Social Media Content and Credibility

(Situation analysis of news shared on Facebook by Journalists from Nepal)

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Abstract

The qualitative research is conducted using status exploration and structured interviews of civil society members and has studied the credibility of messages posted on Facebook by journalists. Survey has observed 749 Facebook statuses for February, March, and July of 2020 posted by various Journalists working from Sunsari District. The journalists are selected using a systematic random sampling method. Posts are observed on the basis of Fact, Attribution of authentic sources, Balance in coverage, clarity in message etc. The content analysis shows Journalists are conscious of their responsibility towards society and do post factual information on social media however they sometimes make mix-ups of news and opinion. Some journalists post sensational information to increase their viewership but that has decreased their credibility. Civil society members and information users' perspectives pointed out that people follow the Facebook posts of journalists for news updates, however, they verify it with other credible journalists and or trusted mainstream media. Journalists share information using Facebook however fact-checking and balance seem lacking. To understand social media content media literacy is necessary.

Keywords: online media, social responsibility, credibility, media literacy

Introduction

Research statement

Journalists share most of their news using social media however much of that information lack fact and objectivity. People prefer to read/watch/listen to the news on social media especially shared by journalists because the news shared by journalists is comparatively more reliable than that done by others (Cassidy, 2007). However, lack seems in refinement in fact check, objectivity, clarity, and presentation. On the other hand, media literacy is necessary to distinguish trustable messages among the information distributed over electronic media (Acharya 2018; Zhang et al. 2018) This research intends to explore the situation of credibility of the news shared by journalists on Facebook, especially during a crisis situation.

Social Media Content and Credibility in Crisis Communication

Traditional Media i.e. Print, Radio and TV have centuries-long historical evolution and are regarded as the source of news for a long span of time, however online media platform has become popular mass media in recent decades. After the increased access to the internet, various platforms emerged that have connected people in a social platform and gave a platform to share thoughts, feelings, ideas and emotions which is laterally called social media (Acharya, 2013). The emergence of such interactive social media has increased people's participation in information generation and sharing regardless of profession. People belonging to any profession in society use social media, therefore it has become a perpetual tool for information receiving and sharing. Social media is popular due to its immediate (fast), universal and interactive nature in comparison to traditional media (Acharya 2018) therefore information dissemination and feedback can be made quickly. Similarly, organizations are also trying to offer social media platforms for two-way communication open to anyone that builds trust between the organization and persons (Kang 2010). When a journalist posts news on social media, a number of people view, read, and listen to it and many make reactions by sharing, liking, comment. They like or dislike social media information, if they find it very interesting or of their concern, they make comments and/or share it with their circle which has helped to increase the audience base of media.

Journalists

Journalists collect information, verify the facts, write it in a factual way to ensure the clarity of the message and disseminate it via any means of mass media i.e. Print, Radio, Television, Online etc. "Journalist means a person who collects or edits materials to be published in magazines, and this term includes an editor and columnist." (Press and Publication Act, 1991).

Working journalist means a person who does communication-related business or service as a main business and is engaged either whole-time or part-time in a communication enterprise in consideration for remuneration, ...this term also includes a person who is related with the profession of journalism such as a chief editor, editor who collects, produces, edits or transmits news items in, or a correspondent, stringer, news reader, programme director, translator, web designer, columnist, photo journalist, press cameraperson, cartoonist, programme producer or operator, audio or language editor, in a communication enterprise (Working Journalist Act 1993)

Online Journalists explore online resources using the Internet and provide clear and accurate timely information (The Online Journalist (May 2000).

Social Media

Social Media is a web-based application that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content a.k.a. UGC (Thomas (2013) quotes Kaplan and Haenlein 2010. 60.) Scholars have accepted it as an "Alternative platform of public communication" (Thomas, 2013 Quotes Poell & Borra, 2011, p. 60). Social Media is a rise of "mass self-communication this brings a process of users building their own mass communication systems via SMS, blogs, vlogs,

podcasts, wikis" (Thomas, 2013 quotes to Castelles, 2009). Social media are internet-based applications that contain digital content that is generated by its users. Texts, photos, videos and data are such content which is generated through online interactions. Users have a specific profile for their identity and make interaction in their social networks. There are 13 types of social media. Among them blogs, forums, microblogs, photo/video sharing, social networks and business networks are used mainly (Acharya, 2013). Among various social media platforms Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, twitter, Wechat, Tik Tok, QQ, LinkedIn, Viber etc. are the most popular social media in Nepal (Statista, 2020; Alexa, 2020).

