journalism sector (IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012). However, Nepal has hundreds of newspapers and radio stations and dozens of television channels established for political or corporate mission, without any feasibility study on the market and its capability to sustain them through advertisement and sponsorship. All these media outlets often share the same inadequate market revenue, and, thereby, are inclined
toward unhealthy competition (IMMN, 2008). Consequently media owners, in order to survive, are motivated to pursue unprofessional interests, such as maximizing personal gains and collecting market benefits by hook or by crook. Because of this, as Kharel (2014) observes, the quantitative growth of Nepali media is responsible for its low-quality content.

International Media Missions to Nepal (IMMN, 2008; IFAMMN, 2012) pointed out the inequitable distribution of state advertising as a responsible cause debilitating small-scale media such as local newspapers and community radio stations. The government introduced a “one-window” advertising policy in 2006, which favoured the state-funded media and deprived private-sector media outlets of public advertising funds (IMMN, 2008). In addition, high taxes on newsprint and expensive postage rates also challenge the sustainability of print media outlets. The IMMN Report (2008) identified “unplanned and unmanaged development, cut-throat competition, commercialization and politicization” as factors contributing to the complexity of the sustainability issue (p.18). Further, as a consequence of fierce market competition, salaries for journalists are low and are not paid in a timely manner.

Most of the news media have an Internet presence but hardly any of them have an online subscription model to help them sustain themselves financially. Comparatively, online news portals seem inexpensive during the establishment phase, but during regular operations, they suffer due to financial shortages. On one hand, the government has yet to provide welfare advertisement funds to online media; on the other hand, the market has yet to trust online news portals as a means of advertising their products and services. Hence, revenue generation has become a significant challenge for the sustainability of online news portals.

**Ineffective press council**

The Press Council Act, 1992, has established Press Council Nepal as an autonomous and independent body for monitoring and regulating media performance. However, the law fails to provide structural guarantees for that autonomy and independence since government appoints PCN board members through an opaque selection process (IMMN, 2008). Autonomous and independent media monitoring bodies such as press councils can play an important role in ensuring professionalism and accountability in media institutions. But Nepal’s media watchdog is ineffective in its regulatory role owing to resource constraints and political interventions.

The Press Council Nepal (PCN) was established for the promotion of healthy journalism in Nepal. Articles 5, 7 and 12 of the Press Council Act, 1992 authorize PCN
to recommend and enforce the code of ethics, monitor media outlets’ and journalists’ performance, and hear and settle complaints about the abuse of press freedom. In addition, PCN is responsible for fostering cordial relations between the media and public agencies, and for maintaining public morality and the dignity of the citizens. PCN is responsible for formulating the code of ethics for Nepali journalists in consultation with the FNJ and other stakeholders. The *Code of Ethics for Nepali journalists* – 2016 encourages credibility of external sources and information verification (Article 4 (14)) of online media and discourages post-deletion of published content (Article 5 (9)) (PCN, 2016b). Since the present code of ethics is largely generic to fit all genres of news media (from print to online), it still needs to address several issues such as maintaining confidentiality, transparency, accuracy and attribution of sources on digital platforms.

In cases of violations of the code of ethics, PCN has the right to ask for clarification letters, to play a mediating role between the conflicting parties and to seek a solution; and if the clarification letter is ignored, PCN keeps the incident on record and publishes it in its annual report. The implementation of the code of journalistic ethics by PCN is so superficial that it can hardly satisfy the victims of the media content. Consequently, people who feel victimized by media activities directly go to court to challenge the media outlet rather than going to PCN. The International Media Mission, therefore, noted that the PCN has been "unable to fulfill the role due to the lack of adequate legislation and capacity" (IMMN, 2008, p. 17).

Additionally, PCN cannot prosecute any person or institution responsible for ethics violations by filing a case in the court of law. PCN also lacks an effective mechanism for monitoring media performance throughout the country as it is stationed in Kathmandu (without any regional or branch office across the country) with limited human and infrastructural resources. An additional problem is that various pressure groups approach PCN and lobby to defuse cases registered against their members (IFAMMN, 2012). There are issues of conflict of interests of the PCN board members. For instance, a long-time PCN board member Kishor Shrestha (nominated in the same capacity for the third time subsequently) runs a weekly newspaper *Jana Aastha*, against which PCN received the highest number of complaints from the public in regards to the newspaper’s disputable, defamatory or sensational content (PCN Report-2016, p. 67). The same newspaper, however, was classified in the best performance category, raising speculations about the abuse of authority and conflict of interest (PCN, 2016). The aforementioned evidence demonstrates that, PCN, the state-funded media watchdog, has become vulnerable due to political interventions, legal constraints, and shortages of adequate resources.
To conclude, this section has identified six major challenges to news media in Nepal that include legal constraints hampering press freedom, resource and infrastructure-related challenges, challenges related to media and journalists' professional performance, and challenges created by ineffective performance of media watchdog. Investment on ICT infrastructure and resource building, production of professionally dedicated journalists, and restructuring and capacity strengthening of the national media watchdog (i.e., PCN) are the potential solutions – to fix the existing challenges – proposed in the following section.

