The Influence of Social-media on Agenda-setting in Nepali Journalism

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of social media on traditional media's role in shaping public opinion and agenda-setting in Nepal. Social media has emerged as a powerful medium, surpassing traditional media in terms of influence and reach. Drawing on the theoretical framework of agenda-setting, this study explores the current state of social media in Nepal. Using case studies and interviews with experts as primary sources and considering social media's purpose, use, and impact, the article presents a comprehensive analysis.The findings reveal that social media increasingly plays a stronger role in agenda-setting, while traditional media's ability to shape opinions and facilitate debates is diminishing. With its fast-paced dissemination, affordability, and visible impact, social media has overtaken traditional media in setting the agenda. However, the unrestricted production of content on social media poses risks, as it lacks an editing process. Traditional media, now relying on social media, faces intensified competition. To remain relevant and avoid weakening, news media must invest in content research and adapt to changing usage patterns. Upholding journalistic standards while leveraging the strengths of social media is crucial for traditional media in Nepal.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, New-media, Newsroom, Public-Opinion,

Introduction

Journalism constitutes the systematic practice of collecting, editing, and disseminating news to the intended audience, with its primary objective being the provision of information to the public. This procedure is commonly referred to as the newsroom process. A robust newsroom possesses the potential to effectively establish, advocate for, and communicate specific agendas. Nevertheless, in light of the increasing prominence of social media, the effectiveness of the traditional newsroom is subject to change. Journalism is widely regarded as a paramount component within the field of Mass Media.

As described by McQuail, "Mass Media" refers to the organized means of openly and distantly communicating with a multitude of receivers within a short timeframe. However, the emergence of the Internet has prompted a re-evaluation of the influence exerted by traditional Mass Media. These advancements in communication technology have profoundly impacted media assessment, including the fundamental concept of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting, an inquiry into the media's role in shaping public discourse, has been a subject of scrutiny for over six decades. Continuous technological progress continues

to reshape the character and structure of media, warranting a comparative exploration of agenda-setting within the domain of social media, the primary mass communication medium of the latest generation.

Nepal's unique journey in mass communication spans centuries, with the printing press arriving in 1851, four centuries after its invention in 15th-century Germany by Johannes Gutenberg. In contrast to Western nations, where online news platforms emerged in the 1990s, Nepal embraced them in 1995, and social media has notably outpaced the growth of online journalism in the country. As of June 2023, the Nepal Telecommunication Authority reports 38.88 million fixed and mobile broadband users, representing 133 per cent of the population. This highlights the integration of internet usage into the daily lives of Nepali citizens, with social media platforms playing a prominent role and accounting for the majority of bandwidth usage.

The COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal substantially increases internet consumption, placing strain on Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to meet heightened consumer demands. During this period, traditional newsrooms face challenges due to government-imposed lockdowns, leading to changes in audience habits. Many turn to social media as a primary source of information. The surge in internet users, combined with the dominance of social media, underscores the evolving landscape of media consumption and its impact on traditional media outlets, especially in extraordinary circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives

Social media has become an inescapable communication medium that permeates every sector of human life, and journalism is facing its direct impact. This article aims to explore two specific objectives:

- Assess the impact of the rise of social media platforms on the dissemination of information and the integrity of traditional media.
- Evaluate the agenda-setting power of social media in Nepal.

By examining these objectives, we can gain insights into the transformative effects of social media on journalism and understand its role in shaping public discourse and news consumption patterns.

Theoretical Perspective

The theory of 'agenda-setting' explores how the media influences public perception and emphasizes the importance of specific issues. This study builds upon the foundational work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s, who developed the 'agenda-setting' theory with a focus on the influence of newspapers. Before their contributions, debates surrounding the media's effect ranged from theories emphasizing high media influence to those proposing lower levels of impact.

In the present landscape, where social media dominates previously influential media platforms such as newspapers, radio, and television, it becomes crucial to examine the current state of agenda-setting. This study aims to conduct a 'gap analysis' specifically within the context of Nepal.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal agendas, whether the issues arise from individuals, institutions, or policy levels. Additionally, the mass audience and media itself contribute to the emergence and amplification of these issues. However, it is important to recognize that the media acts as a conduit in this process. Understanding the concept of agenda-setting necessitates considering the intricate relationship between these components.