The credibility of social media increases public participation and the effectiveness of communication in digital media (Kang 2010). The increased engagement of people in social media have drawn scholars' global attention to the credibility of news content on online platforms. Professional journalists' forums and institutions like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), and Press Council of Nepal (PCN) have recognized the credibility of news as a basic component of professional journalism. For maintaining professionalism, those organizations have provisioned ethics for online and social media news sharing in their respective journalist codes of ethics (IFJ, 2020, SPJ, 2014, PCN 2016). Each code of conduct has emphasized credibility of every information shared by journalists shall be maintained, for which each journalist should be socially accountable while collecting, producing and disseminating factual, clear and balanced information content.

Persons belonging to every profession in society need credible information to perform day-to-day work. Credibility matters much to the message recipients because single false information may lead to a big loss. Message credibility matters to professionals to share and discuss factual information, to formulate practical policies and implement them. Similarly, credible information helps business managers for making business strategies to sustain and grow in a competitive market whereas false information may lead to destruction in a while. Social and political leaders need credible information for understanding society and formulate policies, programs and strategies to work for the benefit of the needful.

During the corona pandemic, people are sitting in home due to lockdown and facing panic situations which have compelled the majority of people to rely upon online platforms to fulfill their information needs. They are seeking information from every possible means that is in their access. On the other hand, journalists share pre-published as well as first-hand news and information through social media. Pre-published news in other media goes through the editorial gatekeeping process of the particular process therefore it can be considered to be more credible but, there are published much such news which is not verified by the users that is arising credibility issues more pungently. Meantime questions about media accountability regarding the media content especially about the fact and credibility has been aroused. The question of factuality and credibility is even more prominent on online and social media. For this reason, institutional efforts have begun to check the fact and identify fake news. 'South Asia Fact Check' website southasiacheck.org initiated by Panos South Asia and Nepal Fact Check' initiated by Center for Media Research (CMR) have begun checking about the fact and fake (The Kathmandu Post).

Statement of Problem

Since the trend of sharing news via social media has been increased globally, the questions of credibility also rose. To check the fact and credibility various researches have been carried out in many countries. Such studies have helped to understand the credibility measures and level of credibility of online media and social media. Some research on the use of social media by journalists, journalist accountability, etc seems to have been carried out in Nepal. But it seems less research have been done regarding the credibility of news content of social media in Nepal. Therefore, I have selected this topic to carry out research on. This research intends to find whereabouts the state of credibility of news shared by journalists on Facebook on the ground of the 'Social Responsibility theory of Media.' The following are research questions to carry out the research.

- What are the elements that make news shared in social media credible?

- How credible does the audience find the information over the social media shared by journalists?

Objectives of the study

The objective of this research is:

- To observe the credibility of information shared by journalists over the popular social media Facebook.

Review of Literature

Scholars have accepted the credibility of news content is based on the ground of journalists' responsibility to society (McQuail 2010; Kharel 2016; Acharya 2018) on which factual, balanced and clear information is disseminated. Media should give forum for exchange of comments and criticism therefore it should be a "common carrier of public expression", reflect representative picture of each groups in the society and should point out and present 'goals and values' of the society (Mc.Quail 2010). Similarly, 'Social Responsibility Theory of Communication' believes, journalist (media) is socially responsible to serve with factual and credible information without any discrimination because the society has faith to the media. Hutchings commission (1947) that coined the term 'social responsibility', outlined the American press being limited inside 'Privileged and powerful minorities' and unable to represent general people voices. To address the situation, the commission suggested to set the journalistic standard that responsible press should disseminate complete truthful and comprehensive information (McQuail 2010). Hutchings Commission has conceptualized free press without any censorship where the media content is subjected to face public discourse and media should accept obligation of public interference and professional self-regulations (Communication Theories, 2020). The concept was elaborated as Social Responsibility Theory by Sibert, F., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. in 1956 (Acharya, 2073 B.S. p. 537; Cassedy 2007) which, gave ground to many countries especially democratic ones to provision journalist code of conduct to make the journalists and media more accountable towards the society.

