



URGENCY OF
DIGIT  L
SAFETY
TO NEPALI JOURNALISTS



FREEDOM FORUM

"A Nepali CSO (civil society organization) dedicated to democracy, human rights and governance"

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URGENCY OF DIGITAL SAFETY TO NEPALI JOURNALISTS

Nepal has been undergoing digital transformation in the recent years, which is further spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of internet and digital devices is growing- be it for connecting to family, friends or for financial transaction, entertainment and study purpose. According to Nepal Telecommunication Authority's MIS report published in March 2022, total internet penetration has reached 128.65% of the total population out of which, majority (98.42%) comes from mobile broadband.

This data also indicates Nepali society is heading to gradual digitalization process, which is believed to contribute to the country's development. On the other hand, it has also created space for untoward activities- several threats and crimes are being occurred on the online space affecting physical and mental health of users. The Cyber Bureau's report which states cases of cybercrime has increased sharply with increasing internet penetration.

Against this backdrop, Nepali media has flourished in the digital space with over 3,000 online news portals registered at Press Council Nepal, a media regulatory body in Nepal. This also depicts gradual shift of Nepali media and journalists from legacy media to the new internet-based media. With this, visibility and penetration of Nepali media has also increased reaching wider audience. Although this development has opened up new opportunities, it has also faced new threats and challenges in terms of the rights of the working journalists.

Freedom Forum has also recorded several incidents of threats targeted against online media and journalists. Latest annual press freedom report of Freedom Forum states that 40% of the press freedom violations recorded during the year 2021 was targeted against online media.

With this in account, time has come for ensuring journalists' safety on digital spaces. Journalists' personal safety is associated to professional safety.

In order to ensure digital safety to journalists, identification of and skills to counter threats is necessary. Freedom Forum conducted a survey to know about the level of understanding among journalists about digital threats. The finding here has indicated the urgency of digital literacy and digital safety to Nepali journalists. The survey incorporates the views of 100 working journalists representing all seven provinces. Although it brings for the views from journalists, it is a reflection study expected to contribute to the creation of safe digital spaces for every citizen for exercising freedom of expression online/digital platform.

Objectives

The study has been conducted with the following objectives:

- To understand perception of Nepali journalists about digital threat and digital safety,
- To identify nature of threats journalist face on digital space,
- To identify possible ways to mitigate the threats in order to ensure safe on-line space for Nepali journalists.

Limitations

The study was conducted to observe basic understanding and knowledge of journalists about threats on online space. Findings and analysis of this study present brief overview of perceptions of 100 journalists included in the study. As the majority of respondents are the journalists working in online media, the report may not present broader picture of threats existing in the other types of media. The study is largely based on their responses collected through Google form survey.

Anonymity of the respondents was maintained for the study. It is a general perception survey.

Methodology

The study adopts quantitative research method. The primary data for the study was collected through an online survey over Google Form. A structured questionnaire was designed for the study and sent to the target respondents via Google Form links. Respondents for the study were selected using a convenience sampling method. Sample size for the study was 100. The samples represented journalists from seven provinces working at local, province and national level media.

Representatives of Freedom Forum at seven provinces coordinated with the research team to collect primary data from their respective provinces.

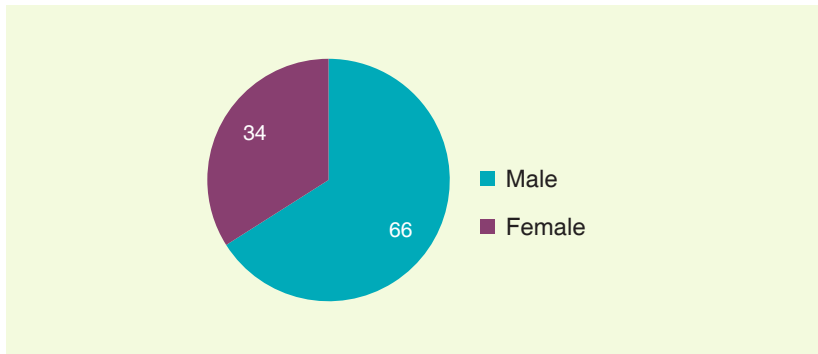
The study was structured in three phases. In the first stage, the questionnaire was prepared, and followed by the second stage- the journalists responded to the questionnaire. In the final stage, the data was analyzed and the report was prepared.

