

JOURNALISM IN TRANSITION: MEDIA, INFORMATION FLOWS AND CONFLICT IN NEPAL

Rabindra Gurung

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International Alert.



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ACRONYMS

CA	Constituent Assembly
CoC	(Journalists') Code of Conduct
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Accord
DAO	District Administration Office
FM	Frequency Modulation
FNJ	Federation of Nepali Journalists
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
LPC	Local Peace Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PCN	Press Council Nepal
SMS	Short Message Service
VDC	Village Development Committee

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal has been pursuing a complex peace process and political transition since the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) of November 2006, which brought its ten-year armed conflict to an end. With the election of a Constituent Assembly in 2008, discussions began to focus on writing a new constitution, completing the peace process, institutionalising democracy and safeguarding the achievements made thus far. However, in response to differences on key issues among political parties since the CPA, the transitional period has been repeatedly extended. Increasing impunity and political interference in security have severely affected the security situation in the country. In addition, new armed groups formed in the Terai¹ and eastern hill districts have also contributed to increasing insecurity in the country.

Just as important as the realities of crime and violence at any given moment are the information flows surrounding those realities, which govern popular perceptions of conflict and criminal violence. Media and mechanisms for information flows, in all their forms – official, informal or street rumours – have major impacts on levels of insecurity and prospects for peace. They can, on the one hand, drive a cycle of fear and prejudice and, in their most extreme forms, may propel people towards violence. On the other hand, they can also shape public understanding of the dynamics of violence and harness or encourage peaceful means to address them.

This briefing paper is designed to understand the role of the media² in influencing public understanding of the dynamics of violence and developing perceptions of security. It seeks to address two key questions:

1. What role can media play, positive or negative, in influencing people's perceptions of insecurity and public understandings of the dynamics of violence, including those at local/community levels?
2. What are the obstacles/challenges which the media face in playing a positive role?

Nepal Media at a glance:

Print Media: 514*

Television Stations: 15**

Radio Stations: 334**

Phone users: 55.41% of population***

Internet Users: 14.09% of population***

Cases of media rights violations: 182

Cases of direct attacks on media: 40

(May 2010 – April 2011, FNJ)

(Note: the number of media reflects those in operation. Data Source: Press Council Nepal, Ministry of Information and Communication, Nepal) Telecommunication Authority)

FNJ data was provided by FNJ. 2011 Summary is reported here: <http://thehimalayantimes.com/featured/year2011/inner.php?id=522>

1 Southern lowlands of Nepal.

2 "Media" in this study covers radio, television and newspapers which specialise in or include news as the major component of broadcasting.

* Nepal Press Council (2011). 'Details of Published Newspapers and Printing Technology', accessed 8th November 2011. Available at <http://www.presscouncilnepal.org/publishedpapers.php>

** Ministry of Information and Communication, Nepal Government (2011). 'List of registered FMs in operation', accessed 8th November 2011. Available at <http://www.moic.gov.np/pdf/fm-regular.pdf> and 'List of TV stations receiving license', available at <http://www.moic.gov.np/pdf/tv-list.pdf> [Note: this list includes all the stations receiving licenses; however, not all are in operation].

*** Nepal Telecom Authority (2011). 'Management Information System, issue 56', accessed 10th December 2011. Available at <http://www.nta.gov.np/articleimages/file/NTA-MIS-56.pdf>

2. METHODOLOGY

Research for this briefing is based on primary and secondary sources and also draws upon similar research carried out by Alert in Kathmandu between August-September 2010. District field research, workshops with journalists representing broadcast and print media as well as a nationwide SMS survey were conducted for primary data collection. A workshop was organised with journalists from across the country were representing print and broadcast media where they discussed and explored the role of media in contributing to peace and security and the challenges which they face. For district research, two districts were selected based on their linkages to the conflict: Rolpa in the mid-western hill region; Bara in the central Terai region. Rolpa is considered to be the origin of the Maoist insurgency and was greatly affected during the conflict period.³ Bara was chosen because of the insecurity it is facing post-CPA, as it is categorised by the government as one of the eight “security-sensitive” districts in the Terai region. A report prepared by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2009 noted that around 109 armed groups are active in the Terai. Most of those groups are also presumed to be active in Bara district.⁴

Research was carried out in the two districts in June 2011: 26 key informant interviews (10 in Rolpa and 16 in Bara), 8 focus group discussions (4 in Rolpa, 3 in Bara and 1 in Kathmandu with journalists from across the country) and 2 group interviews (in Rolpa) were conducted. Interviews were conducted with the Chief District Officer and representatives of the Nepal Police, Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), Press Chautari, Press Union, Revolutionary Journalists Association, Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), Chambers and Commerce Industries (CCI), local FM radio, local publications, government-owned media, Nepal Bar Association, Local Peace Committee (LPC) and the District Attorney's Office. Likewise, group interviews were conducted with District Police representatives and local journalists. Focus groups were conducted with media users (youth, women and professionals) and media producers (journalists). Research outcomes were presented to the interviewee and focus group respondents for verification.

Research was conducted in the district headquarters of Rolpa district, Kalaiya Municipality and Pathalaiya VDC of Bara district. Part of the research was also carried out in Birgunj, district headquarters of the neighbouring Parsa district, as some media organisations registered in Bara are based in Parsa district, owing to proximity and the economic leverage of Parsa.