Conventional models of agenda setting held that mainstream media influence the public agenda by leading audience attention, and perceived importance, to certain issues. However, increased selectivity and audience fragmentation in today's digital media environment threaten the traditional agenda-setting power of the mass media (Feezell, 2017). In the context of Nepal, social media holds the predominant share of the digital media landscape. onsequently, the role of social media in agenda-setting has expanded significantly.

Methodology: Materials and Analysis

This article employs a qualitative analysis methodology, utilizing case studies, document analysis, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) as the primary research methods. The case study approach includes three selected cases, encompassing both past and present scenarios: Occupy Baluwatar, #GobackIndianMedia, and Balen Shah vs. Onlinekhabar.

Key Informant Interviews are conducted with notable figures in the field of journalism and social media in Nepal. The participants included Rajendra Dahal, former President of the Press Council Nepal; Sudhir Sharma, former Editor-in-Chief of the Kantipur Dainik; Mahesh Swar, CEO of the KMG; Laxman Humagai, Chairman of the Advertising Board and former CEO of the Image Channel; Victor Paudel, a social media influencer and founder of the Routine of Nepal Bandha; Gokul Baskota, former Minister of Communications; activist Jagannath Lamichhane, and Chief Election Commissioner Dinesh Thapalia. These individuals possess extensive knowledge of journalism and social media in Nepal.

Furthermore, this study draws on articles, policy arrangements, and study reports specifically focusing on social media in Nepal. These materials are used as secondary sources to provide additional insights and context. Additionally, a limited amount of data utilized in this study is derived from official social media handles associated with the respective media organizations.

By employing a combination of case studies, KIIs, document analysis, and secondary sources, this article aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the influence and impact of social media in Nepal's media landscape.

The Decline of Traditional Media

According to the World Economic Forum, from 2006 to 2016, newspaper circulation in India increased by an impressive 60 per cent, in stark contrast to the United Kingdom, which saw a 12 per cent decrease. In the United States, Germany, and France, newspaper circulation declined by 7 per cent, 3 per cent, and 3 per cent, respectively (Tharoor, 2017). In 2015-16, newspaper circulation in India peaked at an impressive 612,385,810 copies, as reported by the Registrar of Newspapers for India in 2022. Subsequently, data from the 'Office of Registrar of Newspapers for India' shows that during the 2020-21 fiscal year, newspaper circulation in all languages stood at 386,648,237 copies.

However, unlike in India and other countries, specific data concerning the extent of this decline in Nepal is not readily available. Media executives do acknowledge a continuous decrease in newspaper circulation (Dahal, Shrestha, and Karki, 2078). The outbreak of COVID-19 further exacerbated the situation, resulting in a decline not only in newspaper circulation but also in the number of printed pages. This decline confirms the weakening circulation trend. Kantipur Media Group (KMG), holding the largest market share in the Nepali media industry, acknowledges the loss of its newspaper market. According to Mahesh Swar, the CEO of KMG, newspapers have experienced a substantial decline of at least 70 per cent in market share during this transition. He further stated, "We lost 70 to 80 per cent of the market due to COVID-19, and there is no possibility of returning to the previous situation once the pandemic is over" (M. Swar, personal communication, November 12, 2021). The decline in newspaper circulation is a global phenomenon, and Nepal is no exception. The impact of COVID-19 has accelerated this trend, necessitating a re-evaluation of the newspaper industry's future amidst the growing dominance of digital media.

The introduction of radio marked the beginning of broadcasting, followed by the emergence of television as the subsequent "new media." However, with the rapid advancement of technology, television has now transitioned to the online realm. Local cable television networks have expanded their reach to a global audience, while terrestrial and satellite TV stations in Nepal have also made the shift to online platforms.

