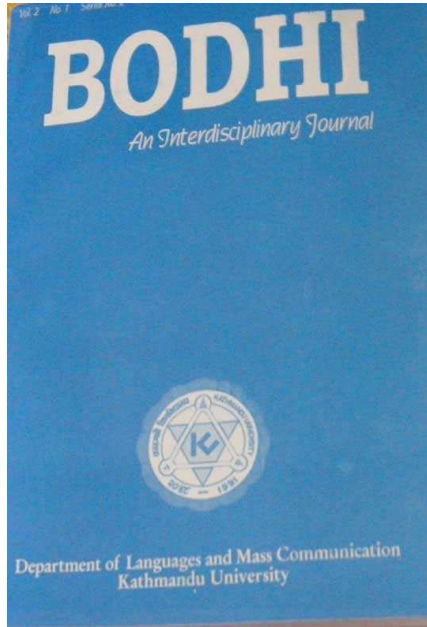


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Online News Portals in Nepal: An Overview

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Evolution of Online News Portals in Nepal

The history of online news portals does not date to long time back. According to Carlson (2000), the Palo Alto Weekly in California is the first newspaper to publish regularly in the web on January 19, 1994. In the South Asian context, Nepal pioneered on availing news content on the web in South Asia.

Kathmandu Post went on the web on September 1, 1995 is the first newspaper to avail its content into the web. In the beginning, its content was available at <http://www.cen.uiuc.edu/~rshresth/ktmpost/>. It was possible through the support from Mercantile Communications, one of the first ISP in the country and Rajendra Shrestha. Later, Mercantile Communications began availing those contents from its portal south-asia.com. (Upadhyaya, 2006, p. 117)

It was only in 1996, Indian media made first tentative foray into cyberspace (Adhikary, 2005). Bharatiya Janata Party set up first party website in the country in 1998 elections (Gunarathne, 2000, p. 105). *The Hindu*, *The Times of India* and *Indian Express* were other few major newspapers to setup website in India. These websites were low-tech and did carry all the news stories featured in the newspaper. But, after nearly a decade, the situation has drastically changed. Many of the online news portals are in the condition to compete with major sites in the world.

In Nepal, *Himal Southasian* was first magazine to have its own domain in the web. It went on the web through www.himalmag.com in 1997. This website has been availing the archive of the magazine since March 1996.

Nepalnews, started since November 1999, under domain www.nepalnews.com, is the first independent online that doesn't publish in hard copy or doesn't have any corresponding

broadcast media. Firstly, it availed content of other news papers that were available in south-asia.com. Later it began posting its own news and features. Now it has grown into an independent and one of the most credible news portals in the country. It claims that it has been visited more than one hundred and ten million times in the nine years of its inception.

There are over a dozen independent online news portals in Nepal that update round the clock offering service in both Nepali and English. Major publication houses avail their publication on the internet through their own domain. However, it has increased to a dozen in recent days. They provide all of their publications through the domain. Besides, they update at least once a day. Seven of them update their content as soon as news breaks. They had become major tools to carry breaking news even before 2006 (Kshetri, 2006).

Innovations in Online Media

When newslinenepal.com began service on the web, it had announced to launch an internet Television. However, it could not continue its operation for long and shut down within a year. Now, www.ana.com.np has launched its internet TV. ana is the Acronym for Associated News Agency Pvt. Ltd. It began its internet service following the success of People's movement in April 2006. Nepalnews has also been availing video reports to major stories now.

Besides, many Radio and TV stations are also accessible on the web. Many FM radios are available on the net under their own domain. www.kfm961.com is pioneer to avail Kantipur FM into web. Ujyalo National Network avails its Ujyalo FM into its website unn.com.np. Nepal FM is also accessible at www.nepalfmnetwork.com. Nepalnews also avails some FM Radios including BBC Nepali Service on the web. Mazzako.com, a website of Mercantile Communications, avails major Fm stations in the Kathmandu i.e. Maitri, Hits, Nepal and HBC. Besides, some radios from outside the valley are also accessible on the web. Bhaktapuronline claims to avail as many as 15 FM stations from across the country live.

Many of news and current affair based programs of Nepal Television including prime news are available on Nepalnews. It also avails many news-based programs of Nepal television including prime news in Nepali and English and top talk shows. Nowadays, it has also been availing Sagarmatha Television live. Ekantipur.com avails live broadcast of Kantipur Television.

Many portals are also leading from outside the valley. Lovelypokhara.com, sarasansar.com, danfe.com and cydberchitwan.com are the top online sites in the country operating outside the valley; first three from Pokhara and the next from Chitwan. Hamrodes.com carries round the clock news updates from Chitwan.

Besides, many other are also published, targeting the particular segment of the people. More than a dozen glamour sites are probably making more money than the established online news portals. Cybersansar, sarasansar, Lovelypokhara and danfe.com are the most popular sites in the country. They target youth focused, mainly producing glamorous contents and availing glamorous pictures of aspiring and established models. Cricket.com.np is renowned site operating since last year about news and updates in Nepalese cricket. But there are sites which have their grand initiation but short closure. However, the case is not similar to all others. A few news portals that arrived in the arena with great applaud have terminated their operation: www.parewa.com, www.nepaleyes.com, www.nepaljournal.com, www.newslinenepal.com.

