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## Mass media in post-1990 Nepal: Ajar window of mass communication

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This study is about the book, *Mass Media in Post-1990 Nepal* by Pratyush Onta, which comprises mainly the essays composed in the 90s, was published almost six years ago. Now, we are citizens of *ganatantrik*<sup>1</sup> Nepal although it was only *prajatantrik*<sup>2</sup> then.

Seas of changes have already occurred since then. The number of institutions which teach media has increased; even Karnali region remained no exception as there are few higher secondary schools which have run journalism classes. More television and FM channels have been added. *3 Year Interim Constitution 2007* was promulgated and Nepal has also experienced *3 Year Interim Plans*, and the nation is heading to get a new constitution in less than a year (if the major parties abolish their self interests and work for consensus). So I am wondering whether this review is relevant. However, there are many commonalities between then and now. For example, journalists are being still threatened, displaced and killed, and their wages are not lucrative except in a few media houses. Above all, Kathmandu's cartel in media has not ended yet.

*Mass Media in Post-1990 Nepal* is a vignette of contemporary Nepali media. It has rich references of both Nepali and English resources. This book contains seven thematic areas: Overview, Print, Radio, Visual, Online, Media and Freedom, Women and Media, and Media Performances, Institutions and Society. Each section has various subsections comprising the writer's discursive and evaluative essays which are short, but at the same time each meets the characteristics of research papers.

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<sup>1</sup> republic

<sup>2</sup> democratic

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**Print media**

In 1993 ending the monopoly of state owned *Gorkhpatra* and *The Rising Nepal* national dailies, a new era of print journalism began with the launch of two private sector broadsheet dailies, *Kantipur* (in Nepali) and *The Kathmandu Post* (in English). Nevertheless, these papers have made the daily news market fairly competitive as more broadsheets, weeklies, radios, TVs and online editions gradually appeared in Nepali media. The writer opines, radio is the most democratic medium, because it is cheap and can be localized (Onta, p. 4). Comparatively little happened in the television sector until about 2002, but now the number of TV stations is fairly high, and a young generation of Nepali journalists are interrogating their society in ways that have been never done before (p. 6).

“One of the sectors in Nepal that has witnessed a spectacular growth since the *Jana Andolan* of 1990 is media” (p. 17). Analyzing media growth, the author discloses that legal regime, new media participants, growth in advertisement market, growth in media consumers, production of media in other languages, although in small number, have made it possible. The number of Nepalis who consume media product at an unprecedented level in the history of Nepal (p. 19) has been awfully increased.

Be it *Kantipur* or *Gorkhapatra*, every influential media house is being stationed in Kathmandu. Kathmandu’s monopoly has not ended as almost all of nationally influential print and electronic media in Nepal is produced in Kathmandu. Equally surprising is the majority of journalists are from higher castes, “I indicate the disproportionate absence of women members of specific caste and ethnic communities- namely, *dalit* and *janajatis*- in the mainstream media workforce in Nepal (Onta, p. 25). It means the concerns and grievances of *dalit* and *janajatis* are not adequately represented in all media products and institutions in Nepal.

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The author suggests “better-educated media workforce is definitely desirable in our country” (p. 31). For that he thinks the general environment of our universities should improve significantly. Investing for developing more infrastructures, both the state and NGOs should make educational opportunities available in non-formal environments, and professionals from other fields have to be in partnership with to fulfill the required expertise.

They should also realize that investigative journalism does not only mean digging up a case of abuse of power but also that it means reporting about broader social trends and processes that influence today’s Nepali social worlds (p. 37). He does not find it among Nepali journalists.

The author raises questions on the writers, contents and audience of op-ed pages. “No studies have been done to find out, in a somewhat comprehensive manner, reader opinions about what has been appearing in the op-ed pages of our newspapers” (p. 41). He sees a need of through studies on this issue.

Then in next essay “Ersatz nostalgia and English Journalism” he writes how Martin Chautari came in existence. “In 1996, I became the convener of the public discussion forum Martin Chautari (p. 7). He has asked many questions to the critics, so he writes, “Answers to these simple questions would reveal the reasons for the success and longevity of a single *adda* in Nepal and contribute to the real debate about *adda* culture in our society (p. 48). He defends Martin Chautari as it is the place where visitors learn basic journalism. Such analysis is basic journalism, nothing more. In addition to be the hub for intellectual discourses for many academicians, he proudly reveals how an *adda*<sup>3</sup> has been the platform for many aspirant journalists too.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Chautari

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Interestingly, along with a growth in magazines and broadsheet dailies, photography news too is showing signs of maturing into an intoxicating genre itself. The Weekly Nepali-language tabloids (known as *saptahiks*) continue to exert influence in political circles and, if only for the reason, have to be considered part of main stream media in Nepal. Since reader taste for this format of print media is still robust, it is expected that weekly newspapers will still be around for the next few years even when they will not be able to recover their full operating costs from the market (p. 20), but some are dogmatic, too. The author examines that these weeklies are influenced by this or that political parties, and they have been exercising partisan politics. “Since there is very little room for professional performance and improvement, almost no quality work shows up in weeklies (p. 53). So they lack numerous things and many of them have already stopped to appear.