The emergence of online television, alongside satellite, cable, and terrestrial TV, has transformed the concept of accessibility. Previously, it was challenging to determine viewership for specific programs, even when considering the ratio of televisions per population as stated in census data. Researchers used to rely on estimations based on ratings, which often included a margin of error. However, the introduction of Fiber to the Home, direct-to-home, and online streaming systems now enables real-time data on program popularity for television channels. Applications and video-sharing platforms provide live viewer counts, allowing anyone to track the number of viewers for live TV content. Furthermore, the rise of Over-the-Top platforms has revolutionized the production and distribution of cinema and television programs.

These advancements have had a significant impact on print media. However, media operators express concerns about the potential for misinformation dissemination through social media, emphasizing the need to strengthen traditional media (Dahal, Shrestha, and Karki, 2022). As the landscape continues to evolve, striking a balance between the benefits of new media platforms and the integrity of traditional media becomes crucial for the industry's future.

The Rise of Social Media as an Integral Component

In recent times, social media has become an indispensable element for every media platform. This interdependence among different media outlets concerning news dissemination was not observed before. Rajendra Dahal, former president of Press Council Nepal and founding editor of Himal Khabarpatrika, shares his experience to illustrate this shift:

> "I listen to the newspaper on Radio Sagarmatha every morning. The radio broadcasts newspaper content, including editorials. I no longer need to read newspapers. Even through the radio, the content comes from newspapers. So, it doesn't matter if I read newspapers; it has also saved me time." (R. Dahal, personal communication, February 4, 2023)

Radio stations now broadcast newspaper content in the morning, as do television channels. Furthermore, radio broadcasting has transformed into an audio-visual medium through social media platforms. Radio programs can now be watched by users on video-sharing sites like 'TikTok', Facebook and YouTube. Just as newspapers began to be read on the radio, radio itself has evolved into a visual medium. As a result, the emergence of social media alongside traditional media necessitates a redefinition of mass media in the digital age.

Presently, Kantipur Television is not solely reliant on its mobile application for broadcasting television content. Kantipur Television programs can also be viewed on video-sharing sites like YouTube. As of June 5, 2023, Kantipur Television's YouTube channel has garnered 31 million subscribers. This significant viewership reflects the number of people who watch news and programs from Kantipur Television's video content shared on YouTube. Kantipur is not the only channel streaming traditional media content through social media.

As of the study period, June 5, 2023, Nepal Television's YouTube channel has over 717,000 subscribers. Himalayan Television has surpassed 1.3 million subscribers, AP1 Television has amassed over 1 million subscribers, Avenues Television has gained more than 600,000 subscribers, and Sagarmatha Television has accumulated over 550,000 subscribers. The recently established television channel 'Galaxy 4K' has achieved an impressive 880,000 subscribers on its YouTube channel.

Additionally, as of June 5, 2023, Kantipur Television has more than 1.6 million followers on Facebook. Viewers can access Kantipur Television's programs and news

through their Facebook page. Approximately 200,000 users also follow Kantipur Television on Twitter. Kantipur serves as just one example; other television channels and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are also extensively utilized. The reliance on satellite channels on social media platforms underscores the fact that traditional media cannot stay detached from the influence of social media.

Most newspapers in Nepal are now available online, and it is rare to find news sites that do not integrate social media. Beyond media outlets, the ability to share personalized content has increased the number of online visitors engaging with social media platforms.

Undoubtedly, as traditional media increasingly rely on social media, there is a transition in the role of agenda-setting to the new media. This shift is not solely due to the propagation of traditional media content on social platforms; rather, social media possesses distinct production and consumption attributes, constantly creating new influencers. Today, social media influencers wield more influence than television hosts, newspaper columnists, and radio presenters. Advertisers, who once favored traditional media, are now drawn to social media, underscoring the evolving impact of social media in its agenda-setting capacity.

Social Media Dominates

Social media has given rise to an influential brand in Nepal known as the 'Routine of Nepal Band' (RONB). Users across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok take its content seriously, as it conveys various information and messages. According to its founder, Victor Poudel, RONB ensures that all content is uploaded only after undergoing multiple verifications, even though it is not a news media.