Discussion and conclusion

The post-1990 political reforms, growing literacy rate, investment and market availability, and adoption of new media technologies are some of the key factors that have contributed to the growth of Nepali media outlets. The Constitution of Nepal has ensured and comprehensively explained the provisions of press and publication rights. To execute these constitutionally guaranteed rights, there are a number of laws and regulations in effect. In this section, I propose the following three interventions to address the challenges and to strengthen the professional performances of Nepali journalism: investment in ICT infrastructure, cultivation of journalistic professionalism, and strengthening of national media watchdogs.

The first intervention to strengthen the professional performances of Nepali journalism is to manage investments on ICT infrastructure and arrange sustainable financial sources for news media. By adopting digital technology, traditional media can offer affordable content, interact with local and global audiences, and be effective in service delivery to target audiences. In other words, ICTs can enhance traditional media to expand their sphere of coverage despite having limited resources. A transformation of traditional media (i.e., newspapers, radio and television) into digital media, therefore, is warranted not only for adjusting in contemporary technological environment, but also for the global outreach and effective audience engagement. Digital transformation of news media can reduce costs of content production, increase accessibility of a wider public to media content, and meaningfully engage audiences in the content development (i.e., information collection, selection, update) process.

Nepal is severely affected by the digital divide across the country in terms of ICT infrastructure (i.e., availability of the Internet, quality service, accessibility to ICT devices) and users' capability of using ICTs and understanding digital content. Nearly three-fourths of the country's population is unable to access the Internet, and many of those who have accessibility to ICTs may be unable to decode digital content because of language barriers (since most of the Internet content is available in English) and
lack of skills to handle ICT devices that, if used properly, can bring positive changes in their livelihood. Concerned government agencies should work out a proper plan, with due priority, for developing ICT infrastructure and bridging the gap of the digital divide in Nepal.

The second intervention can be the cultivation of professionally dedicated journalists who value journalistic norms in the news making process. Theoretically, highly educated journalists are supposed to be committed to journalistic integrity and aspire to maintain professional performance. After 15 years of teaching hundreds of students who are working as mainstream journalists in the country, Prof. R. K. Regmee observes that the overall quality of Nepali journalism has not increased (Himalkhabar, 2017). Besides, many journalists with higher academic degrees are found affiliated in different political parties or in press clubs such as, Press Union, Press Chautari and Press Center Nepal (Media Foundation, 2012). Political associations of journalists might influence and compromise journalistic values during the news making process (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

It is an obvious fact that education is important for journalists in maintaining professional and ethical practices in their everyday performance. Education, however, must be more practical, engaging and closely linked up with journalist's typical work environment. Professional performance of journalists is also associated with pay and perks they receive from their media houses. Otherwise, chances of compromising journalistic values and ethical codes in order to fulfill financial interests exist. It is important to note that a single reporter cannot implement journalism standards unless the whole editorial department is committed to uphold such standards. Journalistic institutions (such as PCN and FNJ), therefore, should regularly orient and encourage journalists (both reporters and editors) to uphold independent, professional and ethical standards in their everyday activities.

The third and final intervention to address the aforementioned challenges of Nepali journalism is to strengthen the capacity of the national media watchdog, the Press Council Nepal, in order to improve policy and structure. For years, several stakeholders have been raising questions about PCN with regard to its autonomy and independence (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008). For instance, political appointments of PCN Board members, administrative interferences caused by the MOIC, and financial and human resource constraints are some of the major issues that need to be addressed immediately to strengthen PCN. With the promulgation of a new constitution, Nepal has adopted federalism. This directly warrants PCN to restructure and expand in accordance to the federal structure. In other words, PCN requires at least seven provincial offices with adequate human and financial resources and power delegation to monitor and deliver justice in provincial and local levels.
PCN has been receiving a growing number of complaints in the last five years with regard to journalist’s/media’s unprofessional performances and violations of people’s right to privacy (PCN Report, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Political influence at PCN, a quasi-judicial body, is a big problem because it may hamper justice delivery to the victims of media content (Media Foundation, 2012). Some of the media outlets that belong to PCN board members are among the ones most complained about by the public (PCN Report, 2016). Frequent administrative interventions from the MOIC and resource (human and financial) constraints may limit PCN’s ability to execute everyday services delivery and interrupt its service expansion across the country (IFAMMN, 2012; Media Foundation, 2012). To solve these problems, establishment of an autonomous, restructured and resourceful PCN that can function independently and encourage journalists and media organizations for professional performance is urgent.

To sum up, since the 1990s, Nepali media outlets have been increasing in terms of number and variety. However, they have been facing a number of challenges including shortage of resources, growing legal constraints against press freedom, unprofessional practices in news production, undue political interventions and influences, and ineffective PCN, the media watchdog in the country. These characteristics and challenges seem equally prevalent in print, radio, television and online news media and may lead to compromises in journalistic integrity and foster further increases in unprofessional practices. Creating sustainable financial resources for media infrastructure and development, strengthening professional performances of journalists and media institutions, and capacity building of the PCN, the national media watchdog should be the primary intervention strategies in order to improve professional performances of journalists and news media institutions in Nepal.

References


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