



NATIONAL REPORT ON

The Impact *of* COVID-19 *on* Nepali Media

Media's weakened watchdog role to
adversely affect democratic ecosystem



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FOREWORD

Freedom Forum this time has come up with an assessment report on 'The Impact of COVID-19 in Nepali Media'. It is a result of the FF's continuous watch on freedom of expression and information, press freedom, journalists' rights and media industry in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic that began showing its effects in Nepal since the beginning of 2020.

FF believes that the report, which tries to capture the current scenario of Nepali media, would be helpful for the working journalists, policy makers, researchers and advocacy organizations, rights defenders, and academia to create and foster knowledge on how the working journalists and media houses suffered in the face of global crisis. The report does not intend to belittle or extol any media, but endeavors to depict the reality. The reports collected from the provinces and integrated here have made observation, recommendation and projection, advocating for the revival of the active and independent media that is essential to well-functioning democracy.

The assessment report is prepared with the support of Free Press Unlimited, the Netherlands based organization working in the sector of freedom of expression in various continents.

Although the report covers short period from March 24 to July 24, 2020, it has been built upon the contributions from various people. Eight representatives in provinces- one in each province and one in the Kathmandu Valley- are major pillars to garner information and data and prepare report. FF heartily thanks them for their diligence and cooperation. Similarly the FF staffs' support is unforgettable.

I heartily thank Mr Narayan Ghimire for integrating reports, doing necessary follow up and editing it skillfully. Mr Krishna Sapkota is equally thankful for the contribution in report format and constructive review. I'm indebted to Mr Prakash Rimal for his critical inputs with thorough review of the report.

The experts giving their views upon FF request have helped enrich the report. So, they also deserve respect. Gratitude also goes to Ms Aruna Adhikari for managerial support, and computer designer Mr Hari Marasini who prepared excellent design to the report.



Tara Nath Dahal

Chief Executive

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A sense of fear was steadily gripping the Nepali psyche by the time a 31-year old student, who had returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan on January 9, tested positive for the disease on January 23. In the weeks that followed the COVID-19 impact spiralled out of control and began to hit Nepal's fledgling media industry in the capital city of Kathmandu and rest of the country.

The Nepali media industry has suffered chain effects of COVID-19 crisis from the beginning of 2020. After the government enforced nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of deadly coronavirus on March 24, the lockdown had direct bearing on the media sector. And, it began with ostensible objectives: adopting austerity measures and scaling down the operations a bit.

The nationwide lockdown that came without any preparation brought economic activities to a grinding halt, leading to economic slump, which, in return, adversely affected "the business of advertising". Within days advertisement revenues declined unimaginably by 80%, and the print media in particular began to feel the heat. Major Radio and Television channels began to cut costs. As a result, radio and television programs went 'off-air' and, as if they had no other option, the media owners took a recourse to retrenchment: many journalists and media workers were asked to stay on unpaid leave, denied regular salaries and payment, delayed payment, finally leading to joblessness and resignations. Journalists started facing hard times for lack of their modest, yet regular incomes. Even Nepal's blue-chip media houses – all based in the federal capital of Kathmandu – were suddenly struggling for survival and existence, and then the obvious happened: FM radios and televisions cut down on their news bulletins and program productions while the print reduced number of pages.

Nepal's journalists and media entrepreneurs are at their wits' end. The independent media's presence and outreach has shrunk, and its watchdog role weakened, creating space for the state-controlled media. When an independent media fails there's no public agency to hold state mechanisms to account, more so in a third world country like Nepal, where corruption is rife and irregularities are 'order of the day'.

Political corruption and bureaucratic bungling have been badly exposed in the name of COVID-19 management. Non-payment and/or delayed salary payments have led experienced reporters and editors of top e dailies to resign. As this report goes to design, additional editors are reported to be working under stress owing to non-payment and delayed salary payments. As a result, stories related to misappropriation

funds, bad governance and corruption have gone unreported, or under-reported. On the other hand, the state apparatuses have flexed their muscles under the garb of crisis management, wielding power to control the media and mobilising line agencies for further surveillance. Whether it is the arrest of journalists on charges of spreading fake news or issuing threats over unfavourable news reports and coverage, the press freedom violation has grown alarmingly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was so worrisome that even the UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights and the National Human Rights Commission, had to make aware the government against any attempt to suppress the human rights and press freedom. With no relief in sight coming to the rescue of journalists and the media industry from any side, time has come to reconsider the role of media management, operation, investment and assistance. If much-needed efforts on restoration of vibrant media are delayed, the environment for independent media would further exacerbate, ultimately forcing more shutdowns of professional media and jeopardising the entire democratic ecosystem.

Out of some 700 active journalists, roughly 50 percent of them lost job and the number of media persons losing job stands around 500 in Province-1. Out of some 4,000 active journalists in Bagmati Province, nearly 40 percent journalists and the percentage of the media workers losing jobs stands around 65. Among some 400 active journalists, 60 percent journalists lost their job, and the percentage of the media workers losing jobs stands around 80 in Province-2. Out of some 440 active journalists in Gandaki Province, nearly 60 percent of them lost their job, while the number of media workers losing jobs stands around 100. Among some 1,470 active journalists in Province-5, some 40 to 50 percent lost job while the number of media workers losing job stands around 60 percent. Out of 300 active journalists in Karnali Province, 20 journalists and while the number of media workers losing job stands around 50. Among 1,100 active journalists in Sudurpaschim Province, 55 journalists lost their job, while the number of media workers losing job stands around 186.

Journalists losing job

Province	Active Journalists	Journalists losing job	%
Province-1	700	350	50
Province-2	400	240	60
Bagmati Province	4000	1600	40
Gandaki Province	440	264	60
Province-5	1470	661	45
Karnali Province	300	20	7
Sudurpaschim Province	1100	55	5
Total	8410	3190	38

METHODOLOGY

An integrated research approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, was employed for this study. Both a structured questionnaire and texts collected through story telling were used in the study. Quantitative data collected through the regular media monitoring of Freedom Forum as well as websites of the government agencies while qualitative data collection methods explored the financial and psychological impacts of COVID-19 on media. In-depth interviews were made with the respondents remotely. Reporting and observation made by Freedom Forum's eight representatives- one each in the seven provinces and the Kathmandu Valley – is major source of information for this the report. In order to substantiate the data and claims on the report, story-telling and quotes of senior journalists are adopted. While some media persons agreed to speak on-the-record, others requested not to be named or identified in any way. The FF central office also reached the media persons over phone and Zoom meetings to get to hear the first-person narration of the reality. The eight reports from across the country have been compiled into the making of this national report. The eight representatives were also asked 10 questions reflecting COVID-19 impact on media status in addition to the major points they were sent to cover in the report. They consulted the senior media persons, media educator, publisher, media association like FNJ chapters and furnished the responses. Moreover, the day to day monitoring of freedom of expression and press by central monitoring desk, national and international updates on Nepali media, in-house discussion were other methods adopted to prepare the report. This report has not intended to belittle or extol any media but made endeavour to touch upon pressing issues surrounding Nepali media and journalists. A broader rigorous study is warranted to ensure exact data on the journalists impacted by the crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Global threat of coronavirus also showed its presence in Nepal in January 2020 with a person testing positive for the first time. Second and third cases were reported in March, prompting the state to impose nationwide lockdown on March 24. The unprecedented health crisis created such horrible stage that all other activities had to be halted to contain it. With the media reports on foreign countries about the COVID-19 fatality and its gradual expansion across the globe, the Nepali media sector was already gripped by fear. As the enforcement of nationwide lockdown was announced on March 24, the ultimate measure to contain the spread of the deadly coronavirus, it not only intensified the fear among journalists and media workers but also led to complete halt on media activities. From the disturbance on regular movement of working journalists to circulation of newspapers, the print stopped publishing at least for some weeks, and radios and television curtailed programme production and limited themselves to news bulletins. Most importantly, the lockdown halted all economic activities, leading businesses to cut advertising costs. Advertisement is the lifeblood of the media. The result: Nepal's otherwise vibrant media industry that employs thousands of people nationwide failed to cope with the crisis and chose a hostile option for survival by minimising its presence and laying off the workforce.