A nationwide short message service (SMS) survey was also carried out through over 70 radio stations across the country. Four questions were developed based on district research findings and each question was accompanied by 3 possible response options for listeners to choose. Each question was broadcast through FM stations for a week over a period of one month. Altogether, 8,903 SMS votes were received for the 4 questions and those SMS responses were analysed.

3 During the conflict period, around 1,017 people lost their lives, the status of 52 people is unknown, over 466 suffered physical injuries and 3,510 people were displaced. Source: Local Peace Committee, Rolpa

4 B. Kafle (2010). *Security and Justice from a District Perspective*. Initiative for Peacebuilding: Brussels, Available at: <http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/1210NepalBara.pdf>

DISTRICT CONTEXTS

District	Political context	Media context	Social context ⁵	Security context	Attacks on media ⁶ (May 2010 – Oct 2011)
Bara					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Area of 1,190 km² ▪ 98 VDCs ▪ Border: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> East: Parsa West: Rautahat North: Makwanpur South: Indian state of Bihar 	<p>2008 CA election: 2 constituencies won by CPN-Maoists, 1 by Nepali Congress, 3 by Madhesi parties.</p>	<p>Radio: 3 FM stations registered in the district, 5-7 from neighbouring districts could also be heard, State radio "Radio Nepal"</p> <p>Newspapers: 3 daily newspapers registered, but only 1 "Kripa" being published from Birgunj, Parsa, 8-10 weeklies registered but only 5-6 published.</p> <p>Cable operators and DTH (Direct-to-home) services available</p> <p>Online: 2 news portals</p>	<p>Literacy rate: 42.7%</p> <p>Ethnic Breakdown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Muslim 13.4% ▪ Tharu 11.2% ▪ Hill Brahmin 5.3% ▪ Yadav 10.4% ▪ Other 59.7% 	<p>The security situation in Bara is poor. Frequent bomb blasts and shooting incidents are reported to have been carried out by armed groups active in the district. Listed by government as one of 8 "security-sensitive" districts.</p> <p>Government officials and the business community are particular targets for extortion and kidnappings.</p>	<p>2 cases of threats against journalists</p> <p>1 case of newspaper burned by political party cadres</p>
Rolpa					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Area of 1,879 km² ▪ 51 VDCs ▪ Border : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> South: Dang North: Rukum West: Salyan East: Baglung and Pyuthan 	<p>2008 CA election: 2 constituencies won by UCPN-M</p> <p>Known as origin of Maoist insurgency</p>	<p>Radio: 2 FM stations Radio Rolpa (500 watts) and Radio Jaljala (100 watts), State radio "Radio Nepal"</p> <p>Newspaper: 1 Weekly newspaper "Rolpa Samachar"</p> <p>Cable Operators: One provides around 20 national and foreign channels, DTH services also available</p> <p>Online: none</p>	<p>Literacy rate: 37.2%</p> <p>Population: 210,004</p> <p>Ethnic breakdown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Magar (43.9%) ▪ Chhetry (33%) ▪ Other (23.1%) 	<p>An improving security situation compared to insurgency period.</p> <p>According to Nepal Police: 33 criminal incidents reported in 2009/10.</p> <p>Few economic activities.</p>	<p>2 cases of assault against journalists</p>

5 Government of Nepal National Planning Commission Secretariat (2001). *Population Census 2001 – National Report*. Central Bureau of Statistics, Ram Shah Path: Kathmandu.

6 The Himalayan Times (2001). 'Attack on Free Press continued', accessed 10th December 2011. Available at <http://thehimalayantimes.com/featured/year2011/inner.php?id=522>

3. MEDIA AND INFORMATION IN THE NEPALI CONTEXT

MEDIA AVAILABILITY AND AUDIENCE

Although modern mass media have increased both in quantity and reach, difficult topography, illiteracy and great differences in regional development continue to restrict access to information for most Nepalis.

Broadcast media In Rolpa, there are two FM stations, both based in the district headquarters of Liwang; in Bara three stations are registered, with one broadcasting from the neighbouring district. These stations do not cover the whole district but only a few areas within and outside the district. State-owned Radio Nepal can be received in most of the parts of the country including these research districts. Bara also receives 4-5 FM stations broadcasting from neighbouring districts such as Parsa and Rautahat. As a result of limited electricity availability, the reach of television is still very much limited to semi-urban and urban areas. Where electricity is available, people watch television through cable, DTH or terrestrial technology.

Print media Publications are scarce in number, as only one weekly newspaper is published in Rolpa; in Bara one daily and 5-6 weeklies are published. National and regional newspapers published from Kathmandu, as well as neighbouring districts, also reach the research districts but are mostly read by government offices and people residing in the district headquarters. Illiteracy, poverty and lack of transportation infrastructure are the major causes of low newspaper consumption.

ICT and “new” media Use of computers and the internet is on the rise in the research districts. Bara has two online news web portals; Rolpa has none. Some local organisations, such as FM stations, also have their own websites. Penetration of mobile telephones is evidently increasing in both research districts and the use of mobile telephones as media tools, as well as communication tools, is on the rise.