All the questionnaires were submitted online and responses were collected into the automated Google spreadsheet. Then, data received from 100 respondents were extracted onto Microsoft Excel from the spreadsheet. Data obtained were then analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Findings and analysis presented in the report are based upon the pivot table obtained from the MS-Excel, number of respondents and responses as per required.

FINDING

1. Gender

Among the total 100 respondents, 34 percent were female, while the rest (66 percent) were male.



2. Media Wise

Among the total respondents, 64 percent are affiliated to only one media, while the rest 36 percent are associated with multiple media.

Majority of the respondents are associated with online media run in Nepali language (43 percent), followed by daily newspapers (16 percent).

There was only one respondent each from state run television and radio. Similarly, two respondents are from online media of English language. Among the respondents, 12 percent are associated with three media, while one percent are associated with five media at a time.

Analysis: The increasing number of online media represents surge of new media. Even the legacy media are shifting towards internet space largely owing to COVID-19 pandemic. The finding also shows that 36 percent journalists are as-

sociated with more than one media. It indicates whether media in Nepal have suffered low financial sustainability as the journalists are working in more than one media.

Media	Frequency	Percentage
Online Nepali	60	43
Online English	2	1
Private Television	6	4
Govt. Television	1	1
Daily Newspaper	22	16
Weekly Newspaper	8	6
Private News Agency	0	0
Govt. News Agency	8	6
Community Radio	19	14
Commercial Radio	7	5
Govt. Radio	1	1
Independent	4	3
Total	138	100

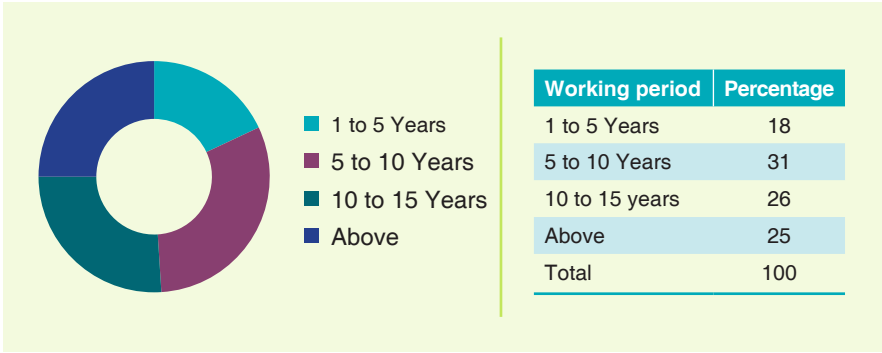
The total number of respondents was 100. Respondents were found to be affiliated to multiple types of media resulting in the media involvement frequency 138 as indicated in the table above.

3. Working Period

The working period of journalists is divided into four categories in this study: early career (1 to 5 years), mid career (5 to 10 years), advance (10 to 15 years), and long term(Above 15 years).

Maximum respondents (31 percent) have working experience of five to ten years. It is followed by 26 percent of respondents having 10 to 15 years experience and 25 percent of respondents have more than 15 years experience. The respondents having experience of less than five years are 18 percent.

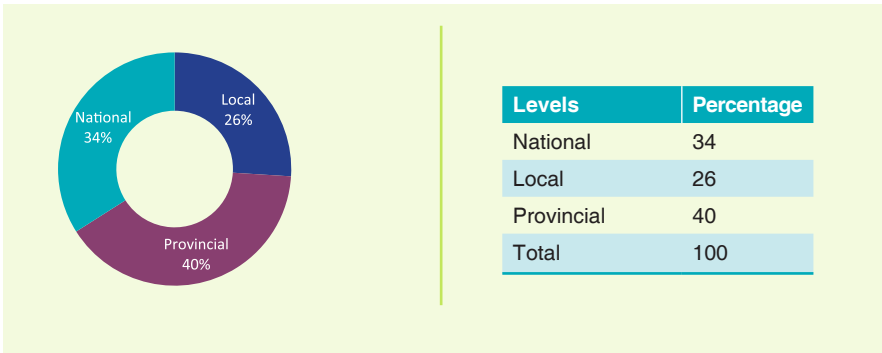
Analysis: Nepali media industry is dominated by mid-career journalists.



4. Media Operation

The majority (40 percent) of respondents belong to media operating at provincial level. Similarly, 34 percent of the respondents are engaged in national media. The respondents from the media operating at the local level are 26 percent.

