

Thoughts on news media's role in Nepal's democratic process

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Introduction

This paper explores media's role in the wake of the 2008 Constituent Assembly (CA) Election in Nepal. The paper will first discuss some important concepts within the field of political science, and then it will move on to incorporate communication theory. After underlining the concepts, the paper will focus on one particular research study focusing on access to information and how this relates to attitude and knowledge among villagers ahead of the 2008 CA election. Finally it will discuss the findings and conclusion.

Why democracy

Access to information plays a significant role in the success of participatory democracy. Press freedom is the key to transparency, in that it provides the public with information on government action and policy, and keeping up with the principles of "good governance." Democracy as a form of governance has often been described as the best form of governance in terms of development. The Indian scholar Amartya Sen argues for democracy, in the sense of individual rights and liberties, and he underlines its importance in that "democracy has to be seen as a creating a set of opportunities... and their effectiveness would depend on how they are exercised" (Sen, 1999, p.155). In other words, the success of democracy depends on a broad involvement of the public.

Democracy in itself could be argued to go against social justice because it relies on majority rule. In *Democratic Justice* Political scientist Ian Shapiro has tried to describe how these two concepts interfere with each other. The way to counter the interference between democracy and social justice is to place democracy in the center of social relations so that distribution of authority becomes the focal point and not distribution of

assets. The reason for thinking of justice and democracy in the context of this article is that the democratic process in Nepal was fueled by injustice and belief in that democratic change would end autocratic rule that is viewed as the reason for the injustice.

Shapiro asks why democratic justice is important and seeks to prove it by giving examples of how the concept of democracy has been used by revolutionaries in past revolutions. He points to the fall of the Soviets Union and the Eastern European communist states, where the revolutionaries commonly shared resentment to the communist system and used the appeal for democracy as way to end the system. He points to the end of apartheid in South Africa where those who fought for democracy identified it with ending apartheid (1999, p. 2). This idea of using the concept democracy as the means to fight what is seen as unjust is relevant for what has happened in Nepal with the decade long insurgency and the uprising of April 2006. The fight against autocratic rule by King Gyanendra was organized and fought by political parties and groups that have labeled their struggle against the king as a fight for democracy. The implication with this systematic use of the concept, according to Shapiro, is that “[t]he imperative to get rid of it [an oppressive system] inevitably shaped their perceptions of what democracy is about,” and the problems that arise when the opposition comes to power is that “[b]ecause democratic ideals are forged out of reactive struggles... on ascending to power, democratic oppositions bear the antithetical traces of the orders they replace” (1999, p.2). Thus, traits of the autocratic rule might be transmitted to the new political leadership.

Like Sen, Shapiro has a sense of what democracy means. They both agree on the function of democracy in that it is a system of opportunities, or in Shapiro's own words “a subordinate foundational good, designed to shape the power dimension of collective activities without subverting their legitimate purpose.” Nepal has been through democratic changes in the past without changing the injustice suffered by large sentiments

of its people. This frustration, Shapiro explains, is due to the fact that "...achieving political democracy does not guarantee broad advances toward greater social justice" in some cases it might even lead to an opposite outcome, this in turn leads to popular descent in democratic conviction. The challenge is to discover a form of democracy that promotes justice. (1999, p. 18-19)

Media and democracy

Communication scholar Ralph Negrine emphasizes the role of the media in democracy through his work *Communication of Politics*. Looking at the media role in a historical context, he brings back the thoughts of the former Director-General of BBC, Charles Curran, who believed that the broadcaster's role was to gain public interest in public issues, so to increase public understanding.

Negrine argues that Curran's view of media's purpose reflects the postwar period in which public broadcasters had a sense of mission in contrast to the modern commercialized mass media. The concept "public sphere" represents the structure of the media that provide the public with relevant information that will affect the public good. The ideal liberal public sphere is a structure consisting of equally well-informed entities allowing for rational discussion making and that is capable of resolving differences without using "non-coercive means." By well-informed entities, Curran meant individuals who had received sufficient information and were able to take equal part in the public discussion. In the real world this is undermined by corporate and political ownership and influence which often is the reality of mass media institutions. The public sphere that is created by the mass media institutions is undermined by the media itself in that it requires the institutions to choose what relevant and important information is.

