

Growth of Nepalese Media in 1990-2000: A Critical Study



Sweta Singh

Assistant Director,
Regional Services Division (RSD)
IGNOU,
New Delhi, India

Abstract

The history of mass media in different societies and countries has more often than not been one of struggle to attain freedom of expression in a relatively congenial atmosphere. The length and degree of struggle might vary from country to country but rulers, or those in power, gave into demands for press freedom with reluctance and, at times, not without violence. Considering this fact Nepal's media's history is not an exception. Governments in even established democracies known for their long traditions of media freedom have been reluctant to part with information that have any remote potential for creating embarrassment for them. Nevertheless, all modern, democratic societies accept that press freedom is essential for a pluralistic society aspiring for good governance, promoting creativity and encouraging innovative initiatives. Nepalese media is also no exception to this.

In this context, this paper will examine various developmental measures that have taken place during 1990s up to 2000. The paper discusses the evolution and state of Nepalese media during 1990s-2000. It also examines how the Nepalese media has been conducting their activities and the institutional and constitutional arrangement related to media during different political regime. The study shows that there was phenomenal growth of media in its number and coverage. The state owned media however continued to be under the control of the ruling party.

Keywords: Nepalese Media, Democracy, Freedom of press, Radio Nepal, NTV, FM radio.

Introduction

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal was promulgated in 1990. This new constitution has been very specific about press freedom and the right of every citizen to be informed. In this respect, the Nepali Constitution is the most liberal in the whole of South Asia and matches or even betters its counterparts in the best of established democracies. However, the Right to Information is still largely confined to principle rather than practice. However, this period is a landmark in the development of both print and electronic media in Nepal (Kharel 2000: 6).

The media scenario witnessed tremendous changes since 1990 in the aftermath of a pro-democracy movement. King Birendra, Nepal's sovereign since 1972, lifted a 30-year ban on political parties; a new constitution was promulgated and parliamentary system of governance was restored. The new constitution, which came into force in November 1990, gave full democratic freedom to the press, removing anachronistic provisions on pre-censorship and seizure of printing presses for printing objectionable materials. The right to seek and obtain information on matters of public interest is now guaranteed. This and other concomitant rights are often favourably compared with the rights granted in the United States through the First Amendment of its Constitution (Adhakari 2000:15).

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to:

1. Outline the history of Nepalese media during the period from 1990s up to 2000.
2. Examine the problems confronted by Nepalese media in the process of its development during this period.
3. Discuss some accounts that have taken place during this period that occupy significant space in understanding the current situation of the media in Nepal.
4. Explore the impact of Nepalese media on different segments of the society.

Methodology

This study is based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Nepal Gazets and other government documents. Secondary sources include books, research papers and articles on the area.

Government Attitude towards Media

The impact of the constitutional changes was direct and visible in the media sector. Scores of new publications of varying periodicity were started in the private sector. A liberal government policy on broadcasting paved the way for the opening of radio and television in the private sector. The lone exceptions were those belonging to the category of official media. The government policy towards them became steadily harder.

The practice of appointing stalwarts of the governing party (or parties) to head official media organizations continues unabated. "With the installation of the first elected government in May 1991, the official media organizations—radio, television, a news agency and two major newspapers—were soon made to shed their 'liberal' editorial policies, and give up using materials that were critical of the government or of politicians in power" (Ibid: 15).

Among the newspapers registered in the changed context, Nepali language weeklies have overtaken the rest in terms of numbers. Daily

newspapers in broadsheet were also registered because the press freedom--guaranteed by the Constitution--encouraged potential investors to try their luck in the media sector. The first group of investors to be attracted to these prospects included those who started Kantipur (Nepali) and The Kathmandu Post (in English) in February 1993 (Ibid: 15).

The following figures released by the Press Council Nepal depict a comparative situation between two years. A comparison of these figures shows the trends witnessed in the first three years of democracy. The numbers have increased slowly but steadily. The process took a faster pace from the beginning of 1993 with the arrival of Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post. Procedures were simplified and rules governing qualifications of editors were relaxed in view of a widely-held argument that since publication of newspapers was but an extension of citizens' right to freedom of expression and publication, stricter press laws and bylaws would amount to restricting the fundamental rights of citizens (Ibid: 16).