Analysis: Most of them are operated from province level. Although the local-global dichotomy has blurred in the digital age, our division shows that journalists working in media operated in the province participated more in the survey.

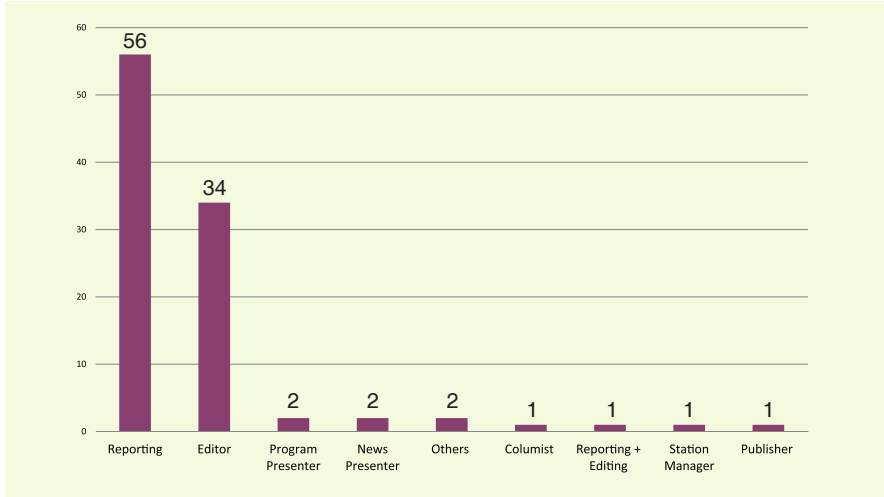


5. Media Responsibility

The respondents of the study hold several journalistic responsibilities as reporting, editing, program presenting, news presenting, column writing, reporting as well as

editing, media managing, publishing and others. Among them, majority of the respondents are engaged as reporters (56 percent) and as editors (34 percent).

One of the respondents was found to perform both the roles of reporting and editing. Similarly, two respondents have roles other than editing and reporting.

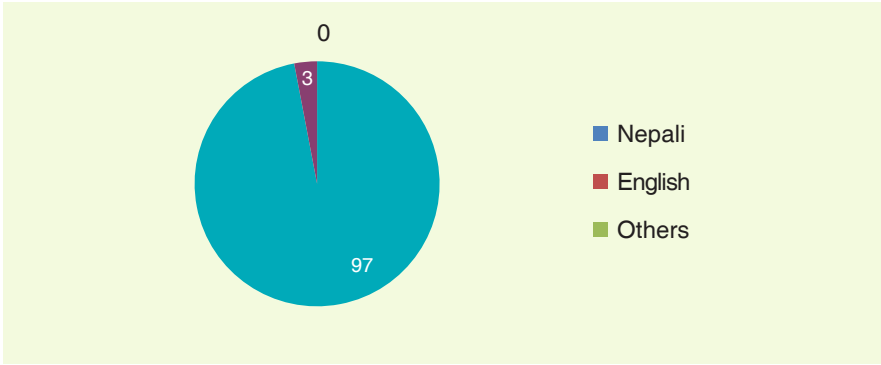


6. Media Language

Media in Nepali language have dominated media landscape. As high as 97 percent of the respondents work in the Nepali language media, while the rest 3 percent are engaged in English media.

No respondents are found practicing journalism in the language other than Nepali and English.

Analysis: In Nepal, people speak around 123 languages. Despite this linguistic diversity, Nepali language media is dominating the landscape. The dominance of a single language in media landscape showed that regional language are in shadow. It might question media pluralism and diversity. Similarly, it indicates that media run in the language other than Nepali are to face struggle to penetrate Nepali audience.



7. Device used for Journalism

Journalists in Nepal use different devices, such as computer, mobile, laptop for their work. Majority of them (51 Percent) use all of these devices. Among the rest, 22 percent of respondents use laptops, 14 percent use computers, and 13 percent use mobiles.

It is positive that most of the journalists have access to digital devices for their work.

Device used for work	Frequency	Percentage
All of the Above	61	51
Computer	17	14
Mobile	15	13
Laptop	27	22
Total	120	100

As some respondents use multiple devices for their work, the total frequency of device used is 120 in the above table.

8. Measures to protect media device

The majority of respondents (63 percent) adopt single measure to protect the devices, while the rest (37 percent) are found to adopt multiple measures.