This is an assessment report with COVID-19 on the setting. In view of the unfolding situation, the Freedom Forum- an organization crusading for freedom of expression and the press undertook this assessment to take stock of the media situation across the country. As the organization closely monitoring the situation of freedom of expression and media freedom in the country in a systematic way, Freedom Forum with its nationwide network took the initiative to assess the impact of the pandemic in Nepali media which in one way or another has bearing on the exercise of these fundamental freedoms. Several people - FF representatives in each Province and in the Kathmandu Valley, active journalists, media educators and researchers, newspaper publishers and media managing directors were the key respondents. Efforts are made to gather information from across the country- how the journalists and media persons suffered in the midst of ongoing crisis. In a way, this report also tries to 'document' the quality and quantity of the suffering. The assessment report has tried to touch upon various issues surrounding the media industry and journalism profession from the point of view of financial hardship to projection of how a diminished media presence dents democratic system. It is neither fully qualitative nor

quantitative report, but the mixed one. While sharing their stories and experience various persons expressed not only their personal concerns and anxieties brought by the financial hardship and professional crisis but also worried about its impact on the system when the watchdog role of media suffers, and how crisis is taken as an excuse to suppress the rights of media persons and journalists.

The assessment report makes observations, projections and recommendations on the pressing issues of Nepali media in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

The report covers the period between March 24 and July 24, 2020. Limitation is that this is a baseline study, basically to assess the early “pressure points” of journalism in the midst of COVID-19 and covers a relatively short period. A detailed and broadly consultative study should be undertaken in the months ahead to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the media (print, digital and electronic) and recommend ways to redress by ascertaining exact number of media workers and journalists.

OBJECTIVES

The major objectives of the study are:

- To assess economic impacts of Covid-19 on the national and mofussil media.
- To attain deeper understanding of the professional and financial security of journalists during Covid-19 crisis
- To prepare a concrete document with recommendations for policy makers and stakeholders
- To analyse whether the COVID-19 crisis has been used as an occasion to suppress the media

PRESENT CONTEXT

Coronavirus emerged as an unprecedented health crisis towards the end of 2019, slowly spreading around the world and causing hundreds of thousands of deaths globally. Detected first in Wuhan, China, and gradually spread to other continents, it has impacted national and international economies badly. As the economic activities declined sharply, unemployment has emerged as a huge threat to survival. Nepal could not, and cannot, remain unaffected by this pandemic. Social and political affairs in Nepal witnessed gradual effects. Saving human lives became first priority leaving aside other business. In this context, media industry employing thousands of people could not tolerate the effects, instead, minimized the presence in order to cope with the adversity. It had to suffer the tragedy, resulting in massive retrenchment of workforce with curtailment of service. The print, electronic and internet based media were closed, some partially, others “for the time being”. Media houses faced tough time to pay working journalists after their revenue collection nosedived.

Nepal recorded first case of COVID-19 in January, and the second and third in March. With no medicine to prevent and control the virus till date, there was no better option than social distancing to contain the spread. The government therefore announced nationwide lockdown on March 24. The country remains effectively under lockdown ever since. The lockdown hugely limited journalists' movement, which had direct impact on reduced coverage of issues of the day. All activities relating to news production and dissemination/distribution have remained disrupted. With shrunken economic and development activities, media advertising declined sharply. Small media outlets, many of them operating from the mofussil, shut their shutters or stopped their service. Closure of service increased gradually to the media run from Kathmandu. As the management of media economy became an arduous job, the print media completely shut down the print service, reducing to online service, which left hundreds of media persons (journalists and workers) in quandary and confusion all of a sudden. It was reported since early days of coronavirus that journalists and workers even in the “big” media houses were asked or advised to stay on forced leave citing shrinking resources, mainly – revenue generation from the advertisement. Media advertising declined to as low as 30 percent in the pandemic.¹ After sheer difference with the management in the crisis, scores of experienced journalists, including editors of top-notch dailies, left the media while many remained unpaid for long time. Many mainstream media still remain closed while others have “scaled down” their operations in the hope that they will be able to bounce back slowly.

¹ <https://www.himalkhabar.com/news/115238>

As 'saving life first' was/is the top-priority, reporters too had to change their traditional mode of reporting and started working from home, depending more on technology for communication. In addition to telephonic conversation, they began attending and organizing Zoom meetings, and extensively used the social networking platforms to keep in touch with their news sources and to update themselves about developments in their reporting beats.

Cautionary restrictions of physical movements of reporters and decline in media presence resulted in deprivation of news and verified information. On the other hand, corruption and financial embezzlement grew alarmingly, taking advantage of the relative absence of the public watchdog – the media. Despite the lockdown imposed to contain coronavirus, some media continued reporting, thereby exposing corruption and financial irregularities, administrative malfeasance and gross political mismanagement. At a time when some journalists out of the federal capital even thought of job hopping, the courage and continuity of the profession playing the watchdog role of many media persons is unforgettable. In the course of discharging duty in the face of hostile situation, more than half dozen journalists got infected with coronavirus. Till the completion of this report, they are said to have recovered well.

Press freedom violations continued unabated during this period. FF recorded a total of 52 cases of press freedom violations in these four months from March 24 to July 24. Intimidation of journalists in the name of spreading fake news was evident. Without adequate and valid study, the internet based media were blocked by the media content regulatory body.² This pandemic served public offices with an opportunity to take law in their hands to suppress the media arbitrarily. Discrediting and discouraging media by the top executive is 'new normal'. Blatant surveillance in digital media is another worrying trend recorded during this period. Even the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) showed serious concern over the deteriorating freedom of expression situation.

The health crisis causing deadly effects on economy, society and politics witnessed a flood and flurry of information which undoubtedly kept people in panic. The media consumers bewildered which particular information was true and which not. As saving one's life became first priority, everyone just rushed to consume the information irrespective of its veracity. Journalists' role on spreading credible information grew more as the fast flow of false information swayed the public amid the COV-

² <http://freedomforum.org.np/ff-condemns-press-councils-decision-to-shutdown-online-news-portals/>

ID-19 pandemic. In the later phase of this report period (June), the problems of those entering Nepal via the vast stretch of southern border featured significantly in the media.

With the passage of time, 'quarantine', 'isolation', 'RDT', 'PCR', 'testing kits' were some terms that featured massively in the media coverage as the country saw increase in the infection rate. Till July 24, 18,374 people were tested positive for the coronavirus, while forty-four persons lost their lives to COVID-19. This report focusing on the media status in the period from March 24 to July 24 is an account of Nepali media and journalists facing horrible time during the COVID-19 pandemic. It vividly states the observation made during this period. The national report integrates the information and data gathered from eight reports prepared by the FF representatives.

As per the latest update of media outlets at the Press Council Nepal, the number of media before COVID-19 are: Print (912); FM Radio (750); TV (100 cable + iptv); and 2,149 online news portals.

NEPALI MEDIA

Brief History

The Nepali media during the party-less panchayat system before 1990 engaged in 'mission journalism' largely divided into two factions - one for the democracy and another for protection and continuation of the status quo under a party-less Panchayat system. The state-owned media limited itself to a government mouthpiece. The country saw the emergence of private media after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. The pro-democracy media weeklies, which championed the cause of multiparty system and liberal politics, made tremendous contribution to influence public opinion in favour of multiparty democracy. Their role in promoting democracy only augmented post-1990. Liberal political and economic system paved the way for media-friendly laws to serve the public interest. It also resulted in gradual expansion of the independent media from 1990 to 2005 which kept a close eye on political activities, election, government system, parliamentary functions and local development. The media role was significant to hold public agencies to account.

