

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CORPORATE MEDIA-POLITICS NEXUS IN NEPAL

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The contemporary Nepalese media landscape is diverse and vibrant with as many as 607 regularly published newspapers, 736 FM radio, and 117 licensed television channels, according to the Press Council Nepal (2018). However, they are highly centralized as almost all TV networks and broadsheet dailies are based in Kathmandu. The press was suppressed and silenced during the Rana period (1846-1951) and during the Panchayat system (1960-1990). It enjoyed relative freedom in the run up to the referendum about the system of government (May 1980), when the Nepalese press was distinctly divided along ideological lines - either supporting the partyless Panchayat system or democracy. Known as 'mission journalism', this partisan phenomenon was instrumental in the direct involvement of the Nepali press

and journalists in political campaigns and activism. The press was also actively involved in two pro-democracy people's movements - of 1990 and 2006. Political weeklies were involved during the 1990s movement, whereas mainly the private bro-

adsheets and radio networks were instrumental in inciting anti-regime sentiments during the 2006s movement. During the Maoist rebellion (1996-2006), state-run media interpreted the Maoists' activities as 'terrorist acts'. Yet, most private media sympathized with the Maoists' causes. The role of Nepalese media during the political upheavals was questionable. However, they tried to justify their political activism for the cause of democracy and freedom of the press. No law bars a journalist from becoming a member of a political party. More than 20,000 journalists are affiliated with one of the three trade unions that are linked to the three major political parties. They claim that their associations are purely for professional work, but the question about their fair play and balanced reporting always arises.

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists is an umbrella trade union of all journalists. However, its top executives are chosen on the basis of their

political leanings. As a quasi-judicial body, the Press Council Nepal is supposed to right the wrongs of the media sphere. Paradoxically, most of its members are political nominees and fall short of performing independently. Furthermore, a new trend of appointing journalists as press advisers by Ministers or influential people has arisen, especially in the post-2008 set up, which only serves to encourage other fellow journalists to compromise their journalistic integrity and to maintain a good rapport with political parties or leaders for payback in the future. Advertisement is critical for media to run and persevere in the business, yet it should be done in an ethically responsible way. However, it is normal to find newspapers publishing news, advertorials and advertisements about various consumer goods or services in the same edition or on the same page. Media do not even hesitate to

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target firms that do not provide commercials. Collusion is not only limited to media and the corporate industry. Politics and politicians are also intermingled. Daily newspapers and television are not party press, but the political parallelism is clearly visible. Big houses skip controversial issues and the news is usually broken by rival media. Sometimes their coverage even seems to take sides in criminal cases, including corruption charges, tax evasion or smuggling cases. When editors try to check undue management pressures, they often end up in compromise or losing their job disgracefully.

In response to such unscrupulous trends among dominant print outlets and TV networks, hundreds of FMs and community radios could be a potent alternative for information. However, over 60 per cent of them are directly invested, controlled or managed by politicians and, at times, reflect ideological lines. News portals and social media have scope for coping with such a trend, as Manuel Castells underscores in his 2009 volume *Communication Power*. Nevertheless, most online portals are either an extension of big media houses, party-affiliated writers or of other interest groups.

As media are increasingly controlled by politicians

and the corporate world, the danger of their misuse to achieve political and financial profits or to vilify opponents prevails. To sum up, in the history of Nepalese media, the press mostly remained under the tight grip of autocratic rules. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the press acquired freedom. However, as big investors entered the media sector, newsrooms have faced pressure from the corporate world on what and how to publish. The division of media based on political parties' lines has further undermined media's credibility and diminished its sanctity as fourth estate and watchdog in Nepal.

About the Author:

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