McQuail accepts the advantage of the Internet as a fast and convenient medium for accessing global news. Interrogating the news sources personally increases understanding

through interaction however, he claims that the use of the internet as a news source is still limited. "It is still very uncertain what information needs are met by the internet and it suffers from uncertainty concerning reliability and lack of trust. The presentation of news on the Internet may be less effective in communication terms than the typically ordered presentation in print television news" (McQuail, 2010, p. 533). Kharel suggests professionalism and journalist code of conduct enables journalists and media to enhance their credibility. He suggests the journalists are to be educated and supervised in terms of the Journalist Codes of Conducts and should be kept reminded about their obligations towards society. "The journalists social responsibility emphasizes journalistic information as a social good and not merely as a commodity" (Kharel, 216 p. 4). He stresses upon the clarity of the message to increase the understanding. For it he suggests to share clear information with no ambiguity. Cassidy believes journalists see themselves in ''neutral'' role. They think they should follow norms of objectivity and report accurate, factual, and verifiable information.

Cassidy 2007 argues on the basis of Pew research that in the past two decades, the public's overall trust in the press has declined. Cassidy says that news sites associated with a newspaper or television network are taken as more credible than others. He states the online sites of major news organizations are higher in believability than Web-only sites. More Journalists themselves rate online news sites lower in credibility than did the public. The study points errors increased because journalists post news stories in hurry and editors spend less time in verification.

The Center for Media Research (CMR) report states skills to utilize the Internet increases better journalism. It states "Journalists also use social media for purposes that are beneficial to their work. Journalists use various online and social media tools to collect and/or verify their information and most of them use social media. Similarly, they use public comments on news website, blog and social media as the measure to scale popularity and also count likes in facebook and re-sharing of the link of particular news. The report states social media's reliability has increased over last few years and many journalists think social media can be reliable as mainstream media if used responsibly. "Individual biases" affects the accuracy and credibility of information in the social media. However, "Facebook, is the second biggest source of information for many journalists" (CMR, 2013).

'The Commission of the Freedom of Press' chaired by Chicago University Chancellor Robert Hutchins has major contribution to form the Theory of Social responsibility. The commission was formed to address the widespread criticism of the American Press. The criticisms were focused upon the newspaper contents to be politically bias, promoting sensationalism and commercialism. Mc. Quail claims this to be the first inquiry commission formed in government's initiation. Mandate for the commission was to study about the weakness of the media that couldn't meet the needs of the society. And also suggest possibilities of reformation to address the problem. Hutching's commission report (Blanchard, 1977) pointed out the failure of the US newspapers. It found it to be limited inside 'Privileged and powerful minorities' and unable to represent the voices outside the limited circle. The report coined the term social responsibility. It set the journalistic standard that responsible press should disseminate complete truthful and comprehensive information that gives a meaning.

Media should give forum of exchange of comments and criticism. It should be a "common carrier of public expression." It should reflect representative picture of each group in the society. Also should point out and present 'goals and values' of the society (Mc.Quail, 2010). Latter, communication scholars like Siebert, Peterson and Schramm explained the theory (Communication Theories, 2020).

Credibility Measures

While studying the existing practices and international norms credibility of news is measured with various indicators. Journalistic practice, media literacy and freedom of expression may impact on the understanding the credibility of a news message. Content indicators and context indicators may give a substantial knowledge to understand news indicators. Title representativeness, click bait title, quotes from outside experts, citation of organizations and studies, calibration confidence, logical fallacies, tone, inference are discussed under content indicators. Whereas originality, fact-checked, representative citations, reputation of citations, number of ads, number of social calls and their placements and spammy ads are discussed under context indicators (Zhang et al. 2018).