However, it was bitter that Nepal's democracy was derailed and development delayed with the Maoist insurgency that had also badly impacted the country politics. Media could not escape the effects of the national tragedy. In course of the armed insurgency launched by the Maoist party from 1996 to 2006, as many as 23 journalists were killed and some were 'disappeared'. Although no study has recorded exact number of journalists losing and hopping jobs due to the armed insurgency, some 300 to 400 journalists might have quit the profession. The armed insurgency led by the Maoists was a severe scourge and journalists were taken under control, abducted and killed by the Maoist party and the state security forces. The decade long insurgency can be remembered as a 'holocaust' of Nepali journalists and media industry that had begun thriving after the restoration of democracy in 1990.

Another callous moment for Nepali media was the 2015 Earthquake in which a reporter with the Gorkhapatra daily, Suman Bamjan, lost life. With the damage of physical infrastructure, the devastating earthquake caused huge loss of media properties, thereby disrupting goods and services. The print media turned to cutting down the number of pages at that time also. A study carried out by Freedom Forum 'Media in Disaster, 2015'³ found that total damage caused to the entire media in eight districts which suffered worst in earthquake amounted to NPR 477 million.

³ <http://freedomforum.org.np/download/nepali-media-in-disaster-assessing-the-aftermath/?wpdmdl=1793&refresh=5f2a8718b44241596622616>

With the spurt of media especially after the second *janaandolan* of April 2005, the concept and practice of diverse media and media pluralism grew alarmingly in Nepal. The expansion of internet encouraged the operation of internet-based media. Even the mainstream print and audio media run web versions, which function semi-independently.

A total of 2,149 online news portals have been registered so far with the Press Council Nepal, a media content regulatory body appointed by the government.

PROVINCE REPORTS

BAGMATI PROVINCE

The Bagmati Province, which is a home to the federal capital, Kathmandu, has huge concentration of media and journalists. According to the Office of the Communication Registrar, the Bagmati Province accounts for 66 % of the country's total print media. Likewise, three quarters of the online media, 83% of television networks, and 36% FM radios are concentrated in this province. According to the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the federal capital of Kathmandu alone boasts of a membership base of 6,231 journalists, while the number of active journalists in Bagmati Province can be placed around 4,000. It is estimated that 40 percent of active journalists were rendered jobless due to COVID-19 lockdown. Similarly, 65% media workers lost their jobs while 40% journalists have been "asked to" take unpaid leave. More than 60 % journalists did not get paid, and have still not been paid months of full salaries.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

The COVID-19 resulted in sharp decline in advertisement revenues subsequently causing financial crisis among both media owners and journalists. Almost all national daily newspapers decided to retrench journalists and staffers with the prolonged lockdown and economic crisis plaguing the major advertisers, including the industrial and corporate sector. The pandemic has hit the print media the most. All weekly newspapers and tabloids were forced to suspend their publication for an uncertain period after the lockdown affecting operation of printing presses, distribution of newspapers and mobilization of journalists and other staff members. Circulation of the newspaper was badly affected by the lockdown. Various newspapers used to send papers outside the Kathmandu Valley via flights. Following suspension of all domestic and international flights publishers failed to send the newspaper out of the federal capital. Shortage of raw materials including newsprint and newsprint plates also forced the print media to reduce pages and suspend publication of their print editions.

According to Press Council Nepal, the media content regulatory body, 1,205 weekly newspapers are registered in three districts of Kathmandu Valley. Similarly, 196 daily newspapers and 247 fortnightly magazines are published from the capital valley. Although most of the

media are reeling under financial crisis for sustainability, a media online news portal- www.aayomail.com – was launched on June 24.

Amid insecurity of job, salary delay or salary cut-off, journalists exposed some irregularities and mismanagement during the pandemic. Despite it all, the media continued to expose financial irregularities in the procurement of medical equipment from China while awarding the procurement contract to a controversial firm, known as, the Omni Group.

Newspaper

Within 90 days since clamping the lockdown, the Kantipur Media Group (KMG), Nepal's largest and most successful media conglomerate decided to fold up three of its prominent vernacular publications - 'Nepal', an influential weekly newsmagazine known for many ground-breaking and in-depth stories; 'Saptahik', another popular weekly tabloid mainly covering arts, entertainment and the silver screen; and 'Naari', women's leading monthly social magazine. The decision has thrown some 40 journalists and dozens of other non-editorial staffers out of job.

With the enforcement of lockdown order since March 24, almost all newspapers went eight-pages from regular 16 to 24 pages. Kantipur – undisputedly Nepal's most influential and largest selling vernacular daily – and its sister publication, The Kathmandu Post, suspended publications for 10 days after the first week of lockdown. But, KMG resumed publication of both the newspapers cutting the number of pages down to eight. Journalists from those publications shared that the publication asked more than 40 journalists to stay on 'forced leave', paying just basic salaries for the recent months. Out of 40 journalists, 9 of them moved to various advocacy groups as the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), complaining of being displaced from their job and not getting salary since the lockdown.

Largest selling English daily The Himalayan Times suspended its publication two days before the lockdown (March 22). It has forced a hundred editorial staff to negotiate a flat 50 percent salary cut since the lockdown. Thirty of its Kathmandu-based fleet of 65 journalists were asked to stay on partially paid leave. Journalists remain unpaid for the past five months. Among those who resigned fighting the management over unpaid salaries included its deputy editor and some 10 reporters. Even those working for the daily's E-paper and some of those putting in additional hours to keep the daily's online portal running, remain unpaid.

Present crisis facing the Nepali journalists is largely because of the practice of 'vulture capitalism' by the corporate media- they have investment in various other sectors and did not bring back that money to media to survive it in crisis. They do not want to protect journalists, but are trying to appease the government and take further benefit. In the Kathmandu Valley alone, where there is around 50 percent of entire media, more than 30 percent journalists are laid off. As the journalists were/are getting laid off day by day, the media are losing the journalists who question government's misdeed and irregularities. It means the retrenchment will undoubtedly result in toothless journalism. Similarly, it is right time to intensify the demand of investigation on corporate media's property. But the government must not see corporate media and small media from the same lens. Government move is essential to bring back the corporate media's investment in other sectors to the ailing media industry and rescue it in the wake of crisis and at the same time introduce relief package to the small media. I think with this global crisis, even the corporate media would not revive print media but augment digital presence. Similarly, the journalists laid off from several media have no other option but to join the bandwagon of digital media.

- Hari Bahadur Thapa, Senior journalist

The Annapurna Post daily cut off salary to journalists and other staff by 50% after April. The journalists are not even given the 50% salary on a regular basis. Hari Bahadur Thapa, Chief Editor of the Annapurna Post, quit the newspaper over a row regarding salary and job cuts of journalists.

Nepal Republic Media, the publisher of two national dailies, also decided to cut salary by 30% after June. The publisher decided to suspend the publication of Republica daily after April-15. Following suspension of newspaper, at least 16 journalists affiliated with the publication have been laid off and remain jobless while some have been transferred to the online portals of the two dailies.

Nepal Samacharpatra daily reduced the salary by 30% to 40% with the enforcement of lockdown while Rajdhani daily has not paid staff salaries since April.

Online

Although, online portal are said to be the easiest medium to be updated remotely, most of the online news portals asked journalists to work from office even during the lockdown. However, journalists without personal vehicle were encouraged to work from home.

Meanwhile, in some online portals, journalists were asked for forced leave. For instance, Nepallive.com and other online portals were among them.

According to Yam Birahi, Central Committee Member of FNJ, the journalists are facing one or the other challenges be it the case of job security or the salary or even discrimination among journalists within the same media houses. He said, "Even the journalists working in the so-called corporate media houses are suffering from salary issues and job losses. Some of the journalists who lost their jobs are even facing serious livelihood problems. The FNJ has received complaints from various journalists working at more than 12 different media houses, demanding FNJ intervention to ensure salary payments and guaranteed job security".