In contrast, traditional media often presents news in a biased manner to serve certain interests. News outlets cater to numerous interest groups rather than prioritizing the public. RONB aims to provide a clear account of people's issues, which has fostered increasing trust among its followers (V. Paudel, personal conversation, 2023). Victor's argument is backed by the impressive reach of RONB's social media pages. As of June 5, 2023, Routine of Nepal Band has amassed 4 million followers on its Facebook page, 730,000 followers on Twitter, over 1.2 million followers on Instagram, more than 727,000 followers on TikTok, and nearly 200,000 subscribers on YouTube.

The accessibility of diverse content through social media has rendered the need to seek information from original news sources obsolete. Furthermore, social media algorithms priorities topics of interest for users. Through the use of artificial intelligence, user preferences are determined, and technology itself determines which subjects will be presented to each individual (Dahal, 2023).

Embracing an Alternative Path

Traditional print and electronic media have often fallen short in addressing issues pertinent to the people. With the extensive scope of traditional media, not all subjects receive the attention they deserve, resulting in the filtering out of many important topics.

Sudhir Sharma, the former editor of Kantipur Daily, argues that when social media, particularly YouTubers, pick up these filtered subjects, they gain popularity (S. Sharma, personal communication, February 11, 2023). This highlights the potential for social media to reach the same status as traditional media if it covers a wide range of sectors and genres.

Since its inception, journalism through newspapers has served as a platform for exchanging ideas. However, the debates surrounding newspaper articles often failed to find space within the newspaper itself as a "public sphere." Similarly, radio and television discussions lacked room for dissenting thoughts in their studios. Audiences relied on these mediums to form opinions on various subjects, but there was minimal room for response or feedback within the one-way communication paradigm, known as the "Linear model." This is because, among the countless viewers or readers, only a few would have their voices acknowledged. The advent of the second-generation Internet, referred to as Web 2.0, introduced interactivity, challenging the established linear model of newspapers, radio, and television.

This is the underlying reason why freely accessible social media pages like Routine of Nepal Bandh have become more influential compared to heavily invested traditional media outlets, including newspapers, radio, television, and online platforms.

"If traditional media had provided free access to people's issues, the chances of social media becoming what it is today would have been very low" (V. Poudel, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

As social media has become the primary channel for the exchange of ideas, individuals, organizations, political parties, and even leaders no longer wait for traditional means to convey their thoughts. During election periods, political activities are more prominent on social media than ever before, prompting the Election Commission to issue guidelines for social media usage. "The influence of social media has grown immensely. The guidelines were necessary as the uncontrolled spread of information became a concern. This issue is likely to become even more complex in the future" (D. Thapaliya, personal communication, February 7, 2023).

Case Study 1: Campaign against Sexual Violence

'Occupy Baluwatar - 2013' emerges as a groundbreaking "social media movement" against gender-based violence, setting an agenda that mainstream media fails to cover in Nepal. This movement highlights incidents ranging from financial exploitation of returning female migrant workers to rape cases. Microblogging platforms like Twitter and Facebook played a pivotal role in initiating this campaign, initially known as Occupy Baluwatar. Engaging young activists such as Jagannath Lamichhane, Vidushi Dhungel, Arpan Shrestha, Kashisdas Shrestha, Stuti Basnyat, Ishan, Sauvidhya Khadka, Ujwal Thapa, Pranika Koyu, the campaign aims to draw attention to the issue of gender violence (Shrestha, 2078 BS).

According to activist Jagannath Lamichhane, Occupy Baluwatar was established in response to the government's failure to address the issue of gender violence, leaving a void that the

movement seeks to fill, inspired by the persistent coverage by alternative media outlets. At the time of Occupy Baluwatar, only 25 per cent of the population had access to the Internet, and social media was still in its early stages. Although not as influential as it is today, social media connects a critical mass of urban-educated youth (J. Lamichhane, personal communication, February 23, 2023). The Occupy Baluwatar campaign symbolizes the collective passion of marginalized communities and draws inspiration from the social media-driven Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. During the early stages of social media adoption, Occupy Baluwatar made a sensational impact in the realm of agenda-setting.