Traditional information flows Traditional forms of media still exist in many parts of the country. In Rolpa and Bara people still use traditional folk media such as street drama, cultural shows and messengers (*Katwal Karaune*⁷ in Rolpa) for communication.

The main sources of information for the vast majority of people are local FM radio stations and Radio Nepal. Theoretically, target audiences of these FM stations are conflict victims, indigenous people, women and deprived communities. FMs aim to give voice to voiceless people, but in practice most of the programmes are entertainment based, with few programmes dedicated to the aforementioned target audience. Use of local languages such as Magar, Bhojpuri, among others, has widened media consumption. Challenges still remain regarding the use and translation of more technical language from Nepali or English and the lack of entertainment components in informational or news programmes, which can deter listeners from parts of the target audience.

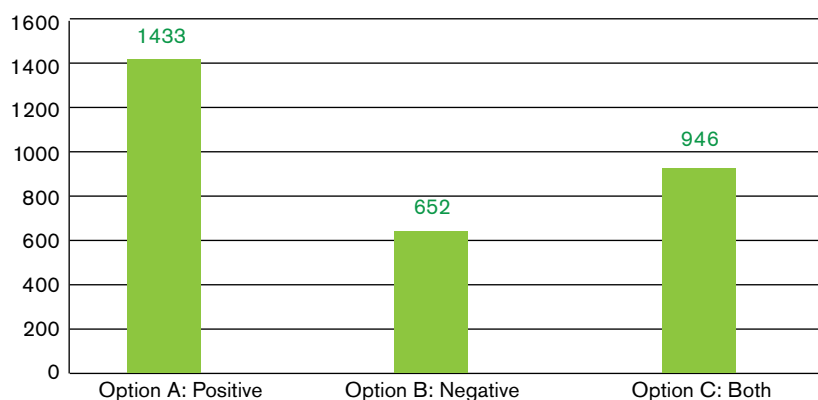
⁷ *Katwal Karaune* is a traditional system in which a person (usually male) is employed to deliver messages in a loud voice, standing at the top or centre of villages.

4. MEDIA, PEACE AND SECURITY IN NEPAL

Media are central to the construction of popular perceptions and thus derive their responsibility. They have the ability to instigate or diffuse conflict by bringing the masses together, but also have the potential to divide them. Although large areas of the research districts are still beyond the reach of any mass media, local media, particularly FM radio stations, have been successful, to some extent, in filling the information vacuum.

An SMS survey carried out across the country also showed that people are aware of the importance of media in both promoting and undermining peace and security.

WHAT KIND OF IMPACT DOES NEWS PUBLISHED/BROADCAST BY MEDIA HAVE ON YOUR COMMUNITY'S PEACE AND SECURITY?



Out of 3031 SMSs received, 47.2 percent (1433) of participants agreed that media play a very positive role in maintaining peace and security in the community. However, 21.5 percent (652) of respondents believed that media play a negative role in maintaining community peace and security, with 31.3 percent (946) of respondents believing media play both roles.

They [journalists] support us by providing information on criminals of whom we are unaware or on other incidents they receive from the community or their other sources. Many times the community does not come to us directly but tries to solve an issue by themselves, no matter how serious it is. But journalists provide us with such information and support us in our responsibility.

Interview, Nepal Police representative, Bara, June 2011

There are times when we have to assist the police. Sometimes the police do not have the capacity to do full research. For example, in a location where an incident has occurred, there is a big difference in the news gathered by police and by journalists. More information is gathered by journalists than police officers as people feel more comfortable talking with journalists.

Interview, FNJ representative, Rolpa, June 2011

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING PEACE AND SECURITY

Media contribute positively to building peace and promoting security in the community, raising issues related to women, justice, security, democracy, human rights and awareness-raising around rights and responsibilities, and helping to build an informed society. To some extent, media actors in both research districts are coordinating with security agencies such as the Nepal Police and District Administration Office in sharing information regarding violence, crime and other public security-related incidents. In many districts journalists and media houses hold regular discussions with local government agencies such as the Chief District Officer and Nepal Police regarding district security. Security providers and media representatives acknowledge the role played by media in providing crucial information, as people hesitate to reach out to security agencies directly or have difficulty in accessing them. Such collaborations have helped state agencies to address issues in a more timely and effective manner.

Media also play an important role in informing people about rallies, protests, demonstrations or riots, and mitigate various rumours by providing accurate and credible information to the public, helping them to make informed decisions and follow safety measures. The media have played a proactive role in supporting the local administration in maintaining law and order, but at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the conduct of the administration, ensuring security does not come at the expense of people's rights and dignity. The media are also at the forefront of advocating for social cohesion and harmony among different communities through culturally and socially sensitive reporting. Media are also playing an important role in informing, educating and making people aware about services delivered by the state, thus helping in the strengthening of state-citizen relations.

Fishing in Jedwang

In Jedwang VDC the Maoist army used explosive materials to kill fish. Women's groups protested and the situation became like that of the conflict period. But instead of focusing the story on conflict we focused on women's attempts at conservation, the challenges they have faced and how the challenge was solved. We gave space to conflict at the end, but women's positive attempts at the beginning. If Maoists were blamed at the beginning the situation would probably have been different. Reporting news from a different angle helped Maoist combatants to understand women's initiatives and the problem was resolved amicably.