There are no par sports reports in our media. So he declares “an obsession with reporting the bare results (who won and by how much?) must be superseded by a more sociologically and historically informed writing” (p. 58). As sports is the focal point of any society, it should be carried out professionally.

Despite having foggy scenario of other aspects of Nepali media, the writer is very happy seeing the magazine boom in Nepal, “Since the year 1999, within the various print media forms, it is magazines that have seen the most spectacular growth” (p. 3). He says that the investment in this genre has come from both big investors and others with specific profiles--*Mulyankan*, *Sdhana*, *Bimochan*, *Wave*, *Asmita*, *Bikas*, etc., and the circulation of the most successful magazines varies from about 10,000 to above 50000.

Nepali literary magazines both qualitatively and quantitatively have been improved. “My reading of what is being printed in narrative genres, especially short stories, memoirs, and essays, leads me to believe that Nepali literature, far from being in a

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stagnation, is quite alive and kicking” (p. 69). The writer shows such optimism here.

Consumers’ reading attitudes have changed in Nepal. “The Nepali media are dominated by political, economic and other depressing issues” (p. 70), rather than positive ones. However, the writer justifies that depressing issues should challenge us to empower our minds appropriately and not let our bodies just become the sites of valuable desires” (p. 74).

“If it is important to bring about a slow revolution that will ensure that each rural-based *Deurali*-reading Nepali is as equal as Kathmandu –based smooth operator, then *Deurali* and similar projects need further support from the donors” (p. 79). Mr. Onta takes an example of a daily newspaper that is published not from the center but its periphery--*Deurali*, a weekly rural newspaper published from Tansen, has village centric reporting and is very easy to understand. However, after a rigorous research the writer found out, “Regional media is caught in vicious cycle of low visibility, low revenue, poorly trained reporter, and poor quality contents” (p. 83).

Many NGOs are involved in Nepali media now. “It must be recognized that NGOs involvement in Nepali print media in the recent years have been anything but insignificant” (p. 88). Nevertheless, the writer is not happy on NGOs’s roles for lifting the standard of Nepali media.

## **Radio**

Onta has given detailed history of FM radios in Nepal. “On 18 May 1997 Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 became the first independent station to get a license” (p. 91). However, he is critical to the state for its indifference at the same time as more and more FM stations have been operated, but no serious effort to understand how FM radio is contributing to a new kind of urban public sphere in our society, has been made hitherto.

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The essayist has depicted how F M radio has been creating new communities in villages and cities, “F M radio is not only what goes on air. It is as much what happens off air” (p. 95). He elaborates that the skills, intentions and desires of these communities define for us some of the broad contours of our own experience of our places.

Very clearly he comments on independent news in FM radios. “Once they went on air, these stations did broadcast news under other names while refusing to invest full scale on an independent news desk citing governmental restrictions (p. 99). After *Jana Andolan II*<sup>4</sup>, however, there is a paradigm shift.

The essayist opines that unless the capacities of radio journalists are greatly increased, and the modality of engagement with radio as medium on the part of common folks, professionals and social activists changes, we can not expect our non commercial FM radio stations to really serve the interest of the Nepali public (p. 107). In addition to quantities, qualities have to be ensured. On this regard I want to link my own anecdote as one of my journalist friends disclosed, “In Delhi which is abode of more than 40 million people has fewer TV channels and radio stations than in Kathmandu. So there are unhealthy competitions. Do you know how much they pay? Hardly Rs. 3,000. A journalist gets just that.”

“In a country where there is mass illiteracy, discussing books over radio is the most efficient way of communicating the ideas they contain and contend to large masses” (pp. 113-114). It is true because other researches have also proved that radio is the cheapest medium in a long run in Nepal. FM Radios are also the platforms for democratic expressions. “The growth of the FM radios in Nepal is a clear indication of democratization at work in post-Panchayat Nepali society” (p. 116). For a *loktantric* Nepal to work, we need to re-imagine our intermediate institution as well. “Radio journalism is a good place to start for

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<sup>4</sup> Peoples’ Massmovement II

those who cherish a democratic media in Nepal” (p. 125). Presently, more than 450 FM radios have shown this.

### **Visuals and Internet**

Nevertheless, Mr. Onta has used less words to analyze visual and Internet unlike the ink used for covering print and FM radios. He shares that Nepalis are in the thrall of non-Nepali satellite TV, mostly uplinked from India. About a dozen Nepali television channels have been come in regular transmission now, and many are in queue.