Strong password is the most preferred measure by journalists (42 percent) to protect their devices. It is followed by not allowing others to use personal device

(23 percent), reliable antivirus (14 percent), and locking files & emails (8 percent).

While, a significant number of respondents (10 percent) has yet not done anything to protect their device. Only 3 percent of the respondents use VPN.

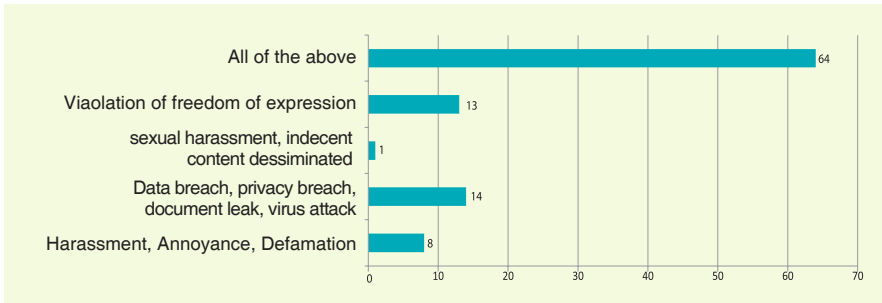
Analyses: The result shows that journalists apply minimum protection measures, like strong password, reliable anti-virus, lock email and file, and not allow others to use their device to prevent digital threats. The safety measures adopted by journalists show their lack of proper awareness about potential digital threats. It is evident indication of inadequate digital literacy. The respondents showed dearth of advance digital safety knowledge, like use of VPN, two-factor authentication, etc. The result also shows that 10 percent of responding journalists have not done anything yet for digital safety. It shows a sheer recklessness towards pressing issue of digital age.

Measures	Frequency	Percentage
Strong Password	69	42
Reliable Antivirus	23	14
Not allow other use personal device	37	23
Use VPN	5	3
Lock files & emails	16	8
Have not done anything	13	10
Total	163	100

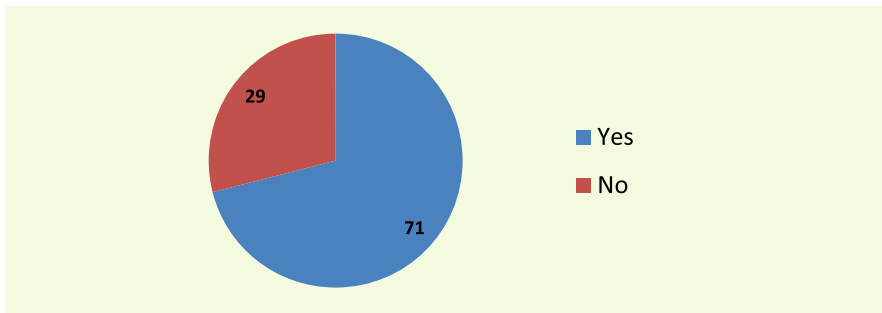
As some respondents employ more than one measures to protect their devices, the total frequency of measures adopted is 163 in the above table.

9. Understanding of Digital Threats

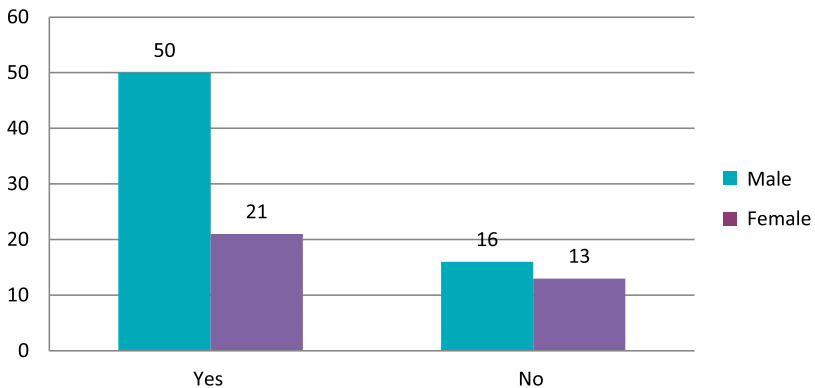
In this section, respondents were asked to describe their understanding on - what is digital threat. The study found that digital threats are understood differently by the respondents. According to 13 percent respondents, it is violation of freedom of expression; 14 percent perceive it as breach of data, privacy, and document leak or virus attack; 8 percent consider it as online harassment, annoyance or defamation, and one percent respondent feel that it is sexual harassment or dissemination of indecent content online. However, majority of the respondents (64 percent) understand it as amalgamation of all of the above.



