

Balancing Freedom and Responsibility: Media's Role During Disasters and National Crises in Nepal

Shree Ram Khanal, PhD*

Abstract

This article discusses how the media helps to the society for dealing with disasters management in Nepal. This study has based on an analysis of the secondary sources of information. It highlights the media's role for empowering the society which is proactively educating the public about the disasters. In times of crisis management, accurate information on high-quality necessary resources like medicine and the media is an essential tool before, during, and after the disaster. During the risk, preparedness, recovery and response phases of disaster management, the media must be proactive, active and post-active as a form of preparedness, preparedness and post-preparedness by using the proper communication channels as a media to aware the people on disaster related activities.

This paper explores the critical role of media in disaster management, crisis communication, and social transformation, with a particular focus on Nepal. It examines how media functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, highlighting its strengths in raising awareness and informing the public, as well as its weaknesses in maintaining consistent, accurate, and ethical reporting. The discussion integrates theoretical perspectives such as Functional Theory and Media Dependency Theory to analyze media responsibilities in times of crisis. Challenges such as political influence, misinformation, lack of professionalism, and inadequate government support are identified as barriers to effective media performance. While media freedom is essential in democratic societies, this freedom must be exercised with accountability. The paper argues that ethical journalism, combined with responsible regulation and institutional support, is vital for ensuring media fulfills its role as a voice for the people and a driver of positive societal change.

Key words: Social-system, Earthquake, Covid-19, Virus, Disaster, Flood etc.

*Lecturer of Gramin Adarsha Multiple Campus, Kathmandu

Introduction

According to McQuail (2010), the media is regarded as a subsystem of the broader social system and is essential in establishing societal norms and values. The media should publish information that is relevant, helpful and in line with the interests of society. According to Bryant and Thompson (2002), media has an impression on people's thoughts, feelings and behaviors on a cognitive, affective and communicative level. It is central that the information provided by the media has to be factual, balanced, objective, ethical and accurate because people in society normally place a excessive arrangement of trust in it (Ward, 2004).

According to a communication scholar, the main purposes of media have to spread information, educate, entertain, inspire and foster the role of socialization (McQuail, 2010). In accumulation for protecting audiences from false information and disinformation, media professionals have a duty to inform the public in different ways that hat to bring social and economic change. Furthermore, the media has a basic responsibility to raise awareness, encourage civic realization and protect civil rights in accordance with societal norms, values and democratic ideals (Hodkinson, 2017).

Role of the media

Media is a powerful pillar of society that plays a vital role in identifying public issues and shaping public opinion to find their solutions. As Dahal (2012, pp. 5–6) emphasizes that the media must represent the interests and preferences of the people. It is also fundamentally designed to reproduce national awareness. The media must work to strengthen democratic values such as protecting citizens' rights, ensuring judicial independence and promoting a just legal system for a healthy society. Moreover, Dahal suggests that media has to contribute creatively and actively to accelerate the process of national development.

Media plays significant role for raising awareness as well as informing the public about the social issues. It also exposes social issues. According to a survey conducted by Pandey and Singh (2017), 91% of respondents believe that the media plays a significant role in covering social issues. Conversely, 9% feel that media coverage of social issues does not effectively inform society. Furthermore, 8% of respondents view media as inherently informative and geared toward problem-solving. This survey clearly indicates that media has become an integral part of daily life, providing insight into societal happenings both directly and indirectly.

Media should primarily be utilized for the betterment of society and national development. As Dominick (1999, p. 504) notes, in developing countries, media should engage in "development journalism," which involves using media in alignment with national interests to promote economic and social growth. He extends the concept of development beyond economic and social progress to include educational, cultural, and human consciousness—elements that are critical for sustainable progress. Media, therefore, should contribute to national unity, stability, and social cohesion.

In Nepal, about 57.3% of the economically-active population (aged 10 years and above) are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing (NSO, 2021). However, due to the absence of robust policies and planning in the agricultural sector, the country has not witnessed meaningful qualitative development. Despite the enormous potential of agriculture to drive employment and prosperity, it is essential to become more vigilant, reduce external dependency, and incorporate mass media into long-term national development strategies.

Unfortunately, many media outlets in Nepal have deviated from their core responsibilities and have neglected ethical standards. A pressing concern is the media's continued alignment with political parties and their interests. According to Khanal (2020, p. 37), the media should challenge the worsening political culture and lack of accountability. A strong and independent media can reduce corruption, bureaucratic delays, and unethical practices. Although some improvements have been observed in recent years, Nepali media is still not sufficiently empowered. A major obstacle is the lack of independent investment, which forces journalists to operate under the influence of investors' personal agendas.