Among them, very few online portals even cut off 50% salary to the journalists. The online portals sustaining from revenue had a difficult time in this period.

The publisher of news portal Nepalnews.com decided to close the online portal permanently due to financial crisis. At least 22 journalists affiliated to the media were rendered jobless post-April. In addition, editor of another news portal Dekhapadi.com resigned over salary payment row with the management after the lockdown.

Television

Even the popular television houses did not pay the journalists citing financial crisis in the wake of lockdown. Journalists working at Avenues, Mountain and News24 televisions complained of not getting salary for three months. In addition, some televisions including Himalayan television asked journalists to stay on leave unless they were asked to report to work. Other than this, some have also transferred journalists to departments the transferred employees never knew even existed, or were ever aware of. Such atrocious moves have only added to mental and physical pressure of the journalists.

FM Radio

In this pandemic, the largest radio network, Ujjyalo, operating from Kathmandu valley has been most affected. After the heavy financial loss, the media organization decided to cut the salary of many journalists by up to 50%.

However, none of the radios was closed despite facing various difficulties for regular operation. They decided to suspend their regular programs with the lockdown.

A media professional tested positive of Covid-19 in the Valley on June 3 while the total cases in the country remained 11,162 until June 25.

Good Practice

Kantipur Television arranged for quarantine for the working journalists who had to visit field for reporting. Every television had made it mandatory for journalists to use mask while working in their office chambers or while on field assignments. However, one of the most popular online news portal, Onlinekhabar.com, arranged a quarantine at the office for those who were assigned for field reporting.

PERSONAL SAFETY AT RISK

Government's press briefings were not properly managed. Some press meets were held utterly disregarding the rules of social distancing. Journalists did not get access to various offices (PMO and Health Ministry) in the wake of COVID-19 lockdown.

Similarly, journalists were forced to expose themselves to the crowds while going for reporting without using PPE and proper safety equipment. The broadcast journalists were also forced to work in the stations without maintaining proper social distancing. Although, some radio stations encouraged journalists to work from home, they had to face various challenges in operating live programs for their media houses with limited technology and other logistical assets.

After a couple of journalists tested COVID positive, various media related organizations arranged for PCR tests for journalists in the Kathmandu Valley. Approximately 200 journalists were tested by the third week of May 2020. None tested positive.

"Nepali media, the print in particular, has suffered the most in this crisis. It is difficult to ascertain exact number of journalists losing jobs, but as per my knowledge, 30 percent of the total journalists have lost jobs or been rendered jobless, unpaid. The COVID-19 pandemic also changes trend, dimension, and shift in the medium of media. Use of technology and multimedia for collection and dissemination of news is an opportunity created by crisis. The crisis further intensified the digital and audio news as the print media subsided. Media merger can be adopted for sustainability with low finance and human resources."

Surya Chandra Basnet, Media Educator and Executive Editor, National News Agency (RSS)

OUT OF KATHMANDU VALLEY

Print

Citing the National New Agency (RSS) reports, The Himalayan Times puts it: "Four daily papers, 13 weeklies and a monthly magazine are published from Chitwan district where there are five local television and 23 FM radio stations and 24 news portals. Most of them are struggling to sustain for lack of advertisement. Director at Kalika FM and TV Kalika, Deepak Poudel, said, "Time has come to pay working journalists and staff by taking loan. There are 32 employees in my media. Although they were paid regularly, they are paid once in two months now. The operating cost of the media is Rs 800,000."⁴

In Dhadhing district, publication of a daily newspaper and several weeklies folded up after they stopped receiving advertisements.

Four dailies and 13 weeklies which remained closed have resumed publication after receiving government advertisements. It is, however, with meagre presence.

It was found that the daily newspapers remained closed in Ramechhap district too.

Madav Neupane of Hetauda Sandesh daily said, "It is not very difficult to publish the newspaper. It is possible to make the medical safety equipment available for the journalists and media reporters. However, major problem is the distribution of newspapers to the stationeries because they are closed and the risk of virus is increasing."

Ramesh Paudel, a journalist from Chitwan, said after the closure of the print media, he has been working from home for radios, online and TVs. He said he has not received any remuneration from the month of January-February. However, FNJ Chairperson in Makwanpur, Hari Humagain said, "After mounting pressure on the media houses, some journalists have started to receive their salaries which they were deprived of for months."

A journalist in Ramechhap said that it was very difficult to secure advertisement for running media in this COVID-19 pandemic.

³ <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/media-face-hard-times-in-chitwan/>

Time for media transparency

Crisis triggered by the pandemic directly affected the output of the media, their mobility and density of issues they raised. Although the work of journalists didn't fully stop in the crisis, operation of the media was hindered much, resulting in delayed payment and non-payment of salaries and entitlements to working journalists. What is quite worrying is that some media houses took advantage of COVID-19 crisis to lay off journalists.

Most of the Nepali media resorted to job and salary cuts and other “austerity measures” that affected journalists, a situation rather rare in the foreign media. It shows lack of professionalism among Nepali media owners. It has also raised concerns whether the media investors in Nepal are fair and ‘qualified’ for operating the media industry.

I don't think the government should provide subsidies and rescue the commercial media sector in the country. It is high time for media houses to be transparent because none of them have explicitly declared financial crisis or declared bankruptcy in the midst of Covid-19.

- Dr Sudhamshu Dahal, Professor of Media Studies, Kathmandu University

PROVINCE-1

The yet-to-be named Province-1 has some 700 active journalists but the number of FNJ members stands at 1,454. The number of print media stands at 102. The province has 132 FM radios; 150 online portals; and 7 televisions. Roughly 50 percent of journalists and some 500 media workers are said to have lost jobs. Nearly 75 percent journalists did not get regular payment. It is guessed that some 30 percent had to stay on unpaid leave. Some 70 percent of media and active journalists are affected due to COVID-19 pandemic in this province.

Print

There are more than 30 daily newspapers in Province-1. Half a dozen of newspapers from Province-3 have also set up their printing presses in different cities of Province-1, including Biratnagar and Itahari.

Four daily newspapers in Biratnagar city collectively decided to postpone their publication and distribution until a favourable environment was restored. Other newspapers in major cities followed suit.

Online Media

Online media remained effective for news dissemination in this province. But when it comes to economic value out of this, it is meagre. Because of this, most of the journalists have not received remuneration for months.

FM Radio

Most of FM radios continued news and dropped other programs. The field based reporting drastically reduced. Number of news bulletins were reduced and limited to morning and evening schedules. Not all of them have received salaries regularly.

Television

There are 4 local televisions based in Itahari. The TV reporters and employees were and are vulnerable to contracting the COVID-19.

Many TV programs were reduced for fear of coronavirus and lack of advertisements, which resulted in low income. TVs also faced difficult time to remunerate their employees because of reduced income sources.

Photo journalists are equally vulnerable due to the risks filed assignments.

No Safety to Journalists

Majority of the media houses were unable to provide safety equipment such as PPE, sanitizer, face masks and surgical/disposable gloves to their reporters and staff members. Most of them have not been provided their remuneration on time, either.

The Mismanagement of COVID-19

When 12 persons infected were identified in Udayapur District, Triyuga municipality-3, Bhulke, the fear of the COVID-19 spread became evident. Demand was raised to expand PCR tests and protect reporters deployed in the hospitals of Udayapur and Biratnagar. A TV journalist reporting from Udayapur tested positive for coronavirus when the reporter in question went for PCR test.

Reports disclosed gradually that there was lack of test kits, proper quarantine facilities and mismanagement on disease prevention fund.

Many criticized the unfair distribution of money (from the fund established to prevent the spread of coronavirus) to the media houses which should have been provided to the frontline journalists instead.

More than half a dozen journalists in Morang were prevented from covering the news about the handover of the health equipment to the District Disaster Management Committee. Photos captured during the handover event were ordered to be deleted.