Interview, Radio Rolpa Representative, Rolpa, June 2011

The media also collaborate with Local Peace Committees (LPCs) to share information with conflict victims, and raise their voice and issues which need to be addressed. The media provide space for conflict victims, highlighting their challenges, pressing for transitional justice, many times resulting in support for affected people. Several civil society members interviewed responded that, through its reporting, the media had played a positive role in making people aware of the risk of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and were collaborating with LPCs to raise awareness. The media have played an active role in bringing attention to mines which were laid during the insurgency period and advocating and pressuring the state for their removal. Journalists also expose wrongdoing and corruption which occurs in development activities. For example, because of reporting on corruption, the local administration was forced to cancel a contract which had been awarded to a company to construct a bridge near Liwang in Rolpa district.

Collaboration of media and LPC in reducing conflict

In Rolpa, the LPC uses the media to raise awareness about risks of mines and unexploded ordnances and provide information on mine risk education. The LPC is also using the media to inform people about relief packages for victims of the conflict.

In Bara, local media frequently include the LPC in its programmes on peace, security and conflict. They provide space to the LPC to share its information and raise awareness about what the LPC is doing to facilitate relief packages to conflict victims. Most of the LPCs include journalists as members of the team, improving communications and access to external information and support.

The media can give a voice to the voiceless, advocating for equitable sharing of the dividends of peace. They provide a platform for conflicting parties to share their needs, bringing them together for constructive dialogue. The media also act as an early warning mechanism on conflict and disasters, thus helping to reduce risk and manage consequences. For example, Bageshwori FM in Nepalgunj, Banke district, alerts people to the danger of floods during monsoon season (June-July) through public service announcements, news highlights and other programmes.

Media Promoting Dialogue

Protests around the presidential reinstatement of the head of the Nepal Army and the subsequent resignation of the CPN-Maoist prime minister in May 2009 led to clashes between cadres of Nepali Congress and Maoists in Rolpa. During this critical period, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) Rolpa Chapter initiated an all-party meeting and tried to advise political parties to seek consensus on their disputes. Such pressure and the mediation role played by FNJ created an environment for political parties to be able to work together in Rolpa.

Focus Group Discussion with Journalists, Rolpa, June 2011 & Interview, FNJ, Rolpa, June 2011

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN UNDERMINING PEACE AND SECURITY

The media also have the potential to act as a spoiler in promoting insecurity and conflict, as seen during the *Hrithik Roshan* scandal⁸. There was criticism and acceptance from government officials, community members and the media fraternity that the media was not able to report incidents fairly and sensitively, but tended to sensationalise and exaggerate, often resulting in an adverse security situation. For example, journalists are criticised for highlighting the activities of certain armed or criminal groups, especially in the Terai, fostering a sense of insecurity. Journalists countered that they were often pressured with threats of violence by the same or other armed groups if they failed to report on these activities.

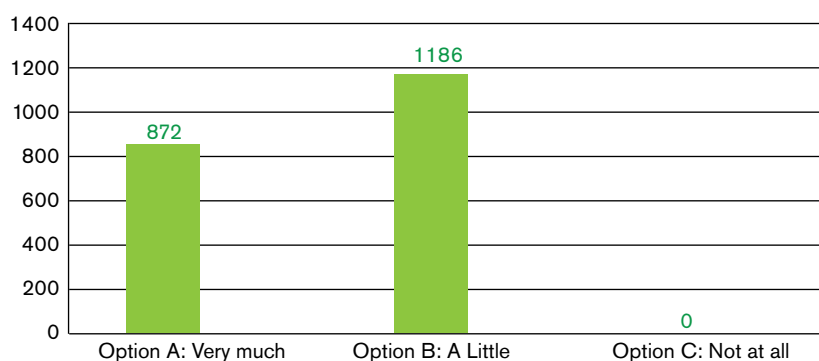
The consequences of poor reporting

In December 2000, violent protests erupted on the streets of Kathmandu against the Indian actor Hrithik Roshan. These protests followed the media's reporting of his alleged derogatory comment against Nepal. The first news about the protest by youth in Chitwan against the actor and his remarks was carried by a local newspaper and later picked up by the mainstream media without proper verification and research. Sensational reporting on the issue acted as a catalyst, resulting in violence directed not only against the Indian actor but also against communal harmony, with people of Indian origin targeted by protesters. The incident resulted in the death of at least four persons, with public and private properties also attacked and vandalised.

Insensitive reporting can promote hate and fuel conflict between opposing parties. Use of insensitive terminology and use of graphics/stories/words which have the capacity to heighten hatred and emotions in the media also affect conflict and negate security. Because of such reporting, people's trust towards media is not universal. An SMS survey showed that out of 2058 SMS votes received, 57.6 percent (1186) of respondents did not fully trust the media's reporting. While no respondents said they had no trust at all in the media, the survey indicates that media need to do more to be seen as trustworthy.

⁸ In December 2000, violent protests erupted in Kathmandu, resulting in the killing of at least 3 people after the media reported an alleged derogatory comment about Nepal by Indian Actor Hrithik Roshan. 'Nepal protests heat up', *BBC News*, 21st October 2011. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1090264.stm

HOW MUCH DO YOU TRUST THE INFORMATION PUBLISHED/BROADCAST BY THE MEDIA?



