

Deepening self-censorship jeopardizing press freedom, media professionalism

Context

Federalism is lauded much for the conveniences it ensures to the citizens in terms of exercising their rights. Freedom of expression (FoE) is the foundational right that enables citizens to exercise other rights. Protection and promotion of FoE along with press freedom is imperative to augment the benefits to the citizens and improve governance as well. For it to happen, journalists' professionalism ensured with fear-free atmosphere and reduced impunity is equally imperative. Freedom Forum conducted a media mission to know the media situation focusing journalists' rights, their safety and impunity, and obstructions on profession in light of the changed context- the federalism and new constitution- where seven provincial governments have been working and creating several activities worth reporting. But, how favourable the situation is for media persons is a matter of study. With the views garnered from active journalists, the media mission observed that ***despite thriving media following the provincial government in place in Karnali Province, self-censorship was deepening, thereby jeopardizing press freedom and media professionalism.***

Surkhet, Capital City of Karnali Province

Kalendra Sejuwal, Bureau Chief of Karnali Province, Kantipur daily

- Journalists are most benefitted with federalism because this new system has brought us huge opportunity. There are a lot of issues for reporting.
- But journalists are so confused that they are not able to pick important issues which are of public concern and interest. Their capacity must be enhanced, otherwise they can not catch up with the change.
- I don't believe online journalism is threatening traditional media. Online journalism does little reporting; it depends heavily on traditional media- does

copy and paste. Reporters in online media are not as active as those in the print or electronic media.

- Journalism is facing severe challenges in terms of law and policy. Self censorship is being entrenched.



Kamal Lamsal, copyeditor, serophero.com

- It is positive that there are numerous issues for journalists to report with the federal system. Diverse issues are emerging at local and provincial levels. It has helped create encouraging atmosphere for future.
- Digital media have been helpful for other media as they been sources of news.
- Academically, bachelor's level education in journalism is provided in the province itself, which, I hope, would help hone knowledge and skills to journalists needed for changed context.
- Security/safety of journalists and professionalism are long term agenda, they are not addressed over short time. It is debatable as well.
- Journalism itself is a challenging and risky job because it, by nature, has to expose social evils and administrative and financial irregularities.
- Some people-even the public officials- show grudges that the media could have written the news not in that angle but on other way.

- Most worrying is '*partikarita*' (report favouring political voice/activities) is dominating '*patrakarita*' (journalism). It will result in serious dent to media professionalism on the one hand and self-censorship and insecurity to journalists on the other.
- Online media must be recognized by the government and public, providing equal advertisements.
- Once the information officers are females, the number of women in sources will increase.

Ms Dambar Acharya, Vice-President of the Federation of Nepali Journalists at Province

- It is because of patriarchal thoughts dominating society, women journalists are not given responsibilities and key roles.
- However, women journalists here are equally able to male ones. But, they are not allocated proper responsibilities because male ones don't believe in women journalists' capacity.
- Inclusion of women in any mechanism is not meaningful because women are included just to show as inclusion- the women picked for inclusion are near any political leader and party, rather than their capacity.
- Financial security of journalists is poor.
- Even the people's representatives prefer male reporters because women generally 'don't dine with them'. Does dining with leaders determine journalists' capacity?
- Because of having male spokesperson/information officers at various offices, they obviously dominate news source.

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Rewati Raman Upadhyay, AP1 Television

- Journalists are reporting in favour of some persons and some politics or faction.

Ms Komal Shahi, Raranews.com

- While writing news, I faced allegation why I belittled one side, and extolled other.
- I think journalist would face more threats from digital media (Facebook) in the coming days owing to growing internet penetration and digital gadgets.
- Low remuneration to media persons is financial threat/challenges which ultimately affects media professionalism.
- There is much pressure to write or not to write news on any issues.
- Because there is no mandatory provision, the media houses are not inclusive and women-friendly.



Sudip Puri, AP1 TV

- Media professionalism- free and fair press- has faced severe challenge as media houses and journalists are politically divided. Reporters are more political than journalists!
- Fair and true information is blocked, and misinformation spread by the journalists themselves who are appointed as spokespersons/advisors to political parties, local levels and the people's representatives. The position to advise

leaders have been a post to kill news. This media trend emerged alarmingly in the federal set up.

- It's very good that after Surkhet become provincial capital, number of journalists and media, especially online ones grew much.
 - There is small media market- few advertisements to media. Most media and journalists are concentrated in province capital, thereby leaving many local issues in rural parts.
 - Particular media get huge chunk of government advertisement. Advertisement distribution is not proportional. It is biased.
- It is worrying because small media won't survive long. Politics influences advertisement distribution, which is big threat of media sustainability in the federal set up.
- Self censorship is a mounting concern now a day.

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Ganesh Bishu, reporter, Nagarik daily, Rukum district

- The online media as YouTube has created much confusion and dominated the presence of traditional media as newspapers.
- Low remuneration to journalists is one of the most significant reasons behind compromise in news writing. Free reporting, press freedom are compromised with low salary.

Ganesh Thapa, Surkhet Patra daily

- Financial sustainability of local media is a big problem.
- Media are getting more guided, and spreading misinformation in the federal system.
- Adherence to certain political faith is hindering free media. Reporters are not independent.