The table shows that newspapers of different periodicities have increased noticeably after the restoration of democracy in 1990.

Comparative Study of Newspapers before and after 1990

Newspapers	Mid-July 1989		Mid-July 1992	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Dailies	73	12.99	96	14.63
Weeklies	425	75.62	506	77.13
Bi- Weeklies	2	0.36	3	0.46
Fortnightlies	62	11.03	51	7.77
Total	562	100.00	656	100.00

Source: Press Council Report 2000:16

Radio Nepal

After the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, people have had great expectations from the development of 'Radio Nepal' in all spheres. Radio Nepal showed drastic changes in its technical development and broadcasting sector in 13 years, which it had not been able to do in 40 years. Even in the multi-party system, the minister who used to be head of the department would pressurize the director of Radio Nepal and exercise their monopoly. Consequently, the impact of unstable government was quite visible on Radio Nepal. There were no concrete rules regarding the dismissal and appointment of staff. In training and other opportunities, people who were associated with the ruling government got chances due to unnecessary political interference. This trend is still going on. (Onta 2004: 80-82).

In 1993, Radio Nepal introduced the concept of regional broadcasting to increase its broadcasting hours. These broadcasting centres could not achieve any special progress except for broadcasting local news in the local language for two hours. Except Dipayal Broadcasting Centre, the other four centres produce and broadcast their own

programmes. Except for the news programmes the other programmes are broadcast with the co-ordination of the other organizations. The major work of the staff of Radio Nepal is to collect news and broadcast them. For news related programmes like Ghatana Ra Vichar and Parivesh Radio Nepal appoints its staff on a contract basis. The quality of programmes broadcast on Radio Nepal is decreasing but the number of staff is increasing day by day. There are sufficient rules, regulations and policies to implement reform in Radio Nepal's programmes and management. However, they are not implemented properly (Ibid: 82).

After 1990, some changes could be seen in Radio Nepal such as; a reporting branch came into existence, a music branch was formed and Radio Nepal started evaluating and monitoring its programmes. However, this is not done continuously. In a democratic system the media has a very significant role to play. In Nepal's context, where there is more poverty and illiteracy, radio has an additional role to play. Radio is the effective medium to communicate the message from centre to village. Hence, every government gives its attention to Radio soon after their inception.

Raghu Mainali (2005) argues that since 1992 they had been involved in broadcasting of community radio by using Frequency Modulation (FM) technology through Nepal Environment Journalism. Perhaps, Radio Nepal started propagating against us. Hence, they started oppositional politics in ministry against us. To end the new possibilities and to take action against us, Radio Nepal itself started FM radio, sold the time to private sector and gave clarification that, "It is the involvement of private sector in broadcasting". This gave the sense that Radio Nepal is not under the Ministry of Information and Communication. Rather, the Ministry of Information and Communication seems to be under Radio Nepal, because the Ministry of Information and Communication has always seemed to be ready to fulfill the vested interests of Radio Nepal (Mainali 2005: 272).

The emergence of FM radios has provided great impetus to radio journalism and new way of disseminating information to Nepalese people. In this respect, Ravindra Mishra (2005) argues, "There are certainly some improvement in radio journalism due to the emergence of FM radios and freedom in broadcasting news. On the other hand, radio journalists themselves have to work hard in this regard. In order to become a successful radio journalist it is not only necessary to become a program maker, producer and presenter but also he/she needs to be an efficient journalist, analyst, program producer, interviewer and presenter (Mishra 2005: 284).

FM Radios

The most significant development in Nepalese history in this period is the revolution of FM radio (Community Radio) in major cities of Nepal. Although the state-owned 'Radio Nepal' continues to be the most powerful media in Nepal with a communication infrastructure unmatched by any other institution, there has been a phenomenal growth in independent FM radio. By late summer of 2001, licenses had been issued to 25 independent radio operators, out of which some 16 were on air; half of them outside the Kathmandu Valley. At that time the government was also processing about 20 additional applications for independent FM stations in different areas of the country. Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 (owned by the NGO, Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists), which received its license in May 1997, was the pioneer in the movement for independent FM radio in Nepal. By February 2001, eight stations were on air in the Kathmandu Valley. FM stations located in the central Tarai towns of Manigram (near Butwal) and Hetauda, the eastern Tarai metropolis of Biratnagar, and places in central hill Nepal such as Madanpokhara and Pokhara have given a taste of non-state sector radio to other sections of the Nepali population as well (Kharel 2000: 255).