He also highlights the need of photojournalism in new dimension, “Because, besides street children and domestic-helps, there are dozens of other themes that have not been exposed to the world, ‘for a continuous disruption of insularity of official versions of Nepal, visuals and narratives that reveal other Nepalis are needed” (p. 131).

He also analyzed the trends of film making on the master pieces of Nepali literatures focusing *Bhanubhakta*, “I do not know this film shown in cinema halls in other parts of the country but by judging by its record in Kathmandu, it must be considered a super flop” (p. 132). This shows like other historic films like *Bhanubhakta* failed to appeal the audience.

The writer seems aware of the influence of Internet in Nepal. So in “Beyond the Internet Hoopla” he writes that the Internet has also begun to make inroads in the lives of a small but influential group of Nepalis. “There are few online news portals operated by some of the main media houses” (p. 5). Only difference is that its magnitude is expanding. Earlier in “Radio and our Literary Landscapes” Mr. Onta recalls his own college life in the USA in the mid 80s when he could not make direct phone calls to Nepal at first. Gradually, he saw Fax (Xerox) machines and then Personal Computers. Next, came the Internet to serve him. Now it is affordable even in Nepal. Nonetheless, he warns, “Instead of Satellite TV, FM radio, and the Internet as an

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invasion of “our culture”, energy must be invested to produce individuals and institutions that can face the challenges posed by these new media to cultivate our language and literatures” (p. 111).

“Restrictions on the media with respect to its possible coverage of Maoist activities was done in the name of protecting the national interest of Nepal” (p. 159). The writer has also portrayed curtailment of freedom in Nepal. It was assumed that an imposition of a state of emergency was necessary to let the army deal with the Maoists but the media forgot to ask why it was natural to assume as much (p. 160). He has championed for promoting media freedom as he argues, “These violations by both sides have occurred in the form of unlawful killings, abductions, arrests, harassment, threats, and forced dislocations of journalists from their primary location at work” (p. 165).

### **Reforms in law and development of media from quantity to quality**

The writer sums up saying that if we want to preserve some of our hard own rights as citizens of Nepal, we need to go back to debating and promoting the fundamental bases of the rights. He has cited *Constitution of Nepal 1991* a couple of times, but we have more liberal interim constitution and the media scenario has changed a lot since then. In “Right to information”, Article 27 of *Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007)* states: Every citizen shall have the right to demand or obtain information on any matters of his/her own or of public importance (GON, p. 9). So, unlike the writer’s claim, “Nepal still does not have a Right o information Act (p. 145), to quote *Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007)* again, “Provided that nothing shall compel any person to provide information on any matter about which secrecy is to be maintained by law.

In the next section the writer has evaluated the position of female journalists, “Women journalists seldom have a say in editorial or managerial aspects of media publications. No media

organization that I am aware of has instituted a commitment toward hiring more women journalists, nor have any demonstrated, though active on-the-job programs, the willingness to train young and able women in the field” (p. 174). However, there are slight changes now. For example most of the reporters of *Image Channel* are women. I watched their live reporting from different parts of Kathmandu during the “indefinite strike” called by NCP Maoists in April 2010.

The writer has commented on the covering of voices against women, “With reference to the role of the media, the *Action Plan* states that advertisements that debase women should be barred and media should portray women in a “positive” role (p. 179). The writer also seems critical on the role of media to stop women trafficking, “While the issue has managed to get attention in some national discourses, the problem seems to be growing in magnitude and an effective solution seems unlikely to materialize in the future (p. 185). Not on the contrary in “*Asmita at 50: Feminist Agenda for Our Media,*” he has requested all the stakeholders to be wise and sensible, “To build on these partial successes, it is high time that office bearers of media organizations such as *Asmita*, *Sancharika Samuha Nepal* (SSN), and *Nepal Press Institute* (NPI) bearers – who are sometimes not in talking terms- sit together and figure out pragmatic strategies that will help the objective of increasing women’s presence in media organizations” (p. 191). Obviously, as the axiom goes--divided we fall.

Since this is a collection of essays written on widely discussed themes, the writer has brought many cross-cutting issues, and “On SAARC Reporting” is one of them, “Our reporters must ask questions of the SAARC process on grounds that the organization would much rather not discuss in public (p. 195). He is fed up with such boring and outmoded reporting as he thinks till now our media has not been able to report the convention promptly. The journalists failed to ask these experts the question how summit after summit, SARC deliberates on more or the less on the same issues and comes up with insipid

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declarations that are noteworthy only for their repetition of the commitments by the regional heads of states to variety of subjects with no institutional innovations promised regarding how those commitments would be honored.

Nepali media has made some investigations regarding the conditions in which our intellectuals and academics supposedly fail to perform their works, but those are not sufficient as he argues, “Sad to say, not a single such empirically informed analysis has been produced in post-1990 Nepal” (p. 199).