BBC has been following a set of standard practice that is neutral role of journalists. Each BBC journalist has to follow norms of objectivity and has to report accurate, factual and verifiable information in their coverage. to maintain its credibility and transparency. It has made its contents credible by following truth, fact, impartial news products (BBC Guideline, 2020). Objectivity, impartiality, balance, neutrality and facts to be the measures of credibility of news (Harcup, 2005). Believability, fairness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness as the indicators of credibility (Cassidy, 2007 quotes Johnson & Kaye, 2002). Journalists should see themselves in 'neutral' role. They should follow norms of objectivity and report accurate, factual, and verifiable information for credibility. (William P. Cassidy, 2007). Responsibility towards society, clarity in the message, facts in contents and good presentation style enhance credibility in the news (Kharel, 2016).

On the basis of above understanding, the credibility can be listed as following.

- Accuracy, Objectivity, Factual, Truthful

- Balance, Neutrality and impartiality

- Verifiability, Believability, Trust, Fairness, Transparency

- Clarity, Comprehensiveness

- Responsibility, Accountability

Methodology

This is a qualitative research conducted in two steps i.e. analysis of the social media contents and interview with civil society as social media users.

Analysis of the social media contents

As the fast mean of message dissemination, social media domain is chosen and among various social media Facebook is selected to study because it is the largest user based social media in

the world with over 26 billion users (Statista, 2020) and the second most used social media website in Nepal (Alexa 2020). YouTube is ranked as the first position but it is mostly used by journalists who work for audio visual media, I want to view the credibility of message of journalists working for any media (print, radio, tv, online etc.).

I have studied social media posts of local journalists shared in Facebook in February, March and July 2020. In the first two months, the epidemy of coronavirus (later named COVID-19 and declared a "global pandemic") was rapidly spread in the world and appeared cases in Nepal. People feared and panicked with the unprecedented pandemic. Most of the days people were locked down in their homes having less access to other media. In July 2020 the lockdown was partially lifted and people were in the phase of overcoming the fear and gradually coming back to normal life. To analyze the credibility of messages delivered by journalists via social media this survey was carried out among senior journalists, active journalists in social media, and journalists having affiliation with sister journalist organizations of various political parties (i.e. Media Center, Press Union, Press Chautari). In average, journalists were found to have posted at least 1 to 21 posts in a day during the study period which have been analyzed on the basis of the above-mentioned credibility indicators.

Interview

In order to identify components of journalist's social media message credibility, six representatives from civil society were selected to discuss the situation. To make it more representative, University lectures, government and public service officers, businessmen, social activists and political leaders who use Facebook as a source of news and information were selected to ask the structured questions. It is assumed that these professionals have a better understanding of media literacy. The interview focused on credibility in the social media posts by the journalists in their observation and the impact of news credibility on the various sectors of society.

Sample Size

In the first phase survey was conducted in the journalists working in Sunsari District and the total population is 141 (Male-125, Female-16) members of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (March 2020, FNJ Sunsari). I have selected 13 members using systematic random sampling using randomize command and 3 members using convenient sampling to make the sample more inclusive and best representative. (The representative of women journalists and journalists from the majority Tharu community and minority Muslim community did not appear in the systemic sample) The sample comprised 14 members (Male-12, Female-2) two journalists had not posted anything within the period, altogether 750 posts on Facebook have been studied. In the second phase, 9 persons have interviewed among them 6 members of civil society and 3 national experts on fact check, objective journalism and access to information. Findings are analyzed and presented in texts on the basis of the Social Responsibility Theory of Mass communication.

Discussion

Like other professionals, Journalists are also stimulated by sensationalism and proximity, conflict of interest, etc. may prevent them to disseminate factual information. However, journalist also posts their personal feelings, personal expression, and opinion on social media they mostly share the newsworthy information and often share (media links of) the published or broadcasted news stories that they have reported. Journalists are conscious on "Social media is a mass media equal to the mainstream media" and the majority number post verified information but some of them post unverified information. Experienced and long-time contributed journalists do not necessarily post verified information on social media, a lot of unattributed news content is shared on Facebook.