There is wide perception among media consumers and government officials, as well as media practitioners, that the media often report stories without due investigation or verified information, undermining a sense of public security. In Bara, protests against the *Kantipur*⁹ newspaper, including burnings of the paper, were undertaken by political party cadres in response to the publication of a story on the “Red Passport” scandal¹⁰ which implicated a local Member of Parliament without substantial proof. This left newspaper vendors in fear and led to the closure of newspaper shops for some days. Government officials also acknowledge this issue, citing the media’s role in aggravating a conflict situation in certain circumstances. One respondent stated that failure to agree to a journalist’s demands could result in a series of negative reports.

Media aggravating conflict

Around a year back, a clash occurred between the Nepal Student Union, a Congress Party student wing, and the All Nepal Free Student Union, CPN-UML’s student wing, in another part of the district. Media briefly reported the incident in the news but did not mention why, how or what happened. News reports of the clash also caused confrontation between two students’ unions in Liwang. If media had fully reported the story, the clash would not have occurred. Also many times, especially during exam times, exams are disrupted by student unions because of news reports of similar incidents in other parts of the districts or the country often citing questions being asked from out of the syllabus.

Interview with a young person during Focus Group Discussion, Rolpa, June 2011

Many interviewees believed that the violence media portray in various programmes had impacted on them, especially through the behaviour of young children and adolescents. One participant shared how a child bullied another child, forcing him to steal because actors in movies and serials did the same. Many participants also believed that media focus on reporting cases of suicide had encouraged more suicides, especially among young people.

There are general perceptions among the public that the media tend to succumb to the demands of politicians or the community, and often do not properly report public security-related incidents. Many interviewees cited media silence during tender processes, when various armed thugs are mobilised to confront or intimidate rival bidders. Many believe that media prioritise politics or negative stories over day-to-day social issues or positive stories. One respondent stated: ‘Journalists are extremely excited to take a picture of some leader giving a speech but ignore barefoot listeners who come either because of force or some expectation’.

Female respondents complained that the media rarely gave priority to women’s issues or tended to present issues through men’s perspectives. Cases of domestic violence are hardly reported in the media and if reported, media fail to follow up the case, often ignoring the plight of the victim. Female respondents believe the media tend to portray women in stereotypical roles such as household workers. Women-orientated programmes are also on similar lines and there are insufficient awareness-raising programmes focused on women.

⁹ *Kantipur* is a Nepali National Daily published in Kathmandu and believed to be one of the most widely-read newspapers across the country.
¹⁰ Some lawmakers were accused and prosecuted for tampering and selling diplomatic passports, aka “red passports”, for financial benefits. ‘Diplomatic passport forgery’, *The Kathmandu Post*, 10th February 2010. Available at <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/02/10/top-story/diplomatic-passport-forgery/218275.html>

5. CHALLENGES TO MEDIA IN NEPAL

Media practitioners acknowledge their role in contributing to public security within their communities. Despite many positive contributions, challenges remain in their ability to act as a catalyst in promoting peace and security. Some key challenges identified during research were:

Professionalism A lack of professionalism among journalists and media houses has been identified as one of the key challenges which promotes insensitive and exaggerated reports affecting public security. Civil society, government officials and media professionals perceived levels of professionalism to have increased over the years; however, challenges still remain. Many media organisations have failed to implement the Working Journalist Act¹¹ and, as a result, journalists are forced to seek a dual profession for survival. This adversely affects reporting responsibilities, resulting in ad hoc and superficial reports which fail to properly raise public security and other issues affecting the local community. Such dual association can also result in a conflict of interests among journalists, putting balance and credibility at risk. The question of economic security has aggravated violations of the Code of Conduct (CoC)¹² by journalists. There are accusations of journalists linking up with criminal groups/illegal traders, customs, or police stations for financial and other personal benefits in exchange for their silence or the compromising of a story.

A Member of Parliament was involved in displacing the local residents of one village. Local people protested, showing proof of their land registration. I reported the incident with some pictures. The editor edited the news, stating only one side of the story, i.e. the protesters, and omitted the other view citing space as a reason. Because of the news I received death threats by phone and had to stay in Kathmandu for a week. I do not have faith in the security given by police.

Interview, Journalist, Bara, June 2011

Failure to implement the CoC is not only due to a lack of economic security but also due to a lack of sufficient training, knowledge-sharing opportunities and other resources. Many journalists do not have an academic journalism qualification or undergo any basic journalism training prior to starting or during the profession. Learning by doing is the mantra for many journalists. Except in a few cases, due to economic constraints, media organisations are neither able to provide basic journalism training nor other specialised training and resources such as recorders or cameras. Except for opportunities provided by INGOs and NGOs such as Search for Common Ground or Equal Access Nepal, journalists beyond the capital hardly get the opportunity to participate in training as there is a serious lack of infrastructure and opportunities outside Kathmandu. Some journalists also complain that international NGOs provide them with training but not equipment, which makes it difficult to put their learning into practice.