Case Study 2: Earthquake and Hashtag #GoBackIndianMedia

The 2015 earthquake in Nepal showcases the diverse ways social media can be employed. During this period, social media served two main purposes. Firstly, it becomes a platform for coordinating rescue and relief efforts following the earthquake. Secondly, it plays a significant role in countering the aggressive portrayal of Nepal by Indian media. The hashtag "#GoBackIndianMedia" becomes a prominent case in point.

Facebook, the most popular social media site at that time, hosted various groups dedicated to providing relief to earthquake-affected areas. People from all walks of life, including students, businessmen, and traders, joined these groups. Leveraging the strength of social media, these groups collected relief materials and distributed them in the affected regions.

Simultaneously, a movement emerged to address the biased coverage of the earthquake by Indian media. As media content from India focused on sensationalism and ratings, a campaign against Indian mainstream media gained traction. This social media-driven campaign can be seen as a direct challenge to the mainstream media. The hashtag #GoBackIndianMedia originated organically on social media as individuals expressed their dissatisfaction. The campaign not only resonated within Nepal but also spread to India and Pakistan. On Twitter, the hashtag trended worldwide, holding the top position for a considerable duration.

The significance of the campaign is evident from the fact that it remained a top trending topic on Twitter for 10 consecutive hours on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2015. The demand for the Indian media to leave Nepal stemmed from their biased, one-sided, and insensitive reporting. By turning a tragedy into a television spectacle, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit during the earthquake response was seen as a public relations exercise rather than a sincere endeavor to aid the country (Datta, 2015). Ramesh Aryal, a youth from Kathmandu, initiated the hashtag with the message "We love India but we hate Indian media" to warn the Indian media against misrepresenting the situation. The social media outcry compelled the Indian media to retreat. User-generated social media content has effectively set robust agendas and successfully challenged the influence of the powerful Indian media.

Case Study 3: Balendra Shah and the Onlinekhabar

During the local elections held in 2022, all eyes were on the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. It was during this time that an online news article highlighted the controversy surrounding the use of the national flag by Balendra Shah, the mayoral candidate for the Kathmandu metropolis. The article raised questions about the compliance of Balendra's actions with Nepal's laws regarding the national flag. Being a popular rapper with a significant following on social media, Balendra attracted considerable attention.

Following the publication of the article, Balendra's supporters became actively engaged in an online campaign against the news outlet. They worked to diminish the number of Facebook likes for the news organization. Balendra's social media supporters responded aggressively on various platforms, including the mainstream media, even resorting to sharing news articles favouring Balendra to counter the attack.

The trend of unfollowing on Facebook has surged to the extent that over one hundred thousand followers have unfollowed the Onlinekhabar Facebook page. This impact has also rippled into the newsroom. To mitigate the ongoing damage, Onlinekhabar has initiated the practice of publishing stories that support Balen Shah.

The use of social media played a significant role when Balendra secured a resounding victory over candidates from the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML parties. Two prominent social media groups, Routine of Nepal Bandh and Meme Nepal, were instrumental in Balendra's electoral success. Despite his non-political background, these groups effectively promoted his candidacy.

Given the ongoing shutdowns and strikes by political parties in Nepal, the Facebook page Routine of Nepal Banda emerged as a crucial platform for establishing the electoral agenda for the 2022 local elections. Additionally, the Meme Nepal Facebook page, with over 1.4 million followers, actively campaigned for Balendra Shah by creating videos, songs, and satirical content targeting opposition candidates.

Apart from these two prominent groups, Balendra's election campaign extensively utilized organized and unorganized social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. The election results demonstrate the influence of social media and its ability to shape the agenda in the Kathmandu Metropolitan City elections, showcasing the power of online platforms in political campaigns. In the case of Balen Shah, Nepali traditional media fell short of effectively gauging his popularity. The discernible impact of social media on the agenda-setting process came to the forefront during this election.