Negrine discards the earlier thinking of Curran due to the changes that took place in Curran's Great Britain from the

sixties until now. A society that was characterized by “cohesion and stability” has become much more diversified and that there has been a fundamental change in the organization of that society (Negrine, 1996, p. 4). But the modern British society that Negrine describes is very different from that of today's Nepal. Nepal is not only in a post-war period, but also in the middle of a process of transition from autocratic rule to representative democracy. In that respect it is fundamentally important for the media to create the public sphere in which the citizens are well-informed and participate in rational discussions.

Distribution of information relies on the quality of the media system, meaning that the probability of informed citizens depends on the effectiveness of the media. Thus, media places a lot of responsibility on itself in ensuring a functional democratic process. This in turn leaves little attention to the wishes, desires or requirements of individual citizens. Negrine argues that “little consideration is given to changes within the structure and processes of government which not only limits the effectiveness of the media but also raises important questions about the rationale of participation in the political system itself” (ibid)

There is, according to Negrine, an alarming trend in the western democracy where non-elected bodies have taken over traditional government responsibilities leading to less control by the elected representatives of the people leaving the citizens with less power to make decisions and therefore also undermining the role to the citizens in taking part in the democratic process. The implication that Negrine refers to is that the relationship between the citizens and the people in power has become too complex to be illustrated. Negrine mentions what he calls the “supra-national body,” the structure that regulates all domestic and social activity and is so vast that it is difficult to identify who is responsible for what, this in turn creates problems for the media that have to keep track of who, where, what and why. Negrine coins this situation as difficult

but crucial, because in this view the media is responsible for highlighting concerns and issues relevant to the people so that they can put pressure on the government and other powerful organizations. “In these ways, the media take on a significant role to articulate, to organize, to voice opinions of the public and to force others to act.” This role differs from the intended role of the “public sphere” where the main reason is to create a “forum for rational debate” (ibid). What Negrine has described here is what I think of as the fourth estate, one that keeps the others accountable, and is crucial for the workings of democracy.

Negrine correctly points out that in the modern governance the media has to articulate public concern in order to keep check on the governing bodies (ibid). As a consequence of media’s growing responsibilities, it becomes important to look at the media institutions and ask if they are ready to deal with monitoring a wider area of governance and foresee problems that will arise in the future.

Communication research

What is increasingly important is to explore reasons for why this function sometimes fails and what the consequences are for the people involved. A study exploring the function of the media as an information provider in rural Nepal and how lack of information affects rural people’s attitude and understanding of the democratic process was conducted a few months prior to the Constituent Assembly election in 2008. The hypothesis stated that “Access to accurate and informative information in the village will determine what attitude its members hold towards the CA election and their understanding of democracy.”

The objectives of this particular research was primarily to prove or disprove the importance of providing information to the villagers and its effect on creating political awareness and understanding of the Constituent Assembly election. Secondly,

to see how access to or lack of information affects the villager's attitude concerning the CA. Finally, it sought to disclose factors that undermine the villager's right to accurate information.

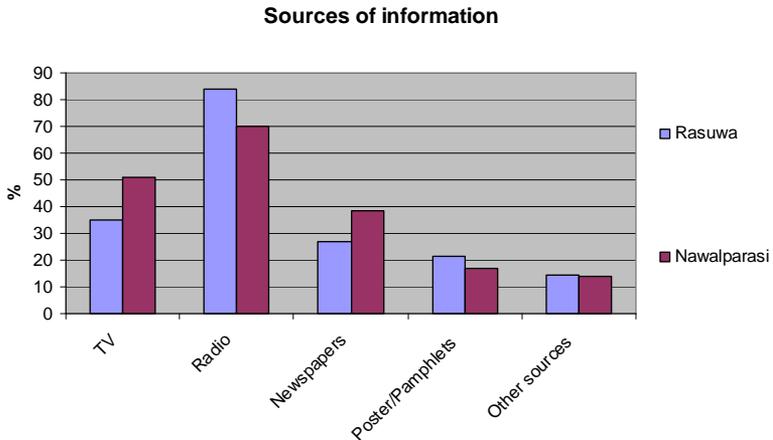
The research had specific questions concerning media's role in the election process. Several questions were made to measure access to different types of media, like newspapers, radio and television. Some questions were raised to measure the level of trust towards the media, and the issue concerning the safety of people working in the media.