Major strength of online media are their accessibility. Unlike many traditional media, they are accessible to the large part of the country. Given topographical situation of Nepal, it takes days for a newspaper or magazine to reach some parts of the country. Online media are free from these constrains. They can immediately update their content and are accessible across the globe.

So far 59 district headquarters have been linked with internet i.e. they can access dialup internet through local telephones. The internet penetration has been increasing; it increased by 0.04 percent in the first quarter of fiscal year 2007/2008 which is very encouraging (NTA, 2008). With this, the internet penetration in the country has reached 0.24%.

With advancement in telephone, especially increase in the number of mobile telephone users, the number of internet users is increasing. Many people are accessing internet into their mobile. Mero Mobile provides internet service to all customers while Nepal Telecom is providing the internet service for its postpaid mobile users. This also signals better future of online media.

Target Audience: Nepali Diaspora

Once, Nepali Diaspora used to read the magazines and newspapers carried by people from Nepal who came to visit home. Now, the situation has changed. They can not only read major magazines and newspapers but also find round the clock updates about their homeland from anywhere across the globe. It is made possible by many online news portals designed to serve the Nepali Diaspora. The portals of this kind are freenepal.com and nepaljapan.com. Nepalitimes.com also has more audience in Diaspora than within the country. This is reflected in the Reader's Response section of the print and online edition. Moreover, it can be seen from the first view of these sites like freenepal.com and nepaljapan.com that big portion of advertisement consists of those targeting the abroad audience, especially Nepali Diaspora.

Institutionalization of Online News Portals

Institutionalizing online news portals is foremost important for their development and sustainability. But in Nepalese context, they are in the initial stage of institutionalization. Consequently, they have neither clearly defined the functions of the staffs nor the salaries and benefits. As the government is yet to recognize such portals as media institution, many of them are free from taxes and other liabilities. But it is clear that initiations have

begun from private endeavor. Online Media Association of Nepal (OMAN) is one major output in this respect. An NGO working in the media sector, Freedom Forum Nepal is providing them support. OMAN's secretariat is established in the premises of Freedom Forum.

Legal Status of Online News Portals

Interim constitution of Nepal 2007 AD is the landmark legal document to recognize online media. The constitution did not only guarantee right to information and freedom of speech and expression but also gave clear status to all media as equal to print. Article 15 gives equal status to print, radio, television, online and other digital or electronic media. The Department of Information has decided to provide press accreditation cards to cyber or online journalists on 16 July, 2007. The decision came after OMAN's request to the government to provide press accreditation cards to the online journalists. The department has opted a policy to provide the press accreditation cards to a maximum number of six journalists working in an online news portal.

The next landmark step towards institutionalizing online news portals were recommendations of High Level Media Commission HLMC headed by Radheshyam Adhikari formed in 2006. Stressing need to legally recognize and institutionalize the online journalism, HLMC report (2007) has a chapter recommending measures for the promotion of online journalism:

Digital medium has been disseminating information, knowledge and news freely, and in addition traditional mediums like newspaper, radio and televisions are also disseminating their content through digital media. In such a situation, online journalism is difficult to be separately dealt with. Online media are more democratic, liberal and unstoppable source, anybody having an access to the internet can get information and news through it easily. So, it is against the nature of technology to keep the online journalism under the

purview of the law. There should be no requirement for the online newspapers to register with the government. But if anybody wants to register company and publish newspaper through online by using editorial manpower as per the standards of professionalism, credibility and journalists, the company should have an option to achieve recognition and facility of printing media.

The next important decision towards institutionalizing online media is made by Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ). FNJ recently decided to confer membership on online journalists. Online Journalists are organized under FNJ's umbrella as its associate members.

Future Prospects for Online News Portals

There has become a growing debate about the future prospects on online news portals. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007) says, "as the base being measured gets bigger, growth rates of 30% a year, they reason, just aren't sustainable. The market research firm eMarketer, for instance, projects online ad spending to grow 15% in 2007, 18% in 2008, below 10% in 2009, and then 7% in 2010." A study by Kshetri (2008) also shows that there has been increase in the audiences of online news portals. It also showed that good number of the portals are making better money as compared to previous years. It is notable that an encouraging 40% of the investors said they are hopeful about the future. It shows that the online news portals have better future in Nepal. However, none of the big media house has appeared in the arena to have large investment in independent news portal.

Challenges

When independent news portals have to compete with subsidiary portals, it is very difficult. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007) has found Online news consumption may also be undercounted because people don't consider the places they go to be "news" sites. Blogs are posing big threat to online sites. Besides, many advertisers are yet to target their product to be advertised through the internet.

Conclusion

Many of Nepali online news portals have entered the arena without appropriate vision and apposite financial strength. Moreover, online news portals are also not recognized legally in the sense that there is not any strong regulatory body which has impeded the development of online news portals. This has worried the investors about the security of their investment. It shows that online media lacks clear vision and investment.

Yet there are positive signs. Many are entering the arena with different experiments and audience number is increasing. They have become the most effective tools of breaking news and many innovations are underway. Many portals have also clearly defined their target audience and developed content that way.

Another significant contribution of the portals is dissemination of news to Nepali Diaspora. Large number of Nepalese, who are recognized as Non-resident Nepalese or NRNs, rely on online news portals for the information about and experiences of their homeland. This has attracted some foreign (NRN) investment in online news portals as well. This has opened avenues for the development of online news portals. If legal status and recognition by the professional bodies and professionals to online news portals is given, it can develop as one of the vibrant mass medium.

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