10. Experience of Digital Threat



Majority (71 percent) of the respondents said that they have experienced digital threat.



Looking into gender wise distribution, 76 percent (50) of male respondents have experienced digital threats in comparison to 47 percent (21) of female respondents.

Analysis: Most of the Nepali journalists have faced digital threats. So, we can say digital threat is a common emerging problem before Nepali journalists.

11. Forms of Digital Threat

Upon the question what forms of digital threat they experienced, 79 percent of respondents chose single options, while 17 chose multiple options.

According to the data, harassment and defamation was faced by 39 percent respondents. Similarly, Legal/Court cases and physical attack (26 percent), sexual harassment (7 percent) and hacking (25 percent respondents) were other most common form of digital threats respectively. Three percent respondents chose others but failed to disclose the form of digital threat.

Forms of Digital Threat	Frequency	Percentage
Harassment & Defamation	45	39
Hacking	29	25
Sexual Harassment	8	7
Legal & physical attack	30	26
Others	3	3
Total	115	100

The total number of responses to this question is 97. As some respondents have experienced more than one form of digital threat, the total frequency of forms of digital threat is 115 in the above table.

Analyses: Harassment & defamation are the most common forms of digital threat to journalists. It reflects the intolerance among people towards critical content. Such mistreatment to journalists imposes self-censorship. Hence, it is high time to find its causes at social level. Data shows that among those choosing- experience of sexual harassment, majority are female. This depicts women are targeted with sexual harassment not only offline but also online in Nepal. Also, significant number of respondents chose hacking which means they need advanced measures of data and device protection.

12. Action taken in response to threat

On the question, what action they took against digital threats they faced, 51 percent chose single option. Similarly, 37 percent chose multiple options. However, 8 percent said they did not take any action on it.

Majority of the respondents (35 percent) said they informed their friends about digital threat, which is followed by 20 percent respondents who informed editor and media house and 16 percent informed FNJ. Interestingly, six journalists also said that they informed Freedom Forum and other civil society organizations about the incident.

Action Taken	Frequency	Percentage
Informed Friends	54	35
Informed Family	10	7
FIR	7	5
FNJ	25	16
Editor & Media House	30	20
Freedom Forum & other CSOs	6	4
NHRC	0	0
DAO & MoHA	6	4
International Organizations	0	0
All of the above	0	0
Did nothing	12	8
Others	3	2
Total	153	100

The total number of responses to this question is 96. As some respondents have taken more than one action on receiving digital threats, the total frequency of forms of digital threat is 153 in the above table.

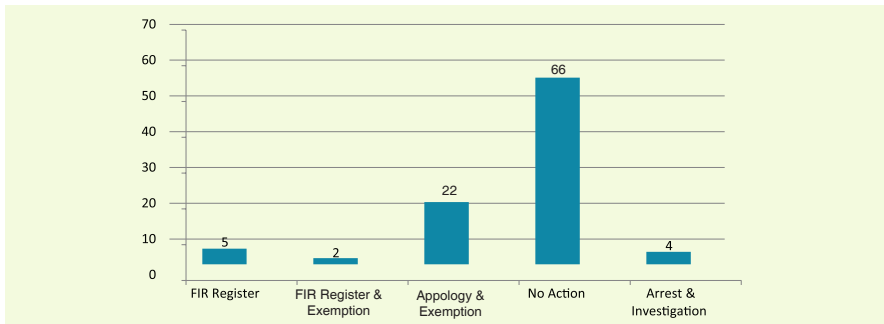
Analyses: Journalists are found most comfortable to reach out to their friends to share the digital threats they faced. According to data, only seven respondents have filed FIR and none said they informed rights defending organization, including the National Human Rights Commission about the digital threats they experienced. It shows either victims have no or limited access to the authority or lack of awareness about existing laws or they may not have trust on them. Such trend perpetuates victimhood and encourages suppression of crime.

This implies the need for concerned agencies to build trust in the identification of digital threat and play active role to mitigate the threats.

The study also shows that 12 respondents took no action against digital threat they encountered. This approach of taking digital threat for granted encourages perpetrators and makes journalist more vulnerable.