Nepali mainstream media consistently avoided any serious analysis of the links between socio-economic conditions and the rise of armed insurgencies in the early days of the Maoist campaign (p. 204). In “Demonizing the Maoists” he argues Nepali media was very capricious, “First Nepali media was very biased to Maoists. As the mainstream political bosses were unanimous in naming Maoist activities as acts of terror (while still disagreeing on the way to solve this problem), the Nepali media did the same” (p. 204). Later, the reporters from different parts of Nepal started to describe each Maoist guerilla as messiah so much favoring them; however, after Maoist made deadly attacks to different headquarters and disrupted different schools in Kathmandu by Maoists student wing, they again seemed to change their barricades taking more aggressive stance against.

Nepal has a small market. Still many books are being written. Most of them are not up to the standard. “The bottom line is that our media needs to abandon a loser’s attitude toward book promotion and become a lot more pro active” (p. 210). There are only few broadsheets and magazines that carry “Book Review” section. And there are some reviewers whose analysis can make a lot of differences. He urges more reviews, of course.

The work of journalism is interrogation. One of the self-preservation myths that journalists in this country like to

reproduce is that they are ‘watchdogs’ of various interest on behalf of Nepali people. Far from I, from case to case, Nepali journalist’s ability to interrogate people and institutions that make claims in the Nepali public spheres leaves a lot to be desired (p. 212). Sad to say it is not so in Nepali media. Debating on media quality, the writer discloses, “Finally media’s ability, independence and investigate zeal are tie not only to a set of journalistic skills but also to its recognition of diversity and respect for dissent within its own institutions (p. 217).

In “Donor Support for Media: Public Assessment, the writer has argued that donor support for Nepali media is necessary but so is mechanism that evaluates the kind and quality of such support publicly (p. 222) which is not materialized in spite of the fact that several NGOs have been engaged in such business.

How exactly foreign investment in media in Nepal detrimental to our national interests? The writer, however, is in support of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Nepal. The general consensus with which our editorial bosses have opposed FDI is a syndrome of the schizophrenia that characterizes our dominant national culture whereby evocation of nationalism has been an effective strategy to prevent further debate and scrutiny of the concerned subject (p. 225). So, Mr. Onta is not suspicious to FDI.

The author thinks that Journalists’ Association is circus to professionalism. “It would be no exaggeration to say that in their current *avtar*, the *Nepal Patrakar Mahasangh* and cognate organizations have lost the moral rights to champion the cause of so-called Fourth State” (p. 230). He is equally critical to Ratriya Samachar Samiti (RSS), “The chief strength of RSS is its national network that surpasses the capacity of any other press organization in Nepal. Its chief weakness is its pro-government stance and hence it can not, in its present format,

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become an organization which puts pressure on Nepal Government (NG) as a watchdog media organization. (p. 234). He sees the need of creating a National News Service in Nepal.

The writer has made clear what media advocacy is; and asserts, “Finally, for media advocacy to work, the working relationship between NGOs and media people need to be based on a greater level of mutual level” (p. 240). Later, he writes how NGO-Media relationships should be modeled in Nepal. We should be able to work toward a society where informed coverage of important issues becomes a routine matter in all kinds of media. “In that society, the term media advocacy would, of course, be redundant” (p. 245)!

He does not hesitate to advise media tycoons that publishers and editors who can not afford to pay writers need to consolidate their resources to produce a more financially solvent publication, one in which author is compensated (p. 249). He tends to end the saga of writers’ remuneration problems here.

It also analyses many micro facets of media under the assumption “that such attention is crucial to making mainstream media a real force for democracy in Nepali society” (p. 11). In this way several factors are responsible for the growth of media during this period. This book examines those factors and described the changes witnessed in media scene in Nepal in last fifteen years.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning, Onta has given long descriptions on how he happened to associate with media – his experience in Radio Sagarmatha and *The Kathmandu Post* to his stay in India as a PhD scholar. Then, he describes about his struggles to establish Martin Chautari as the milestone for both academicians and students of journalism.

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All essays are short; most of them are discursive having both for and against arguments and finally the writer's judgment. Certainly, he has captured the fast growing print media—dailies, weeklies and other magazines and argued quantitatively it is satisfactory but Nepali media still has to raise qualities. Moreover, the book contains rich references which comprise both English and Nepali resources. In addition to brevity the writer is able to use simple language.

There are also some flaws in this book. Use of sexist language and informal words, lack of abbreviation section, few lapses in sentence structures and repetition of the same ideas in different essays, are widespread. Moreover, the book has very little information on television and online journalism, in spite of the fact that number of these has been increased significantly now. Above all, *Mass Media in Post-1990 Nepal* is a must read book not only by the media students but also other intellectuals and policy makers.

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