Ms Sita Oli, Sajha Bisanu daily

- I don't see any serious threat to media persons compared to the past.
- Women themselves need to boost their capacity.
- I've not felt insecure because I'm capable.
- Influence of politics and political leaders is much on media, which is worrying.

Politics is spreading its roots to media, thereby eroding professional integrity of the media.

Buddhi Singh Thakuri, operator, Deuti TV

- We're not allowed to report Province Assembly activities by entering the Assembly hall. Why such bias?

Jagat Dal Janala, education journalist

- Because of low remuneration at local levels, journalists quit jobs or leave local levels and gather in the provincial capital.
- Politics is spreading its roots to media, thereby eroding professional integrity of the media.

Mrs Rama Pyakurel, Human Rights Advocate

- Many people have entered journalism after the country adopted federalism.
- Journalists need to abide by code of conduct.
- Reporters are missing many issues from rural areas.
- Currently, there is no serious threat to journalists as compared to the past.

Padam Bahadur Shahi, advocate, Karnali Foundation

- There is low physical threat to media. However, political pressure is growing. Many journalists do not write news about their party leaders though the latter do wrong.

- Media is vibrant after federalism. There are few journalists, who are aware of the issues emerged lately.
- Journalists must build capacity and boost professionalism.

Narayan Bhattarai, Chairman, Karnali Foundation, Kalikot district

- Journalists were psychologically threatened because the activities of underground outfit are emerged. The Biplab-led Maoist group may pose threat for their fair reporting.
- Not only local but also the national media are not able to cover the stories from remote villages.
- Journalists must enhance their capacity on parliamentary reporting. They need to be able to wipe out confusion created by digital media.
- Journalism and social media should be differentiated to get true information.

Krishna Raj Dhamala, editor, ekarnalipati.com

- If there is anything that is sheer threat to journalism profession, it is journalists themselves. Why don't journalists maintain integrity first to be secure themselves? It is political affiliation that makes journalists insecure.
- There is no development journalism, no investigative journalism here.
- Spurt of online media is witnessed after federalism.

Raj Bahadur Shahi, Speaker of the Karnali Province Assembly

- We're broadcasting parliament activities live. It is an example of transparency.
- The formation of Parliamentary Journalists' Society also works as a watchdog.
- The Province Assembly has its own website, which is also a step for the transparency.
- I commit here that media centre would be established soon to convenience journalist to receive information

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Ms Sita Nepali, lawmaker at province from ruling Nepal Communist Party

- After federalism, journalism is vibrant in Surkhet. With the new system, journalists are compelled to hone their skills.
- New media have more influence than traditional media.
- Online media either extol or belittle any one or activity. They are too biased with cursory reporting.
- Broader discussion had to be held while formulating bill relating to media and communication. Press freedom must be respected.

Dailekh, district adjoining provincial capital

Ms Rajani Yogi, Dhruba Tara FM

- There is no investigative reporting.
- Although there is encouraging presence of women in radio, they are not in the leading role.

Ms Pushpa Yogi, Dhruba Tara FM

- Journalists have no threat in the recent time.

Ms Bhawana Hamal, Dhruba Tara FM

- We're only limited to news reading. We've not done long, investigative stories.

It is difficult for women to continue journalism because of difficult geography with low physical facilities.

Ms Binu Bharati, Vice-President of Federation of Nepali Journalists in district

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Amar Sunar, reporter, Ujjyalo FM

- There is no physical threat.
- But security persons do not allow us taking photographs reasoning the newly launched Civil Code.

Hikmat Nepali, reporter, Annapurna Post daily

- There is no situation that any journalist faces threat and attack because of writing news.
- Much threat to professionalism comes from political faith, biasness.
- Activities of local governments are underreported.
- Those near and dear to the people's representatives don't provide information. Rather they kill the news.
- Capacity building of journalists must be a continued process because there are a lot of issues relating to federalism. But most of us are not aware.
- Local level stories are left, and under reported because most of the journalists were migrated to centre- province capital, federal capital.

Those near and dear to the people's representatives don't provide information. Rather they kill the news.

Bishal Sunar, reporters, AP1 TV

- Journalists are treated as 'no entity' by the people's representatives.
- There are many issues relating to non-transparency at local levels but left underreported.
- We, journalists, are being used/misused by political leaders and people's representatives and spoiling professional integrity.
- Journalists as press coordinator are killing news from the very sources/field.

Bhupendra Shahi, Hamro Teshro Ankha

- People's representatives are working as 'mini kings', fueling irregularities. When such irregularities are reported, the media are decried.
- Sustainability of local media is difficult.
- None is ready to hear and address journalists' concern and demands.
- If any factual information is published in media, the journalists are targeted throughout the life, so it is difficult to do independent journalism in federalism.

Observation

It is positive that the journalists are encouraged after they have numerous issues to report following the provincial capital and governments in place. However, along with deepening self censorship, misuse of political power to sway media and spread misinformation or politically favoured information is emerging as serious threat to press freedom. Capacity building of journalists along with the guarantee of favourable media policy/law is must for investigative reporting; and discriminatory distribution of advertisements needs to be ended to prop up media sustainability. In order for the media to play watchdog role, and for the local democracy to thrive, the media at local level must be free and independent. Integrity of media profession should be equal priority.