13. Response to complaint registration

The majority of respondents (66 percent) said that no complaint was filed against digital threat. Five percent respondents said that complaint was registered by the police. Similarly, 22 percent said they granted exemption to the accused upon their apology. Four percent respondents said that the accused was arrested and investigation done.



Analyses: While 71 percent have experienced digital threat, in 66 percent of complaints no action was taken. It has perpetuated victimhood in Nepali journalists, which fuels crime and affects fair reporting. It is surprising that journalists, who are considered aware group in society, are themselves perpetuating victimhood.

14. Effect of Threats

Effect of Threat	Frequency	Percentage
Made no effect	2	1
Made me alert & cautious	65	45
Fear and mental trauma	35	24
Family pressure	14	10
Performance delayed	24	17
Others	4	3
Total	144	100

Total 98 journalists responded to this question. As the respondents chose multiple responses, the frequency of effect of threat totals 144 in the above table.

Data say digital threats made most of the responding journalists (45 percent) alert and cautious. Another significant number of journalists (24 percent) faced fear and mental stress. Again, three percent journalists faced other forms of threats, among which two mentioned that it did not affect their work, while two did not disclose it. Two respondent said he/she was not affected by the threat.

Analyses: Though majority respondents claim that it had made them alert and cautious, in the above question, they have neither adopted any advance safety measure nor did they take any action against it. Therefore, it can be said that it might have imposed self-censorship. Journalists have also experienced fear and mental stress, however they are reluctant to go to any authorities for support. It is an alarming situation for professional safety and mental health of journalists. This indicates that concerned authorities and stakeholders need to work collectively to create a conducive environment for journalists to exercise their right to press freedom. Silence on these matters will make journalists more vulnerable to digital threats.

15. Causes of threat

Causes of threat	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of law or ineffective law	53	21
Poor performance of law executing agency	52	20
Lack of digital literacy	56	22
Dissemination of news without fact-check	23	9
Diversification of crimes in cyberspace	25	10
Government policy and performance.	28	11
Website developer/ Domain Host	9	4
Role of intermediary	11	4
Total	257	100

The respondents chose more than one answer to this question, hence, the frequency of Causes of threat becomes 257 as mentioned in the table above.

Out of 257 responses, majority (22 percent) find lack of digital literacy as the major cause of digital threat. According to the respondents, lack of law or ineffective law (21 percent), and poor performance of law executing agencies (20 percent), are major causes of threats among others.

Analyses: Lack of digital literacy, as pointed by the most respondents, is a major cause of digital threat. Journalists use different electronic and communication devices in their work. However, the method they adopt for security is not adequate. Amid the rapidly evolving threats in digital space, Nepali journalists are confined to basic measures like using strong password, not allowing others to use their device, etc. Likewise, unfamiliarity about advance safety measures and evolving threats is also a reflection of lack of digital literacy.

Further, 21 percent of the responses have also pointed ineffective law as a major cause for digital threat. This aligns with the response in previous questions which reflects their limited engagement with the law enforcing authorities.

16. Threat Givers

The majority of respondents (28 percent) said that unknown person is the issuer of the digital threat. It is followed by the person mentioned in their news (26 percent), who is causing digital threats. Four percent name others as threat giving institution, however do not disclose it.

Threat Givers	Frequency	Percentage
Relative	5	3
Colleagues	11	7
Outside Office	12	7
News related person	43	26
Govt. Officials	11	7
Public Personality	25	15
Security Personel	5	3
Businessmen	2	1
Other professional	0	0
Unknown	47	28
Others	6	4
Total	167	100

As the respondents chose more than one option for threat givers, frequency for threat givers totals 167 in the table above.

Analyses: Unknown person as vital threat giver shows the dire need to strengthen the professional safety of journalists. 'Person mentioned by news' stands as the second in rank to issue threat to journalists. It portrays that critical perception of digital audience is very poor and people are losing tolerance towards media contents.

17. Ways to Minimize Digital Threats

Respondents have different opinion regarding the methods to minimize digital threats. Among the respondents, 26 choose single way to minimize it, while 74 respondents chose multiple ways.

Ways to minimize digital threat	Frequency	Percentage
Effective investigation and punishment	53	14
Make effective law	65	17
Digital literacy for public	60	15
Capacity building of judges, prosecutor	37	9
Digital safety skills to journalists	52	13
Public awareness about the difference between journalism and social media	45	11
Campaign against misinformation and disinformation	33	8
Effectiveness of FoE defending organizations	44	11
Other additional improvements	3	1
Total	392	100

The respondents chose more than one option to this question, hence, the frequency of solutions to minimize digital threat in future becomes 392 as mentioned in the table above.