Table 1 : Case studies of social media campaigning

Case	Topic	Activity	Impact
1	Occupy Baluwatar - A Social Media Movement against Gender Violence	The establishment of campaign agendas through social media, circumventing mainstream media coverage.	Heightened awareness of gender violence was achieved by leveraging social media platforms, despite the absence of coverage by traditional media outlets.
2	Earthquake and Hashtag #Gobackindianmedia	Leveraging social media platforms for conducting rescue and relief operations and for staging protests against biased Indian media coverage.	Mobilized global support and gained worldwide prominence on Twitter, underscoring the imperative for equitable and impartial reporting during crises. Social media users played a pivotal role in redirecting Indian media narratives.
3	Balendra Shah Vs OnlineKhabar.com	Online campaign supporting Balendra Shah and countering negative news by sharing favorable content.	Highlighted the significant influence of social media, particularly platforms such as Routine of Nepal Bandh and Meme Nepal, in driving Balendra's electoral triumph in Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Concurrently, Onlinekhabar experienced a decline in its Facebook followers.

Source: Agenda-setting study, 2023.

Can journalism serve as an alternative to agenda-setting ?

The case study sheds light on this question. While social media demonstrates its strong influence in agenda-setting, it raises an important and sensitive question about the role of mainstream journalism in this context. Experts involved in the study are asked to provide their insights, and they collectively agree that social media content may not undergo the rigorous editing process associated with journalism. Despite its agenda-setting function, social media is not purely a journalistic medium. It is concluded that while social media can disseminate information to the public, it does not necessarily provide news in the true sense.

All the experts acknowledge that social media gains significance because mainstream media often fails to directly cover issues closely connected to the people. The "gap" left by the mainstream media's limitations is filled by social media platforms, particularly YouTube. Paudel, the founder of Routine of Nepal Bandh, criticizes mainstream media for conveying one-sided messages and becoming a tool for propaganda, a sentiment that resonates with other participants to some extent. It is not uncommon for media outlets

to face scrutiny when there is an imbalance in the flow of news and ideas. When social media highlights such issues, it provides an opportunity for mainstream media to improve. In other words, social media can be seen as a "social auditor" of mainstream media.

However, there is a risk associated with social media in terms of promoting incorrect agendas due to the presence of raw and unverified content. In recent times, the rapid spread of disinformation, misinformation, and misleading messages through social media has become a concern.

The erosion of credibility within the news media landscape is a multifaceted phenomenon, primarily attributed to political predisposition, corporate encroachments, and instances of self-imposed censorship. Within this milieu, notable political actors, including KP Sharma Oli, Rabi Lamichhane, and Balen Shah, have undertaken concerted endeavours to discredit conventional newsrooms, often harnessing the amplifying capabilities of social media platforms. Concurrently, newsrooms find themselves ensnared in a crisis of professionalism, contending with challenges to their integrity and objectivity, while influential political figures and social media influencers mount assertive campaigns against their legitimacy.

Conclusion

Simultaneously, traditional media outlets have been compelled to embrace social media in response to the growing reach and impact of technology. Organized social media groups have demonstrated their ability to wield greater influence than mainstream media, as exemplified by the mobilization surrounding Balendra Shah's election as the mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Social media has become the primary platform for addressing public concerns and shaping the agenda based on people's needs. Consequently, there arises a necessity to redefine the role of media as a whole. Just as the Fourth Estate monitors the three branches of government, social media has the potential to function as a "watchdog of the watchdogs." There have been inquiries on social media regarding the content produced by mainstream newsrooms. This scrutiny has prompted the newsroom to heighten its vigilance. Such monitoring via social media serves as an inspiration for journalism to fortify itself. Given these dynamics, it appears that social media could be positioned as a fifth estate. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent risks of misinformation, as disinformation poses a constant threat to democracy.

To harness the potential of social media as a catalyst for positive change, comprehensive reforms within traditional media are imperative. By doing so, social media can be integrated as a facilitator of constructive transformation, ensuring the dissemination of accurate and reliable information while maintaining democratic values. Political party leaders have placed significant emphasis on social media. The news sector has been utilizing content sourced from social media platforms. This underscores the increasing effectiveness of social media in its agenda-setting role. However, there is a pressing need for refinement in social media content. It is essential for all stakeholders within the media ecosystem to

actively contribute to ensuring that social media content is grounded in facts and to take the initiative in promoting its positive utilization.

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