A majority of journalists lack knowledge, skills and understanding of conflict-sensitive reporting. Many journalists interviewed during the process had not heard of or read the CoC meant for them, and exhibited a lack knowledge of other policies and laws developed to regulate journalism. Media representatives admit that a lack of training had seriously hampered quality of reporting and affected accuracy, balance and credibility of not only news but journalists themselves.

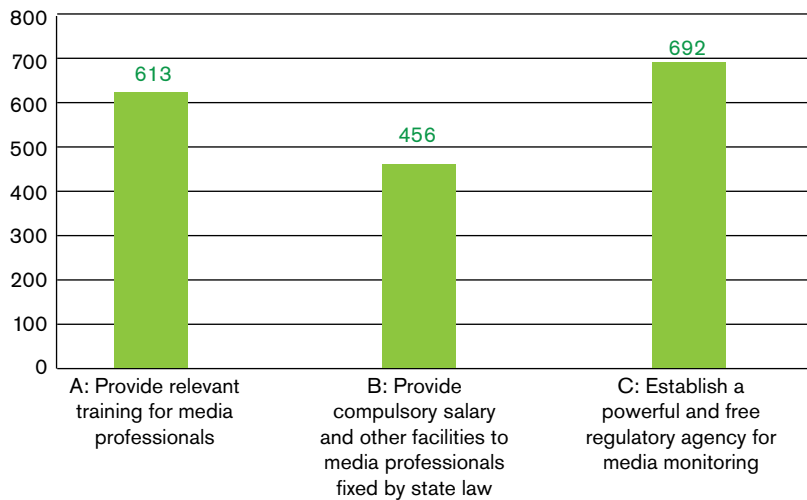
¹¹ Working Journalist Act 1993, amended and revised 2007, demands minimum salary and other facilities for journalists.

¹² Nepal Press Council and FNJ Journalists' code of conduct 2003, amended and revised 2008, articulates "Dos and Don'ts" for journalists while carrying out professional assignments. "Don'ts" also include refraining from seeking personal benefits from news.

Increasing competition to sell news is also increasing the sense of insecurity and threat among the public. News media, particularly television and radio, compete to break news first and in doing so report stories without proper verification or exaggerate the story. As elsewhere in the world, to capture attention, media promote negative stories, undermining positive stories, and create a sense of insecurity.

According to the SMS survey, providing relevant training to media professionals and ensuring their economic security were important to make the media sector more trustworthy and responsible.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO MAKE THE MEDIA SECTOR RESPONSIBLE AND TRUSTWORTHY?



Out of 1791 SMS votes received, 34.2 percent (613) of respondents believed that journalists should be provided with relevant training whereas 25.4 percent (456) of respondents believed journalists should be provided with a timely salary and other facilities as fixed by state law to make them responsible and trustworthy. 38.6 percent (692) of respondents believed that there was need for a powerful and independent regulatory body for media monitoring.

Gender representation Unequal gender representation challenges the media's ability to report challenges and the needs faced by women. Representation of women journalists is very low: in Rolpa there were only 5-7 active women journalists out of 50 journalists associated with the FNJ local chapter; Bara has 3-5 active women journalists out of 59. Women journalists have to face various social and cultural obstacles which limit their opportunities. Even those who defy such obstacles have to face harassment and the patriarchal attitude of their male counterparts, government agencies and society in general during reporting. Deep-rooted social and cultural barriers create significant obstacles to access of information for male journalists who want to report on issues affecting women.

Gender discrimination in the work place

People have a different view when they know that a female has done the reporting. They say 'a journalist! A female journalist!' It's very difficult for female journalists to collect information. We are not provided information by government officials and community members because we are female. There is a perception that women belong to household activities after all. After so much trouble, when a female reporter completes her reporting, her editor asks so many questions regarding her credibility such as where was the reporting done, how was it done or if it contains true information, or if the information written in the report can be verified. If the same reporting is done by a male in his own home without visiting the field, the publishers/editors pose no questions at all. Such discrimination also discourages women journalists to be actively involved in the profession.

Interview, Female Journalist, Rolpa, June 2011

Politicisation Political alignment of media houses is an almost universally accepted norm, but such alignment should not come at the price of independence, credibility and impartiality of the media. Support should be based on merits and demerits. As a result of changing political contexts, a move towards professional and independent media began after 1990 but party journalism still continues and is arguably the norm. Many media organisations are directly or indirectly operated by political parties. According to the Nepal Press Institute (NPI), as an estimate, around 15 percent of all media stations are officially owned by district-level party leaders; unofficially, the number hovers around 75 percent. Such sentiments were shared equally in both researched districts. There is a general perception among the public, as well as media representatives and government officials, that local media have linkages with political parties. Respondents pointed out that people knew which media were run by which party. Through political allegiance, many journalists self-censor, trying to avoid embarrassing the political leadership or to keep their own political ambitions alive.

Not only media houses but individual journalists and professional organisations are also divided according to political party affiliation. Such political division has greatly affected solidarity and the working environment among journalists, as these organisations are often seen to be safeguarding their party's interests while advocating for the welfare of fellow journalists.

POLITICS DIVIDING THE SOLIDARITY OF JOURNALISTS¹³

UML's youth wing Youth Force involved in the attack: FNJ

A four-member fact finding team of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) formed to look into the attack on Biratnagar-based journalist Khilanath Dhakal, has concluded that the CPN-UML-affiliated youth wing Youth Force (YF) Morang District Chairman, Parashuram Basnet, and its Biratnagar Metropolitan City Committee chief, Rohit Koirala, were behind the attack.