Majority of the respondents (17 percent) have suggested that effective law can be the best way to minimize digital threat to journalists. It is followed by the steps like increasing digital literacy of public (15 percent), effective investigation and punishment in the cases (14 percent), providing digital safety skills to journalists (13 percent) raising awareness about difference between journalism and social media (11 percent) and improving effectiveness of FoE defending organizations (11 percent).

Analyses: Yet again, the finding reflects high demand of digital literacy training to equip journalists with digital safety skills. Lobbying with the law enforcing authorities for effective implementation is also need of the hour according to the study.

Conclusion:

The study focuses on the perception of Nepali journalists about digital threats, their experiences and the measures they have taken to counter the threats. It is manifest from the study that the journalists believe the digital threats are harassment, defamation, privacy breach and violations of free expression on or via digital devices but the measures they adopt to secure their devices and ensure personal safety are very basic. It is a worrying concern in deed.

The study also highlights that out of every 10 journalists, seven have faced some forms of harassment online and female journalists are vulnerable to sexual harassment on digital spaces.

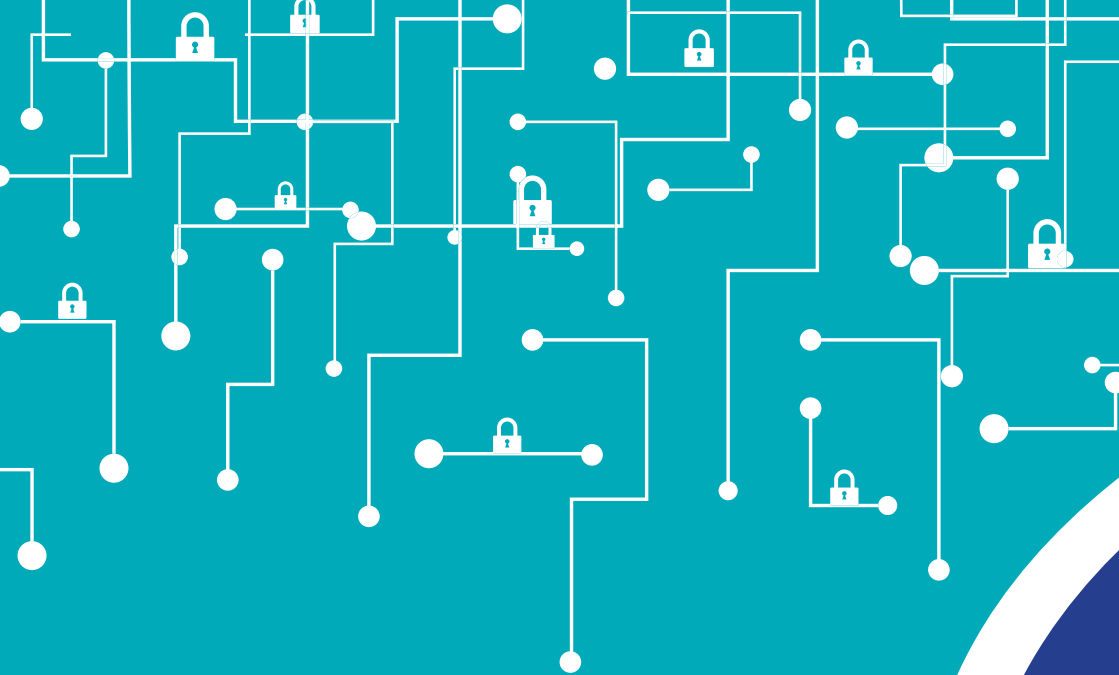
Majority responses indicating that no action was taken against their complaint equally warrants attention. This trend may fuel crime and increase self-censorship among journalists. Notably, journalists are found to be at more risk from the subjects/persons mentioned in their own news, which indicates intolerance towards criticism.

Most of the journalists opined that effective law implementation and increasing digital literacy among public are the most effective ways to minimize digital threats.

The study further concludes that journalists are vulnerable to emerging digital threats and are required to be capacitated with new tools and skills to combat the threats.

Digital safety must be made a part of journalism training and study,

Even the general public should be orientated on digital literacy which could help contribute to build tolerance towards media.



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