Worried, yet hopeful

Since the enforcement of nationwide lockdown, we have stopped publishing the newspaper. It continued till May 29. Although we resumed it, it is run in less strength. The time is full of uncertainty to all - media owners, media workers and working journalists. As many as seven journalists have tested positive for COVID-19 in the province, which has further panicked fellow journalists. We managed our payment with profit made previously. As the local media are small, we can be hopeful that we gain support from local community. I'm equally worried and hopeful because the crisis has hit all professions, in all countries. I don't think the online media will emerge vibrantly after COVID-19 crisis because people have not trusted them yet. The journalists in print media won't migrate to online media so quickly. Media organizations like FNJ provided some assistance as safety materials in the beginning.

Bandhu Pokhrel, Managing Director, Udghosh daily

PROVINCE-2

In Province-2, also yet-to-be named, there are 400 active journalists but the number of FNJ members stands at 842. The number of print media (dailies and weeklies) stands at 275. There are 71 FM Radios, 70 online news portals, and 4 television networks. Among the active journalists, 60 percent journalists and 80 percent media workers have lost jobs. Similarly, 40 percent journalists were asked to stay on forced leave and 30 percent journalists did not get their full salaries. Most of the journalists (70%) were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown.

All weeklies and major dailies were closed. FM radios cut down on their programs. Half a dozen journalists contracted coronavirus. They however recovered well. Small media suffered worst, while those having good financial status before the pandemic used COVID-19

as an excuse to not pay working journalists. Neither local level nor did the provincial and federal governments provide any relief or support to the media.

Print

Almost all weekly newspapers were closed. Daily newspapers including Janakpur Today, Daily Express, Pratik daily were also folded up. The Daily Express resorted to cut down the print copies from 5,000 to 300.

FM Radio

Janakpur-based FM radio like Janaki FM, Radio Today, Janaknandani FM, Radio Janakpur and others had to curtail regular program hours and took some programmes off air. Siraha based FM like Salhesh, Muskan FM, Dhadkan FM also cut down their programs.

Half a dozen journalists tested positive for the coronavirus and said they were disappointed with the mismanagement of the quarantine center.

Editor of the Mithilanchal FM, Prabin Shah, said, "There is still dilemma whether to continue the work or quit it for lack of safety equipment. Media with small investments are hit hard by the pandemic."

According to Ritesh Tripathi, Nagarik daily's Birgunj-based reporter, since the majority of media in Province-2 are small operations, they have not been able to manage the safety equipment for journalists and other workers. On the other hand, the media outlets that registered good income in the past years have however used COVID-19 as an excuse to not pay working journalists, he added. In this crisis, neither local level, nor the provincial nor the federal government provided any relief, or support, to the media. Journalists had no option but to work despite not having safety materials. It resulted in sheer hindrance to regular news reporting and dissemination. As most of the media in Province-2 are of small investments, they also failed to ensure health and safety materials for the working journalists and employees.

With the nationwide lockdown imposed in the wake of the spread of coronavirus on March 24, journalists started coming under family pressure to not step out of home. However, they continued reporting news and informing the public despite the crisis. Although journalists were provided press passes by the government, they faced huge difficulty in movement for regular reporting. I think print media suffered the most in the lockdown. Initially, almost all newspapers shut down publications with the enforcement of lockdown, which later resumed but with decreased coverage. The lockdown caused a decline in the number of readers. They also faced huge difficulty in delivering newspapers to their regular subscribers and newsstands.

Brij Kumar Yadav, Editor of popular daily in the province, Janakpur Today

GANDAKI PROVINCE

Of FNJ's 974 members, some 440 journalists are actively working in the Gandaki Province. There are 28 print media, 100 FM radios, 93 online portals, and 15 television channels. Nearly 60 of the active journalists and 100 media persons have lost job. About the same number were forced to take unpaid leave. An estimated 180 journalists have not received their regular salaries since the lockdown. Due to COVID-19 lockdown, more than 50 percent journalists were affected in the Province.

Print

Ten out of 28 daily newspapers continued publications but irregularly, while 2- Lamjung's Lumjung Darpan daily and Myagdi's Rikhar daily continued publication even during lockdown.

56 weekly newspapers shut down their publications. 222 people associated with the dailies and 116 others with the weeklies became jobless. Some daily newspapers have gone online. Others, despite being published, are not paying remuneration to journalists and non-editorial staff.

FM Radios

Some 100 FM radios are in operation and have 942 staff members on the roll. Of which, 90% remain unpaid.

Chief Executive of Radio Bahari, Ramesh Paudel, said, "The situation will soon result in huge financial crisis in the industry. Collection of the money from the market is difficult, most of the media people will start losing jobs."

Television

15 TVs in operation employ 142 employees. Photographers and videographers associated with these television channels were vulnerable to the contagion.

Online

There are 93 online portals with 143 employees. Editor at pokharanews.com, Ganesh Baral, said, "The viewership of the online media has increased by 30% as compared to viewership of the past."

90% out of 1,658 media person in this province have not received their wages. They are compelled to report wearing the face masks, which are the only protective gears.

Executive of Adarsha Samaj daily published from Pokhara, Krishna Prasad Baskota, said he is unable to pay his employees. He said he started producing an e-paper from May 15 because of lack of working hands.



A health worker taking nasal swab from a journalist to test for corona-virus in Kathmandu. (Photo Credit: AFP).

More than 60% journalists on unpaid leave, 35 plus jobless and face a bleak future

Since the lockdown imposed by the government to contain the coronavirus on March 24, we stopped publishing the newspaper till May 10. We stopped publishing because of the fear of contracting the deadly coronavirus. It was/is indeed a huge threat, and the general people are panicky. Lockdown also created hassles to deliver the newspapers. Since May 10, we resumed publishing but on a lower scale - cutting down the number of pages to four from eight and there is just a meagre advertisement. The closure in economic and educational activities led to 80 percent decline in regular flow of advertisement. March, April and May (till 15) are major advertising months for schools and colleges. The incomes of these months practically shouldered expenditures round the year. But, we got no advertisement revenues this time around. With the closure of media, it obviously led to financial crisis. Although the print is resumed, we've requested five journalists to stay on unpaid leave, because we have no option at all. Among 45 newspaper vendors, only 12 are in service. Even those working since the resumption of the daily have not taken salary. I think more than 60% journalists are on unpaid leave in Gandaki Province. The stringers and reporters of the national media have more to worry about as they have not been paid for months. Media outlets, otherwise running well, have not been able to pay even 50 percent salaries. As many as 35 journalists have lost jobs. Even if the coronavirus subsides, it may take long time for the media to return to the pre-lockdown days. How can a media with Rs 1.2 million operation cost in a month recover soon while it is in loss for months? Although it is said online media is easy to run with few human resources, they have not earned public trust yet, so there is just a little chance that the online media will be vibrant in the days. For radios, TV channels and print media too, there is no environment for getting advertisement without total recovery of economic activities. Coming days will be more challenging for journalists to run families. However, a positive note was that the provincial government mentioned that it would distribute public advertisement on its own to media citing the crisis they are facing. It was mentioned after journalists piled up pressure and asked for relief amount.

Bharat Koirala, Media Educator and Executive Editor, Samadhan daily

PROVINCE 5

In Province-5, there are some 1,470 active journalists though 1,633 persons are the FNJ members. It has 95 print media, 107 FM radio, 150 online media, and 14 televisions. Similarly, some 40 to 50 percent of active journalists lost their job, while the number of media workers losing job may stand around 60 percent. Fifteen percent journalists had to stay on unpaid leave and some 65 to 75 percent journalists did not get the full salary. Nearly 80 percent of the active journalists were affected in the province due to COVID-19 lockdown. After a month of fear caused by COVID 19 pandemic, most of the media started publication with journalists returning to work. In this province, seven journalists tested positive for COVID-19 but they finally returned to work after recovery. Despite fear of COVID-19, most of the media houses resumed their publication after a month. Good practice was that most radios and television channels provided accommodation to journalists, thereby saving journalists from growing threats of coronavirus and continuing timely dissemination of news.