The research strategy combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection was applied to get a deeper understanding of the situation in two geographically and culturally different districts of Nepal. The strategy consisted of a survey, semi-structured interviews and field observations in selected villages in Rasuwa and Nawalparasi district. Two hundred and seventy nine voters participated in the survey. The results were triangulated and conclusions to the research questions were made based on these results. The fieldwork lasted from the end of October to middle of December in 2007, during a period of political upheaval and civil unrest.

Research findings

The findings concluded that literacy and locale played a major role in people's attitude and knowledge of the election. Villagers in the Rasuwa district who had less access to TV, radio, and newspapers than the villagers in Nawalparasi, were less interested, more negative, and in general did not understand the purpose of the CA election and what impact it would have on Nepali governance. Also economic status and gender played a significant role, the survey revealed that poor, illiterate women had less knowledge and cared less about the election. Even though the percentage of people undergoing voter training programs was more than double in Rasuwa than in Nawalparasi, they scored lower on attitude and knowledge. By summarizing the results, it becomes clear that media access

played a more significant role than the government- and NGO-run voter training programs. Another interesting finding in the survey was that most literate participants supported the statement that media was biased, as opposed to illiterate participants.



Interviews with key informants such as politicians, members of women groups and journalists were included in the research to supplement the quantitative results. When asking about access to information in the villages, the Maoists said that people in general were not ready for the election at that time. The journalists mentioned illiteracy, limited reach, poor coverage due to violence and lack of proper journalistic training as major contribution to poor access of information. Madheshi Janaadhikar Forum (MJF) blamed Maoists for denying other political parties access to the villages, and the women’s group representatives said that they lacked representatives in the media and therefore lacked coverage of women’s issues and a voice in the media. According to the Nepali Congress (NC) representative, people in general had been ready for the election, but they had been denied to vote by the Maoists.

Conclusion

The election was carried out on 10 April 2008. The outcome of the election came as a surprise to many political analysts and opinion makers, the traditionally large parties such as the NC and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) suffered an unexpected defeat, as the new parties such as the Maoists and the MJF came out on top. The research gave some insight to why the media failed in predicting the outcome.

The research result concluded that access to information shapes the villager's views on the election in either negative or positive way, that the villagers in general did not know the meaning of Constituent Assembly election at the time of the research. It revealed general lack of respect for journalists among individuals and groups. It points to the fact that many journalists are not following ethical codes of conduct for media professional, either due to lack of training or political motive. Other reasons for biased media reporting could be caused by a relatively low circulation that causes the media outlet to seek funding elsewhere, thereby jeopardizing their journalistic integrity.

Reporters were not present in the villages during the research, and the groups, like the MJF, complained about biased coverage. The observation suggests that the media in Nepal, which have limited reach in rural areas, are not aware of the reality people living in the villages and therefore were unable to predict the outcome of the election.

The World Press Freedom Day was celebrated in May 2008. The focus was on freedom of expression, access and empowerment. The Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, delivered a speech in Kathmandu for the occasion that was relevant for the research. He emphasized on the importance of freedom of the press and the access to information and how these principles build into the overall development objective of empowerment. How giving people

information so that they can gain control over their lives, and making them able to participate in the democracy through engagement in public debates, or holding their representatives accountable does not happen by itself. The media needs to be professional, independent, pluralistic and free. UNESCO works with four key principles: “freedom of expression, quality education for all, universal access to information and knowledge, and respect for linguistic diversity.”(UNESCO 2008)

The comments made by the Director-General are not only significant in the context of Nepal, but in a global sense. Although the research has shown that communication reach in the rural areas is very often missing, the quality in reporting is also lacking, which in turn causes a general lack of understanding of the democratic system. The CA election brought hopes for a more stable political situation with a strong rule of law. International organization, such as UNESCO, has been doing important work in spreading community radio in Nepal. However, the main responsibility should be placed on the politicians and the media to improve communication channels, education, and foster political awareness among all Nepalese. This paper has presented a few important issues that have implication for political awareness related to information access among rural people in Nepal during a time of democratic change.

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