Table 1

Social Media Posts categorized by types

Respondent	Total Posts	Video etc. Shares	Direct News	Views	Personal Posts	News Share
1	31	11	4	5	4	7
2	10	-	2	2	6	0
3	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	52	5	8	10	23	6
5	7	-	6	1	0	0
6	118	7	20	20	5	66
7	180	10	52	75	43	0
8	140	3	25	54	48	10
9	79	27	14	10	16	12
10	1	1	-	-	-	-
11	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	10	2	6	-	1	1
13	73	16	6	7	32	12
14	24	4	2	10	7	1
15	11	5	2	-	3	1
16	13	1	1	9	2	-
Total	749	92	148	203	190	116

Note. Data source field survey, 2020

Altogether 749 Facebook posts of 16 journalists were observed and they are categorized into major 5 categories i.e. sharing video and news posts by others, direct news posts, views, personal posts, and news shares (done by themselves for various media). Although all categories reflect the tendency of the posts, Direct news posts, Views on particular issues, and News shares and categories were analyzed. As everyone was under unprecedented huge fear of the pandemic, the posts reflected fear of the society but the majority of journalists found to post relevant factual posts, stories of hope and persuasive instructions for keeping the public safe from the infection of coronavirus. Good gatekeeping work has been observed on the posts which can be related to their responsibility towards society. Every day there was disappointing news of the spread of the pandemic and the case was becoming more panic because neither there was any treatment nor people knew the proper way to stay safe from the infection. While observing the journalist's news posts on Facebook news have found shared with proof using sources and photos. Posts were sometimes expressed in literature that was appreciated by the audience. Personal views were expressed with full citation and some personal posts have a social message.

The clarity in expression, convincing and effective presentation, strict opinion against false, sensational content on media, global news that is not in the media is covered. Journalists have clear looking angle on news issues, and news analyses about news were posted. A representation of tourism, culture, diversity is seen. In some posts, irony, news based on opinion, sensation etc, were seen and some misleading information was posted. Journalists have a humanitarian angle on issues. While posting data, the verification part seemed weaker, some news posts needed to be verified, no citation. Among lots of opinions posted many posts seemed to be news-based. Reactions to news seem logical. Hopeful news are shared. Some issues that were trended in social media i.e. spraying medicines from helicopters etc. were opposed. The journalists also suggested to their readers not to believe such fake news.

Views were served with analysis and news with evidence. Other's news were shared with reference and views were elaborated. Verified information was served in clear posts that helped to increase media literacy in society. A piece of news found to share information about 4th coronavirus infected was found on 27 March, 2020 that has cited the WHO. Opinions and news were served with their links to the original posts. Verification before sharing also has been seen. During the pandemic, journalists found sharing messages of humanity, the message of hope and even news of the watchdog themselves. Few sensational, baseless and blaming posts were also seen that accused Nepalese people in foreign employment as if they sent a packet of the pandemic e.g. a post stated: "Earlier they sent remittance, now they are sending corona." The posts also contained news and logical opinions, news that increase hope and give further information on Covid 19. They also suggested that strong commitments to media should be medium of factual information. On the basis of the journalist's codes of ethics, the journalists seem to be socially responsible while sharing information via social media however, the gatekeeping parts are still missing.

Public engagements on posts

It has been assumed that people follow journalists' posts for news updates in the difficult situation of access to mainstream media, good public participation i.e. reactions,

comments, etc has been seen in the posts of the journalists. Commenters have raised questions of clarification in most of the posts. Obviously, they have given their positive or negative versions on the opinion posts in public issues. The remarks on journalists' news posts on Facebook, civil society members have given different opinions.