Print media

In Province-5, among 39 daily newspapers and 56 weeklies, only few were closed owing to the pandemic. Despite the fear of COVID-19, most of the media houses resumed their publication after a month. But, they are facing huge financial crisis, mainly due to the lack of advertisements. Most of the media houses are neither able to pay house rents nor are they able to provide remuneration to their journalists. The media organisations have neither been able to collect the revenues nor able to deliver copies of their publication to their subscribers and regular clients. Some of those owning their own office vehicles distributed their publication themselves while, most curtailed circulation. City editions of Kathmandu-based newspapers also limited their circulation and distribution to the core city areas of Butwal, Dang, Nepalgunj and the nearby highway towns.

FM Radio and Television

107 Fm radios and 17 televisions working from the province were badly affected due to COVID-19 lockdown but did not stop broadcasting. Good practice was that many of these media houses provided accommodation to the journalists, thereby protecting journalists from the threat of coronavirus and, at the same time, keeping media operations intact. However, those working in television were more vulnerable for they had to do the field reporting. These media faced severe financial crisis due to the lack of advertisement, resulting in difficulty in regular payment to working journalists.

Online media

Online media emerged as major sources of news and information during the lockdown. Approximately 150 online media are in operation in this province. While online media worked as an effective source of information to the general public, there seemed an unhealthy competition leading to the spread of fake news. Fake news has become a real, serious challenge facing the digital platforms.

Good Practice

District chapters of FNJ insured journalists against COVID-19 and also organised tests for journalists in Kapilbastu, Dang, Pyuthan, Banke and Rupandehi districts with Rapid Diagnostic Test (RDT) and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test for COVID 19. Local authorities including Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law also allocated budget for media in addition to providing insurance to media persons.

"We won't let media die"

We are concerned about the health and physical as well as social security of the journalists working in the frontline. We have been discussing as to how the media houses and journalists could be assisted for their survival. The province government arranged for insurance to the working journalists in the wake of COVID-19 crisis, distributed safety materials to them, allocated budget as relief amount to the media houses so that they could continue their publication. Even the private sector was urged to support the media. At this difficult time, we are aware that the government and media should work in coordination. Support to media is our responsibility. We are also preparing to bring programs for financial sustainability of the media.

-Kul Prasad KC, Minister for Law and Internal Affairs

According to FNJ President in Bardiya, Rajendra Dhital, journalists have kept on informing people and government with news and information despite facing such crisis. Journalists faced huge risk while reporting from the ground without safety gears. They are equally under pressure from family members to quit job in the wake of pandemic. Protection and support to journalists in crisis is also a responsibility of the State. Although FNJ provided some safety materials and insurance to the working journalists, no noticeable help has been provided yet.

No local journalists complained of non-payment

After the lockdown was relaxed to some extent, the media sector, except few newspapers, was the first to resume services in this province. I hope most of the journalists here were paid even during lockdown. I had requested journalists to inform me or FNJ if anyone was unpaid, but I did not receive any complaint. But district based reporters of Kathmandu-based media are facing more crisis these days. District reporters from Kantipur, Nagarik, Naya Patrika and Annapurna Post dailies have informed me about their problems, such as, irregular payment for their services and an increasing practice of putting the news on hold because they often only end up filing the news on Health ministry's press briefings any way. They lack proper gears to venture out on reporting assignments.

-Bipul Pokhrel, Vice-President, FNJ Central Committee

KARNALI PROVINCE

In Karnali Province, there are some 300 active journalists and 804 FNJ members. There are 44 print media publications (20 dailies and 24 weeklies), 44 FM radios, 40 online news portals and two televisions. Due to COVID-19 lockdown, 20 journalists and 50 media workers lost jobs. Ten journalists stayed on unpaid leave. Some 100 journalists have not been paid their regular salaries since months. More than 80 per cent active journalists were badly affected by the lockdown.

Problems faced by journalists during the lockdown period are, as follows: a) work without remuneration, b) inability to pay the office rent c) job loss, and d) family pressure to quit media profession. As per the data at Federation of Nepal Journalists Karnali Province, there are 20 daily newspapers, 24 weeklies and 40 online news portals. Of them, radios and online media remained active in disseminating news. For lack of internet access at journalists' homes, many journalists said they did not have the internet connection at home and had difficulties working online from home. Press freedom violations continued unabated despite the lockdown.

FM Radio

All 44 FM radios out of 150 media outlets are/were active in the province.

Print

All 20 daily newspapers and 24 weeklies were shut down. Siddha Darsan daily and Sajha Bisanuni daily have managed to publish once in a while recently.

Online

Although online media are most efficient media, some news portals spread misinformation in their ostensible attempts to break the news first.

Press Freedom Violation

Incidents of highhandedness and misbehaviour by the police increased drastically. Political parties, mainly the district chapters of the ruling Nepal Communist Party, were also found engaged in threatening and intimidating journalists for their news coverage. Hence, journalists said, there is no safe environment to work professionally, without fear. At least 8 incidents of press freedom violations were recorded in the three months since the enforcement of lockdown on March 24.

Mountain TV's correspondent Biswa Kumar faced obstructions while shooting raw footage of Nepali migrants returning home from India. The returning migrants were allowed to head back home without testing for COVID-19.

Govinda KC from Nagarik daily was threatened after he wrote "negative news" about relief distribution mismanagement in Narayan Municipality of Dailekh.

News reader Nanda Kathayat was beaten while he was on his way to Jagaran FM for the morning news.

The newspaper distributor of Kantipur daily was also beaten up during this time.

A journalist was threatened for writing about the land encroachment done by a Karnali province lawmaker.

Media Watch

The media outlets were however able to report and bring out the mismanagement of the quarantine centers, prompting protests from those residing in the quarantine facilities. There were only a few separate isolation chambers and, after the nearby school used for isolation was packed, four RDT positive youths had to be kept in buffalo sheds. This sparked protest and criticism in online platforms.

Time to reconsider the role of big media

Almost all print editions were closed down for three months once the lockdown was imposed nationwide. The print suffered the worst as compared to other media outlets. The lockdown panicked journalists and fear gripped us. Although FM radios continued to go on air, they curtailed programmes and air time. Market closure led to a massive decline in advertisement. Of close to 400 active journalists in Karnali Province, more than 100 are facing hard times. They became jobless. Most of them are from the print. The local media here curtailed salary by up to 70 per cent. The online media did not see any noticeable adversity, though. The “national media” also asked their stringers in written to stay on unpaid leave. By forcing the reporters to stay on unpaid leave, the reporters have effectively been relieved from the job. Except for normal assistance, such as, distribution of safety materials, no sustainable assistance has been extended to the media by any side in this province. The province government could have announced a relief package to the media but refrained from mentioning anything in its annual budget. Journalists' demand for relief and support simply went unheard. I believe that the small media/mofussil media will restore quickly if the spread of coronavirus subsides. Print media has huge public trust and the online media cannot replace the print media, best regarded for its trust and credibility. The COVID-19 crisis has set up the so-called big media based in the country's federal capital, Kathmandu, in very challenging times. What's their role on protection of media and journalists? It is right time to initiate debate on big media's policies and priorities. Time has come to reconsider the relevance of these “national media”. Are they reliable media in terms of saving journalism in times of crisis? These are serious questions to ponder.