Journalists must adhere to ethical codes and professional integrity. Kharel (2016, p. 36) observes that media in Nepal are often influenced directly or indirectly by political parties and leaders, and are used to serve their interests. Even media outlets considered independent often display some degree of political bias. In this context, Kharel (2016, p. 2) stresses that professional journalism should not only support state-led initiatives but also operate independently, free from political or external pressure. Freedom of expression should be exercised responsibly to promote transparency and ensure good governance. Media plays a pivotal role in political democratization. While it is widely accepted that media should serve the public interest, Regmi and Kharel (2002, p. 24) argue that mass media itself must be monitored by independent regulatory bodies.

Nepal is unique in that its journalism sector maintains an overt relationship with

politics (Regmi & Kharel, 2002, p. 7). Much of the media in Nepal tends to focus excessively on political speculation, exaggerated narratives, and misleading content. These practices often compromise truthfulness, credibility, and objectivity. Political agendas alone should not dominate the content presented to the public, as audiences deserve balanced and fact-based information.

Role of Media in Disaster Management

Geographically, Nepal is among the nation's most susceptible to earthquakes, landslides, fires, floods, and other natural disasters. By covering early warning systems, risk reduction tactics, disaster preparedness, rescue operations, and post-disaster reconstruction, the media plays a critical role in disaster management. The media also makes sure that government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and relief organizations are coordinated, transparent, and accountable.

Information dissemination in times of crisis is a critical function of the media. It ought to give preference to material that speaks directly to people's everyday experiences and supports the actual problems they encounter. According to Koirala et al. (2021), the media must also be actively involved in all phases of disaster management, including risk assessment, preparedness, response, and recovery. News outlets offer up-to-date and accurate information about disasters, including possible risks, safety precautions, evacuation protocols, and emergency reactions, claims Acharya (2024). His study highlights the role that media plays in empowering people and communities, increasing awareness, and promoting risk-avoiding behaviors. By making corporations, government agencies, social groups, and aid organizations answerable for their contributions to disaster preparedness and response, the media can also serve as a watchdog.

According to Acharya's research, the media can be a big help to victims in overcoming obstacles and improving their spirits. The media can help bring about significant behavioral change by promoting efficient disaster management.

Nepali media provided extensive coverage of the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, especially in the Sindhupalchowk region. The coverage, however, drastically decreased after the immediate aftermath. There was little focus on the problems victims faced during the phases of reconstruction and relief distribution. This disregard points to a lack of consistent media coverage of communities affected by disasters. All stages of disaster management preparation, response, and recovery require timely and accurate information. (Acharya, 2024),

In times of crisis, disaster communication is just as vital as medicine because it can save lives. Women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities are among the vulnerable groups that are frequently disproportionately impacted by disasters. Misinformation is also more likely to occur during these periods. In this regard, media outlets need to be cognizant of the psychological requirements of these susceptible groups and strive to guarantee ethical and compassionate coverage. The media should be heavily involved in promoting safety and saving lives during disasters, as Khanal (2021) points out.

Covid-19 and Nepali media's Role

In recent years, some mainstream media outlets in Nepal have taken steps toward self-improvement and have shown a greater sense of responsibility. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Nepali media organizations successfully informed the government about necessary precautions and safety measures. Even during the height of the pandemic, the media continued to disseminate critical information despite potential risks. Undoubtedly, the media played a significant role in the dissemination of information. However, despite this, certain weaknesses were observed in terms of analytical and critical reporting, and some social media platforms were responsible for spreading misinformation and rumors. Unfortunately, the state appeared to not take the threats, preventive measures, and broader implications of the pandemic as seriously as it should have.

Even media in developed countries were not immune to bias and misinformation during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, in the United States, media outlets were often divided along political lines, with some supporting the Republican narrative and others aligned with the Democratic viewpoint. Many media platforms circulated former President Donald Trump's claim that COVID-19 should be labeled the "Chinese virus." In contrast, most mainstream media presented COVID-19 as a global pandemic, not an artificially created disease. Public misunderstanding also stemmed from the growing reliance on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube over traditional news sources. Although many mainstream media have their own social media channels, people increasingly tend to engage with fragmented content and form their opinions based on these platforms, bypassing verified news sources.

As McQuail (2010, p. 98) explains, Functional Theory clarifies the role of media within society. This theory views mass media as essential in guiding social development and highlights the importance of media functions. Lasswell (1948), a prominent theorist,

proposed that media serves several key roles: providing information, offering entertainment, facilitating coordination, promoting cultural preservation, and mobilizing the public.