FM Radio has broad implications in Nepali society. The young populations in urban areas of Nepal are especially influenced by this. FM radio has increased the amount of news available on the radio to urban parts of Nepal. Initially, since these FM stations were barred from broadcasting their own news bulletins as per one of the conditions in their

license, none of the stations called their news-oriented programmes 'news'. That changed with a Supreme Court judgement in July 2001 that constitutional guarantee of freedom of press applied equally to all forms of media, including radio. However, in terms of content, these programmes vary a lot. They include reading headlines and some main news from major newspapers of the economic reports, sports results, and reportage on literary activities, institutional events, art exhibitions and other happenings of Kathmandu society at large. Thus, by devoting a fair amount of time to the 'non-political', these FM radios have already redefined our style of understanding of news (Ibid: 256).

FM radio has increased the amount of what can be called everyday life information such as special events, traffic flows in city, weather forecast, flight and bus schedules, market prices of vegetables and fruits, air pollution readings, health tips and horoscopes (for those who believe in them). In addition, FM radio provides information about events such as elections, religious gatherings and national celebrations (Ibid).

FM radio is assisting the distribution of knowledge in news. This is being done through programmes designed to cater to the listener's curiosities -contraceptives and careers, music and movies, and sports, language and literature, health and hobbies and so on. Some of this new knowledge is disseminated through 'quizzes' while others are in the form of chat shows and musicals. This new knowledge may be superfluous but its airing is a very significant step in this regard. Music production in at least two languages— Newari and Nepali —has received a shot in the arm due to FM radio. Lovers of Nepali modern songs have some tangible communities due to the work of certain FM programme hosts (Ibid: 257).

FM radio has increased the amount of social analysis available on radio through various programming formats. As monologues it has come in the form of anonymous or attributed responses from people on the streets ('vox pop' in radio parlance) or commentary from noted social critics. As dialogue, such social analysis has come in the form of a variety of chat shows: one-on-one between a host and guest or in the form of multiple dialogues between host(s), guests and listeners who call in. Frequently, others have participated in such discussions by sending in their queries by mail, fax or email before the programmes go on air. Such analysis can also be found in feature reportage focusing on a specific theme as developed in innovative programmes by the reporters in Radio Sagarmatha. Some of the subjects covered by these programmes have never been discussed over radio before, and others have received critical treatment that is impossible to find on the government-run Radio Nepal. This kind of analysis, already being done in Nepali and Newari, is bound to emerge in other languages as the FM revolution spreads across Nepal (Ibid: 257-58).

FM radio's interactions with government officials and politicians have added to the collective knowledge of urbanites regarding mis-governance in

Nepali society. Similarly, discussions with practitioners of other professions have demystified specialist knowledge, intellectually empowering the community of listeners (Ibid: 258).

FM radio has increased the amount of oral history available on the radio. This has been achieved through programmes that present the life history of a 'big' person in his own voice or through the profile of a 'subaltern' by a reporter. Alternatively, personal history often related to love tragedies (but occasionally successful romances) has become very popular in the form of letters to radio programme hosts (Ibid: 259).

FM radio programmes have encouraged cross-media reference as a routine practice of urban knowledge. While FM radios have been reading newspaper content, the programmes aired have also influenced the print media. For example, since these radio reports highlight local sports events, broadsheet dailies have had to follow through by increasing their coverage of local sports. Additionally, radio programme hosts are bringing internet content to listeners who do not have direct access to the net. Further, radio programmes are increasingly becoming available on the internet (Ibid: 259-60).