- **Kalendra Sejuwal**, senior journalist with two decades experience

SUDURPASCHIM PROVINCE

In this province, there are nearly 1,100 active journalists; 997 of them FNJ members. Similarly, the number of print media stands at 114, FM radio 66, online media 55, and television 2. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, around 55 journalists and some 186 media workers have become jobless. Similarly, 243 journalists had to stay on unpaid leave. As many as 138 journalists did not get salary. Some 70 percent of active journalists were affected by the lockdown. Most of the newspapers stopped their regular publication since the beginning of the nationwide lockdown. In Kailali district, only two newspapers remained in operation. FM radios were on and off air. With reduced advertisements, the radio and newspapers reduced their news coverage. A similar fate awaited the online media in this province.

Bibash Chaudhary, who is associated with the Radio Manko Majheri in Kailali district, said although lockdown increased the number of radio listeners, the radio incomes decreased drastically. "Our FM has bank loans. It is getting difficult for us to pay back the bank instalments, and manage regular cash flow to pay staff salaries and support our own families financially." President and Director at Kailali FM, Navaraj Khanal, complained that there was no support from the provincial government. The government bodies do not share information easily. "We have been unable to fully pay our employees," he lamented. Editor of Sudurpatra Online, Srawan Deuba, said although the online viewership has increased, there is no advertisement. So, there is fund crunch to pay salaries to the employees.

It will take a long time for the media to bounce back

In the Sudur Paschim Province, there are four border points which witnessed tremendous influx of Nepali migrant workers from the neighbouring country. So, those reporting the returning migrants during the lockdown worked under fear. Although the media companies instructed journalists not take risk their lives, those assigned as photographers and videographers had no option but to capture the problems faced by those entering the country. In the beginning there was no safety at all. As economic activities slumped, advertisement market dipped, thereby badly affecting the operation of local media. The advertisement declined to 20 percent even in the FM radio and online media. Even the Province level printing presses of the newspapers run from federal capital were closed. Almost all affiliated to the local media did not get their salaries. Even some journalists reporting for the national level media headquartered in Kathmandu failed to get their salary payments. Although some safety materials, such as, sanitizers, face masks and surgical/disposable gloves were distributed, these were not adequate. It was learnt that the provincial government provided Rs 3.4 million in relief. It was distributed to various radios, dailies and weeklies. It was not however sufficient to revive the media. Although most of the active media have resumed their service, their presence is meagre. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown has directly affected the media entrepreneurs and journalists. It will take long time for them to regain normal financial condition. They appear to be in complete confusion at the moment on whether to stay on in business, and for how long, given the dim prospects of returns. It can safely be stated, post-COVID-19, the future of media and journalists therefore looks absolutely uncertain.

- Chitranga Thapa, senior journalist with 25 year experience in the print media

PRESS FREEDOM VIOLATION

"In Nepal, authorities have used a stringent cyber-crime law to arrest a retired civil servant who was critical of the government including its COVID-19 response. According to press freedom groups, there have been several cases involving detention of journalists while covering COVID-related news, incidents of journalists facing obstruction from authorities, and reports of threats and physical attacks against journalists."

(The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet issued a statement expressing alarm over the decline of free speech in Nepal, on 3 June 2020)⁵

"22 media personnel on duty were arrested while collecting news during the state-enforced lockdown, others were attacked, threatened and insulted."

(National Human Rights Commission, 6 June 2020)⁶

The NHRC also criticized trends and tendencies among the public officials to restrict journalists' access to information, and demanded that proper remuneration be given to working journalists. It regretted the fact that experienced working journalists had started quitting their jobs because of non-payment of regular salaries.

The above statements were made in the wake of increased spate of intimidation on citizens and journalists for exercising freedom of expression in Nepal during the pandemic. These statements made it clear that journalists and common citizens are suppressed merely for exercising freedom of expression. It is a worrying trend that authorities want to take law in their hands arbitrarily in the name of control and management of the situation.

Despite adversity, media has tried to report on irregularities, wrong doings and gross mismanagement by the government agencies as the country fights the pandemic. It is unfortunate that suppression of the media has become a new normal.

One of the most notorious incidents was technological attack on an online news portal, Kathmandupress.com. A news story mentioning the high level involvement in the purchase of faulty medical equipment and safety gears was deleted from the backend of the news portal www.kathmandupress.com on April 1.

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25920&LangID=E>

⁶ <https://theasialive.com/2020/06/06/nhrc-nepal-urges-government-to-respect-freedom-of-press-expression/>

It was a grave technological attack on the popular news portal run from the federal capital, Kathmandu. A software company providing consultancy was learnt to have deleted the news story carried by www.kathmandupress.com from the backend. The Shiran Technologies Pvt. Ltd, on April 1, unlawfully removed the content- 'a story about the corruption on purchase of medical equipment involving the sons of Prime Minister's Chief Advisor and of the Deputy Prime Minister.' The technological company in question is linked with the Prime Minister's chief IT advisor, Asgar Ali.

Similarly, journalist Binu Subedi of Kantipur daily became a victim of cyber harassment for her reporting about the government and political parties' weakness. A group of individuals close to the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) harassed and trolled her spreading wrong message questioning her professional integrity.

"Some individuals have been harassing me via misleading and defamatory posts on micro-blogging site Twitter of late," Subedi said. She reports on the ruling party politics as a political beat reporter. After her series of reporting exposing the government's nexus with interest groups and plights of the migrant labour stranded in the lockdown, various social media accounts started to attack her online.

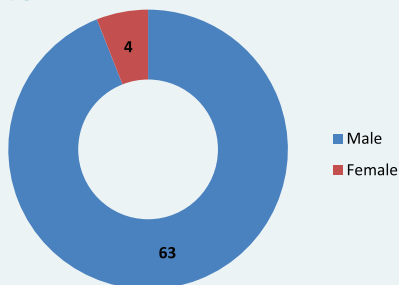
Intimidation to media and journalists continued unabated in the federal capital. Several journalists were taken under control/arrested from across the country for alleged sharing of misinformation.

About the misinformation, the annual World Press Freedom Day Report of last May 3 writes: 'Free press stakeholders and freedom of expression defenders should be together and work in unison to stay away from the 'guided information and misinformation' that is highly likely to come with sheer abuse of state agencies targeting and tarnishing the role of free media in democracy.'⁷

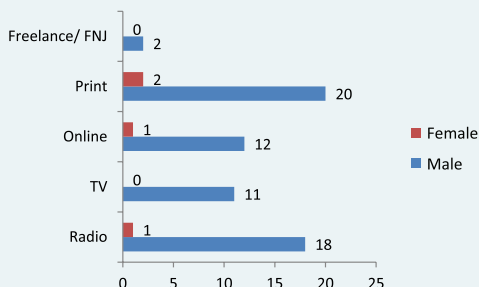
⁷ <http://freedomforum.org.np/download/press-freedom-day-may-3-report-2020/?wpdmdl=4222&refresh=5f40b132354251598075186>

Number of affected male and female journalists in total 52 incidents that took place from March 24 to July 24, 2020.