The FNJ has announced a week-long protest programme to exert pressure on the government to take stern action against the ones involved in the attacks on journalists in different parts of the country. An emergency meeting of the FNJ today decided to launch the protest and submit a memorandum to the CPN-UML.

Don't include the party in the attack: Press Chautari

Press Chautari Nepal has expressed concern over the preliminary report made public by the mission formed by the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) regarding the attack on journalist Khilanath Dhakal of Biratnagar. Press Chautari said that the criminals should be limited to the level of criminals, and expressed concern over a particular political group being targeted out of prejudice. Chautari also urged the FNJ to not be influenced by imaginary and political intentions, and instead to focus on professional and personal security of media persons.

Impunity Journalists and media organisations receive regular threats and intimidation from political parties, criminal and armed groups, or sometimes even from members of the security forces threatening them for their coverage of an issue. Even if reported, perpetrators may not be punished according to the law because of their high-profile political and/or economic connections. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least six Nepali journalists have been killed¹⁴ since 2006, including one in Bara. CPJ has labelled Nepal a state where killers of journalists can go free without facing justice¹⁵. Many journalists interviewed during the research mentioned that they had received death threats and other forms of threats from various sectors because of their news reports. Support from the administration in bringing those intimidators to justice is very weak due to political and other reasons.

13 Nepalnews.com (2011). 'FNJ demands stern action against those attacking Nagarik journo', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.nepalnews.com/archive/2011/jun/jun06/news17.php>;

The Himalayan Times (2011). 'Press Chautari concerned over FNJ report', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Press+Chautari+concerned+over+FNJ+report&NewsID=292162>

14 Committee to Protect Journalists (2011). '7 Journalists Killed in Nepal since 1992/Motive Confirmed', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.cpj.org/killed/asia/nepal/>

15 J. Simon (2011). 'An open letter to PM: In Nepal, Killers of Journalists could go free', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.cpj.org/2011/09/september-15-2011-prime-minister.php>

Journalist's killer still at large¹⁶

On the evening of 5th October 2007, Birendra Shah, a local journalist of Bara district, was abducted by Maoist cadres for writing critical news of the party. According to reports, Shah was taken into the jungle, severely beaten and shot dead by the abductors. Probe reports publicised by media groups, a parliamentary committee and the National Human Rights Commission also confirmed the involvement of Maoist cadres in Shah's abduction and killing. Maoist leaders sought to distance themselves from the killing, which they called an anarchic act orchestrated by a district committee member.

On 30th May 2011, the district court sentenced two defendants, Mainekar Giri and Ram Ekwal Sahini, to life imprisonment on charges of carrying out the abduction and murder. However, the main accused, Lal Bahadur Chaudhary, has not yet been detained. Shah's brother and other journalists stated that the accused killer was roaming free but the administration was doing nothing to arrest the accused because of his high-level linkages.

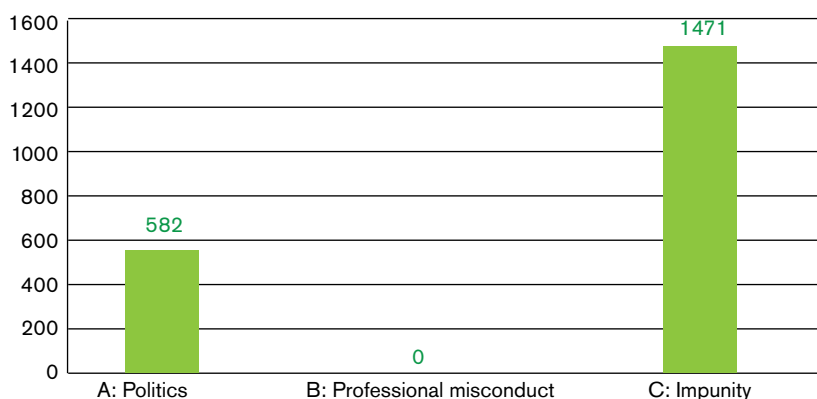
Self-censorship among journalists and media organisations appears to be increasing alarmingly, primarily in response to threats and impunity. Journalists and editors face the dilemma of to publish or not to publish. Typically this is in the face of threats to their wellbeing if they publish stories on the criminal or misconduct of the politically or economically powerful. However, in the Terai, media organisations and journalists are often threatened by armed groups who claim responsibility for bombings and shootings if they do not broadcast or publish their names in the news. In most cases the administration fails to bring the accused to justice despite specific identification with substantial evidence. Media representatives and community members believe that such a culture of impunity has bolstered criminals, increasing further attacks and threats against journalists and media organisations, ultimately affecting public security and peace. Local administrations deny such claims, stating that media professionals hardly reported threats received and that they had provided security to journalists as required if a case was reported.

Being alive is the most important thing. If I am alive then I can only write.

Interview, Journalist, Rolpa, June 2011

Public perception is also similar as it is believed that impunity and politicisation of the media are the key challenges affecting the media's role in promoting peace and security.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR REASONS BEHIND INCREASING INSECURITY FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS?