Television Channels

After 1990, comparatively little happened in the television sector. Apart from the government-owned Nepal Television (NTV) selling slots to commercial and NGO operators, the government finally decided to open the television sector, to country's premier cable television distribution company. Channel Nepal began satellite broadcasts in 2001, just a day before NTV itself went satellite. The government granted licenses to three other commercial operators for satellite linking as well, from among applications received from various parties, including NGOs. Quality satellite programming in the Nepali language has a potentially large audience outside of Nepal, due to the scattered nature of the Nepali population in India in particular, whom it would be impossible to reach through terrestrial television. When such programmes become available in Nepali, a new kind of national Nepali public sphere can be expected to emerge. This not only provides new markets to media from Nepal but also invites forth challenges regarding production of print copy or audio software that is responsive to both national and international Nepali sensitivities. At the moment, Nepalese are in the audience of non-satellite television, mostly up linked from India (Onta 2000: 258).

Though Nepalese people got the opportunity to watch some private television channels through satellite technology, NTV still could not bring any changes in its presentation. Nir Bikram Shah (1993) identified some of the major factors responsible for this in his paper.

According to him, there are about six main factors contributing for the low performance of NTV in this period:

Partiality

It will be very difficult for a young institution like NTV to carry the image of an advocate of one-

sided views, since the issue may be possible mis-utilization of the creative manpower of that organization. During the panchayat period, when political parties were banned, it was not possible for the government media to highlight activities concerning political parties. But in the changed context, the pluralistic society would not accept one-sided views. When the representatives of people are concerned about such behaviour that means objections have been raised at the highest level.

Overdose of Foreign Programs

Seventy-five percent of the air time is taken by foreign programmes in the name of more revenue for self-reliance resulting in under-utilization of the national manpower in the creative aspects and degradation of the available creative manpower. The same amount of time could have been instrumental in creating awareness among citizens about their rights and duties. Such efforts could have been recognized as commitments to consolidate democracy.

Substandard Presentations

NTV programs are often criticized as being substandard and of low grade. Two major elements have been identified for this situation: they are: firstly, the failure to identify the national interest and priorities and secondly, the failure to open entry for the new and young talents. In the absence of new thoughts and ideas, television loses its dynamic profile which is evident on the television screen. The overuse, underuse, and misuse of the available creativity leads to such a situation. Media like the television should be able to open avenues for new talents (Shah 1993).

Cultural Imbalance

Another alarming factor is the lack of resources which has led to concentration of everything in the capital. Both the radio and NTV have failed to adequately address the requirements of Nepal's multilingual, multi-religious, and diverse cultural society. In this situation, emphasis must be given to the various ethnic groups that reside outside Kathmandu. One prerequisite in a democratic setup is to offer equal opportunities to all, which the NTV has so far not been able to do.

Urban Bias

Television has not able to reach the entire population. It has not even reached some areas where STAR TV and Doordarshan signals are intercepted.

Passive Responsibility

Another serious accusation against the NTV is that, it often tried to escape from its responsibilities. NTV, being an autonomous public sector organization, should not only present "others' opinion" but must be able to present its own views in most cases on behalf of the masses. A true and impartial voice and vision is expected from an organization like NTV. But because of its instruction-oriented nature, responsibility seems to be getting second priority (Ibid).

All the above facts also revealed that NTV was fully controlled by the state and it failed to provide alternative views to its audience. Similarly, NTV also could not function in a democratic manner in a democratic setup.

Conclusion

The above analysis clearly shows that during the decade of 1990-2000, after coming into force of the new Constitution the Nepalese media has seen a remarkable growth in terms of number as well as the content. Large number of news papers were started during this period. Several private FM radio stations were established which started broadcasting on wide variety of issues. The emergence of FM radios has provided great impetus to radio journalism and new way of disseminating information to Nepalese people. Private satellite television channels were also came into existence however their impact on the population was not very significant. These FM radio stations

Like other South Asian Countries, the state owned media i.e. Radio Nepal and Nepalese Television however have remained in the control of the government. They continued to air the views of the ruling party. There were no concrete rules regarding the dismissal and appointment of staff. In training and other opportunities, people who were associated with the ruling government got chances due to unnecessary political interference. In spite of these developments in media sector in Nepal after 1990s, there are several structural weaknesses in the Nepali media that limit its potential as a vibrant force for the democratisation of Nepali society.

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