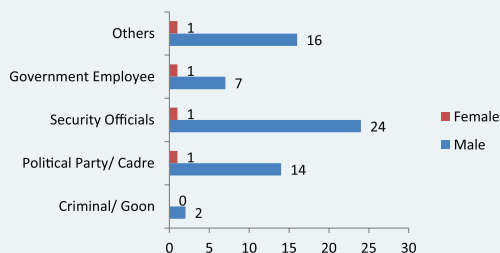
Gender



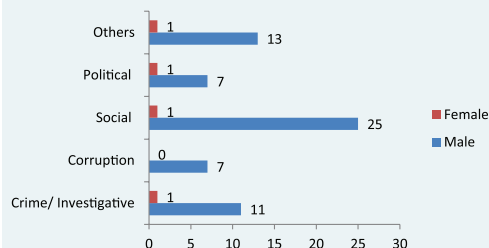
Type of Media



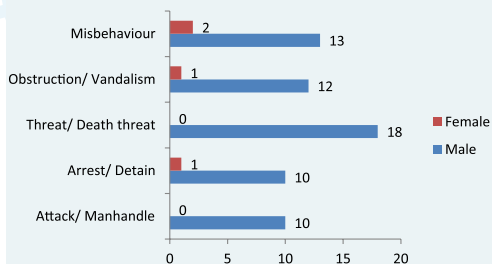
Hostile elements



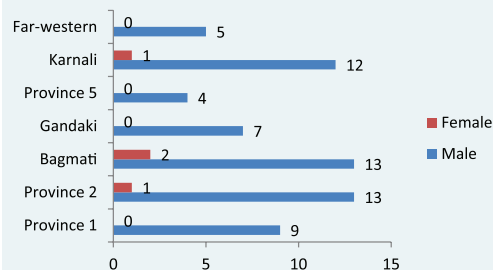
Type of content



Type of Violation



Provinces



ADVERTISEMENT AND MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY

With severe shrinkage of economic activities in the face of crisis, heavy decline in advertisement is natural. As the largest source of income to various media, advertisement had tremendous role on media sustainability. For lack of advertisement, Nepali media evidently suffered the worst. The annual market size of Nepali advertisement is of some Rs 9.50 billion. But the pandemic badly affected this market. The print advertisement declined by nearly 75 percent. Radio adverts went down by 60 percent and TV commercials by 40 percent. Online portals also saw a 30 percent decline. Overall, the fiscal year 2019/20 witnessed at least a 35 percent fall in advertisement. The advertisement market is likely to be affected for nearly eight to nine months with this fiscal year likely to see a drop in advert revenues by 50 percent. Kantipur daily, by far the largest newspaper, is learnt to have lost nearly 80 percent of its advertisement. On the other hand, the government media outlets have only witnessed a 25 percent drop. Most of the media company with highest rate are adversely affected.

The government advertisement accounts for roughly 28 percent of the total media advertisements. Similarly, the media outside the capital city only enjoys a 20 percent advertisement share.

Advertisement revenues declined by up to 80 percent during the lockdown as compared to the normal time. According to our prediction, overall advertisement revenue will decline by 50 percent this fiscal. We hope that the advertisement revenue starts regenerating after the Dashain festival (October) because most of the industries are expected to resume operation around that time. However it is not certain yet whether the media will pick up after the festival. As the advertisement dwindles, it directly impacts the media. At such a situation, the government can provide subsidy for the media from its different sources, like health, education, forestry and state-owned telecom, banks and hydropower plants. Separate advertisement budget to boost the media could be an option in the form of relief.

-Rabindra Rijal, President Advertisement Association of Nepal (AAN)

ASSESSMENT

A. Observation

- After decade-long insurgency and the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, current pandemic has brought about unprecedented crisis in the field of journalism. Media outlets have pulled down their shutters; media persons are forced to quit their jobs; salary payments have been delayed, or not paid; and wages have been reduced. Both small and big media companies in the capital city and mofussil have suffered the worst.
- Media community and journalists have reckoned that the government should make an honest effort to support the media sector to revive.
- Media houses appear determined to continuously and gradually retrench journalists and staff members citing decline in advertisement revenues.
- Media houses lacked resources and failed to prepare crisis management planning to protect journalists.
- The pandemic created opportunities for journalists to build their software skills, enhancing technical knowhow and adapting to the 'work from home' culture.
- COVID-19 pandemic has been taken as an excuse and pretext by the state mechanisms to suppress the citizen's freedom of expression and press freedom.
- Government was reluctant to announce any relief and rescue measures to restore media suffering the crisis. However, the Province-5 government's efforts and commitment to save media is laudable.
- Lack of convincing and noticeable initiatives by the media owners/entrepreneurs has posed a question whether they are concerned about media sustainability and journalists' rights and free speech.
- Big media with hefty income took pandemic as an excuse to retrench working journalists, stop paying them and even moved to close the media outlets. However, while retrenching human resources, no media owners declared or filed for bankruptcy.

- Time has come to whet a frank and open debate on the role of media, media management, media investment and transparency in relation to journalists' rights and press freedom.
- Journalists across the board have become disenchanted for the kind of treatment they have been accorded due mainly to (a) delayed and/or non-payment of salaries, (b) forced leave, (c) arbitrary salary cuts, and (d) unjustified retrenchments. Lay-offs of journalists with decades of experience will have direct bearing on the quality of journalism.

B. Recommendation

- Every media house needs to have in place contingency funds to deal with emergency situations and disasters.
- Government needs to hold broader consultations with stakeholders to help innovate economic activities by maintaining adequate safety measures.
- Concept of media merger and community media can be considered and promoted to sustain the media industry, continue practicing freedom of expression and information and protect democratic values.
- The State should hold broader discussion and bring policy measures in order to revive the media, bringing back journalists to the lost jobs so that democratic values can be promoted. Only vibrant media can expose the corruption and financial irregularities, administrative malfeasance, public misconduct and wrongdoing that jeopardize good governance and the people's right to information.
- The concept of multiple owners of media can be floated for more democratic running of media. Over concentration of media outlets in single hands needs to be discouraged. State needs to turn privately run media houses into public limited companies.
- The media "failings" that have surfaced are a result of gross mismanagement of media organisations by the media owners/ management and their modus operandi has to change in the days to come. The reason: unlike any other profit-making ventures, the media businesses carry unquestioned public trust. A broader consultation with stakeholders may be advisable to promote transparency and accountability in the media organisations.

- A morally weak media cannot promote good journalism, critical to promote good governance, democracy and federalism. Efforts should be made to engage with the media owners to address inherent weaknesses in the media business for the broader cause of journalism.
- Promotion of digital media is advisable. Development of public service media may be encouraged.
- Backup and current knowledge on sectors, including public health, safety and security in newsroom is essential
- It is imperative to look for ways to keep the trained journalists still engaged in the business of covering, or uncovering government corruption, malpractices, social injustice and human rights violations. "Citizen Journalism" could be an option to explore.
- Small initiatives to promote 'not-for-profit journalism' can be planned. Social media platforms can practically be turned into a credible platform for credible alternative journalism.
- This is a baseline study, basically to assess the early "pressure points" of journalism in the midst of COVID-19 and covers a relatively short period. A detailed and broadly consultative study should be undertaken in the months ahead to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the media (print, digital and electronic) and recommend ways to redress them.

C. Projection

- Diverse media and media pluralism could wither, thereby causing severe dent to democratic values and culture in the country.
- Camaraderie among journalists and between media owners and journalists may weaken and further erode professional journalism.
- With extended lockdown in the country and prohibitory orders in various cities across the country already causing huge recession on economic activities, advertisement industry is likely to see an existential crisis, which in return will impact sustainability of the media organisations.
- With withered investigative reporting and non-payment, transfer and low payment to professional journalists, corruption, mismanagement and irregularities will continue unabated.

- The state of declined and weaker presence of private and independent media will be taken undue advantage by the State apparatuses to disseminate information that only suit the interests of the government and certain political parties. It would further deprive people of reliable information and spread misinformation.
- Amidst mounting suffering with no economic relief in sight, the journalists and media owners may be lured and be co-opted by the state.
- The number of working journalists will decrease in response to non-cooperation and assistance from any side, including the concerned media houses, journalists' associations, political parties and the State.
- In the absence of the media's watchdog role, other democratic institutions as academia, civil society, political parties will not only lose the FoE platform but also witness reduced strength.
- Prolonged COVID-19 pandemic will weaken the passion and patience of professional journalists while protracted financial crunch may lead to psychological harm of journalists.

Freedom Forum is an independent, non-governmental and not-for-profit civil society organization working for the cause of social accountability, democracy and human rights focused on press freedom, freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. Incepted in 2005, Freedom Forum has emerged as a prominent national organization in promoting access to information and freedom of expression through dialogue, research, training, public advocacy and campaign and programme implementation. Currently, the organization is working on the issues of public finance management, budget transparency, open data and aid governance, political and parliamentary accountability, freedom of expression online and open government partnership (OGP) based on its on-hand experience and learning.



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