16 Committee to Protect Journalists (2011). 'Nepal journalist's killers sentenced to life', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.cpj.org/2011/06/nepal-journalists-killers-get-life-sentences-maste.php>; Advocacy Forum-Nepal (2011). 'BIRENDRA SHAH', accessed 18th October 2011. Available at <http://www.advocacyforum.org/emblematic-cases/2011/01/birendra-shah.php>

According to the survey, out of the total of 2053 total SMS senders, 71.6 percent (1471) believed that impunity was major challenge faced by the media and was the main reason behind increased insecurity of media professionals. Politicisation of the media was another challenge which affected the media's own security as well as public security, with 28.4 percent (582) of respondents identifying this as a major challenge. Although district research indicated that a lack of professionalism was one of the major challenges facing the media, no SMS senders believed that this affected the media's own security.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the current transition in Nepal, the role of the media in promoting peace, security and cooperation among the government and the people is more important than ever before. Despite a few glimmers of hope, media still need to do more and, to this end, require support and cooperation from not only government but also from civil society and the international community.

The following recommendations are provided to the EU and other donors, who can play an important role in strengthening the capacity of the media to promote peace, security, development and prosperity, and help to strengthen democratic norms and values.

Strengthen the professionalism and conflict-sensitive reporting capacity of media personnel.

The EU and other donors could work with media organisations and associations to support greater media professionalisation. This support could include the establishment of a training wing within the FNJ. This would involve the development of expert capacity on good media practice, including conflict-sensitive journalism and basic journalism skills. Experts within FNJ could then develop tailored toolkits and materials on relevant issues and offer professionalisation training programmes and follow-up support to journalists through FNJ's considerable networks. Given the security threats facing journalists, conflict-sensitive reporting training, and personal security and safety training could be incorporated as an essential part of any media training and training materials. Support for greater professionalisation of the media sector could also include “hardware” support for media organisations in the form of computers, sound recording devices, and broadcasting and printing technologies. Alongside “soft” capacity-building support, such support would help to increase the professionalism and quality of journalistic practices in Nepal.

Strengthen understanding and awareness of legal frameworks to uphold media freedoms and ethical practice, amongst journalists and the public, including where to go for redress when laws are broken.

The EU and other donors could support the Nepal Press Council, FNJ and other organisations working for the welfare of journalists to develop and disseminate IEC materials on policies and resources relating to the protection and professionalism of journalists and those working in the sector. These policies and resources will include the Code of Ethics¹⁷ for journalists, the Working Journalist Act, Right to Information Act, among others. Awareness-raising materials should also include information on mechanisms and procedures for redressing grievances and complaints, from both journalists and the public. IEC materials and resources can be disseminated through FNJ networks and associations of media organisations. Such IEC materials could also be disseminated to the public through educational institutions and government agencies such as VDC Offices or DAOs. Support for awareness raising amongst media professionals should go hand in hand with support for local civil society to raise public awareness of the importance of free media. This could include the development of multilingual media (audio, video and text) which highlight the importance of free media and good media practice, and the importance of community support and collaboration in ensuring free and fair reporting. Such support would be crucial to raise awareness not only amongst media professionals but also the general public regarding the rights and responsibilities of media practitioners. A more informed public would act as a check and balance mechanism for responsible media practices and would result in increased cooperation between media and the local community.

17 Nepal Press Council and FNJ, *Journalists' code of conduct 2003*, amended and revised 2008. Nepal Press council and FNJ: Kathmandu.

Strengthen the capacity of the government and media institutions to address the security challenges faced by journalists more effectively.

The EU and other donors could support relevant government bodies and the FNJ to establish mechanisms for greater coordination and collaboration between journalists and the security forces. Such a coordination forum, whereby senior personnel of security forces and representatives of the media sector can come together on a regular basis, would be mutually beneficial for both parties. Security providers benefit from receiving information on security threats facing journalists on the ground; media representatives benefit from improved relationships with security providers. Such a mechanism would involve representatives of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Nepal Police, FNJ and other relevant agencies, and organisations such as Broadcasting Association of Nepal, Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal, Television Association of Nepal, Nepal Media Society, among others, and should meet monthly. The EU and other donors could also provide support for the FNJ and other institutions working for the welfare of journalists to establish and strengthen support structures for media professionals facing security threats and media victims of violence. This could include the establishment of a victim support unit within the FNJ which provides legal aid and counselling services, and works with security providers to ensure security for journalists under threat. The establishment of such mechanisms would enable journalists to seek legal and other assistance to ensure their safety, thereby encouraging more journalists, particularly women, to stay in the profession.

Work with government and media stakeholders to create and strengthen an environment conducive to responsible, independent and safe media.

The EU and other donors could provide support for the Press Council, FNJ or other relevant organisations to carry out a policy review of existing media policies and laws, with the aim of identifying areas for reform and strengthening. Such a review would also aim to identify entry points for addressing the overarching challenge of institutional politicisation. The EU and other donors could also support the Government of Nepal, including the Press Council Nepal, and FNJ to help encourage sustainable and viable growth of independent media. This could include providing opportunities for media-related policy makers to understand and learn from policy and practice implemented in European states. Such programmes will facilitate knowledge and understanding to tackle issues of the over-politicisation of media in a democratic and sustainable manner.

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