Civil society, a mix of intellectuals from various professions is the serious consumer of information. It continuously observes the mass media content, judges and makes opinion that is reflected as public opinion. The survey carried in the civil society has dug out some points on the tendency of use of Facebook to disseminate information by journalists. In the eye of civil society, many people view Facebook for news updates and they especially follow journalists' posts because in many cases they post news flashes earlier than in the online or other mainstream media. Even if they have access to mainstream media like Radio, TV etc, people prefer to get information in hand, with a mobile device, therefore they use Facebook because it is convenient and quickly updated. Many people follow only reputed journalists posts, whose credibility is higher. However, they verify the facebook news posts with other experienced journalists' posts whom they trust more and further with the national and local media that they consider trustworthy. The process of using social media helps in public discourse to form public opinion.

Journalists' posts are rather more reliable and factual than that of general people however; one has to go through cross-verification to other reliable sources. Until they are not verified, the information is not accepted. Other than a few professional journalists, most of the journalists are not professional. They are financially biased and do it for earning money from sources by promoting or bargaining their business. Politically biased is another problem of professional journalists. Social media gives freedom to the individual to share their feelings and views, therefore, journalists also may post opinions and/or posts together that confuse and eventually reduces credibility. Everyone reflects his/her professional skills or attitude on social media. Civil society judges the verification work is very weak. The majority of journalists give less time to check the facts. The survey has outlined some weaknesses of journalists while posting news on Facebook that are less use of citation and attribution, weakness in fact-checking and scarcity of objectivity.

The study has outlined some points to consider a news post credible they are as follows.

Reliable sources should be attributed to an authentic, reliable, or trustworthy source. Every post should go under Information Verification.

The news should cover either side of the issue and should be presented in a balanced way.

Factual information should be published objectively for which they should do fact-checking work before posting any information, self-gatekeeping should be maintained.

Journalists are politically biased because they are aligned to any political party. Journalists are politically biased, moreover, the media houses which they work for, make them even more biased.

Sometimes even if they write news in favor of fabricated information, it does not give a good impact in long run. Such news harm all parties.

Every journalist should maintain a news source. Journalists should not be aligned with any political parties for objectivity. Although they can cultivate relationships for the specialization of their beats.

Impact of fake information

Some journalists post sensational issues in order to increase their viewership which reduces their credibility. Many Journalists are politically biased therefore they might Leak information, hide and falsify information as per their benefit. A piece of false information may cause a vital loss to people in any occupation. in the knowledge field people, it is more serious, because if one recites false information, that even decreases the credibility of the person. Fake news is not good practice it harms everyone, in every profession. Sometimes fake and false news may do good to handful of people but eventually, it causes big damage to society and the journalist him/herself. If the news is in your favor but is not reliable, it gives a bad impact. If news presented accusing someone baselessly, it demoralizes the person without any reason. On the other hand, writing one sided news has reduced balance which itself declines the credibility of the information.

Social media is a platform to share personal feelings and views where one can post news or views by these users can easily be confused. Users should understand the information separately whether it is news or views. Understanding of the message depends upon the skill of the user which is possible when people use self-discretion capability and this capacity is increased by media literacy. The capacity to understand social media content helps to understand its credibility.

Conclusion

People use social media for news updates and they follow journalists for such updates. Journalists prefer to post newsworthy information on Facebook and people watch their posts for firsthand information however they verify the information with other media. Although they post information responsibly, sometimes they mix up news and views together, they give less efforts on fact check and bias reduction which is reducing the credibility of their posts.

The journalists are conscious about social media being a mass media like other mainstream media, they look conscious of choosing the information and attributing them while sharing. However, the information verification part is still lacking.

Distinguishing between news and views seems to be posted clearly to ensure the easy understanding of common people.

People who seek news and information should be judgmental while getting news, and social and political leaders should work to increase media literacy. Media freedom should be practiced with responsibility. Sometimes journalists might post sensational contents to increase viewership which literally causes damage to their credibility.

This research paper can be useful for journalists, civil society, information users policymakers, educators, students, academic researchers etc. The research has limitations i.e. the survey covers only journalists working from Sunsari District and has studied their posts only posted on Facebook within the certain time span of the covid 19 pandemic 2020. Future research can be carried out on other social media sites with broader geographic areas i.e. province level, national level and a longer time span including normal situations. Broader surveys from the user perspective and journalist perspective can also be done in the future to understand the multiple dimensions of the issues more precisely.

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