Mass media should serve as a bridge between the government and the public, communicating issues and information in both directions. It should play an active role in fostering awareness, promoting public conscience, and ensuring transparency. The media's role must be creative, proactive, advocacy-oriented, and reformative. Importantly, media should amplify the voices of the voiceless and act as a catalyst for positive social change. A responsible journalist should not be influenced by political affiliations, commercial interests, or pressure groups but should be guided by a commitment to national well-being and societal progress.

The media must take a dynamic and critical role in the nation-building process. In Nepal, mass media should be utilized to address social discrimination, untouchability, and other harmful social practices. It should also serve to uplift marginalized, minority, and oppressed communities, contributing to their transformation and integration into the mainstream (Khanal, 2017, p. 76). According to Media Dependency Theory, members of society rely heavily on the media, which gives media institutions significant responsibility. The primary duty of the media is to provide factual, clear, and accurate information about daily life, rather than creating confusion or panic (Khanal, 2018, p. 7). Media should not only reflect societal realities but also guide the public toward constructive change. Honesty and objectivity in information dissemination are fundamental responsibilities of both journalists and media institutions.

Given that Nepal is predominantly a rural country, national development is not possible without the development of rural areas. Therefore, media should prioritize the concerns of rural communities. The public expects news that is fast, accurate, objective, and truthful. Social values and cultural traditions greatly influence the quality and ethics of journalism. In light of the increasing influence of postmodernism and Western culture in Nepali society, it is the responsibility of Nepali journalists to preserve and promote cultural authenticity. Media should be a powerful tool to challenge harmful traditional practices, poverty, illiteracy, and caste-based discrimination. It must be bold and assertive in its reporting, as this is an urgent need of the present time.

Among various forms of media, radio remains one of the most effective means of communication in rural areas of Nepal, surpassing newspapers and digital platforms in accessibility and reach.

Media is also essential in shaping and mobilizing public opinion. Recognizing its influence, British politician Edmund Burke referred to the press as the "Fourth Estate." The media must always remain sensitive to its dual role: upholding its social prestige and fulfilling its responsibility to inform the public truthfully and ethically.

Discussions

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a significant test of the media's capacity to manage crises and fulfill its role in disaster communication. In the context of disaster management, the media's responsibilities extend beyond information dissemination to include early warning, public education, coordination between stakeholders, and post-disaster recovery support. The pandemic highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the media in fulfilling these functions.

In Nepal, the media played an important initial role by informing the public about safety measures, government directives, and health precautions before and during the pandemic. This aligns with the Functional Theory of Mass Communication, which identifies the media's role in providing information, social coordination, and mobilization (McQuail, 2010; Lasswell, 1948). Media outlets became central to communicating evolving guidelines from health experts, promoting mask usage, social distancing, and vaccination awareness. The speed and reach of mass media—particularly radio in rural areas—proved crucial in overcoming geographic barriers.

However, while early coverage was commendable, long-term engagement with pandemic-related issues such as access to healthcare, vaccination hesitancy, the mental health crisis, and the impact on marginalized populations was often inconsistent. This mirrors broader shortcomings in disaster communication where media coverage tends to peak during the immediate aftermath but declines during the critical recovery and reconstruction phases. In the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, for instance, media outlets widely reported on the destruction, yet largely failed to follow up on long-term rehabilitation, particularly in remote areas like Sindhupalchowk. A similar pattern occurred with COVID-19, where the initial urgency gave way to reduced coverage as the pandemic became prolonged.

Social media further complicated the media's role in disaster response during the pandemic. While it enabled rapid sharing of information, it also became a source of widespread misinformation and panic. According to Media Dependency Theory (Ball-

Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), people rely heavily on media during uncertain times to reduce ambiguity. When that media is unreliable or biased, as was sometimes the case even in developed nations, it can create confusion and erode public trust. For example, in the United States, partisan divisions influenced how media outlets framed the virus—some reinforcing misinformation such as calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus,” which fueled stigma rather than awareness.

In Nepal, this challenge was compounded by political interference in mainstream media and limited fact-checking infrastructure. Some outlets aligned with political interests, limiting critical reporting on state preparedness and response efforts. This diminished the media’s watchdog function, which is essential in holding institutions accountable during disasters. Acharya (2024) argues that the media must not only inform but also empower communities and act as a moral and psychological support system for disaster victims. His findings suggest that media can play a restorative role by maintaining morale and promoting resilience among affected populations.

Additionally, disaster communication should be inclusive, addressing the vulnerabilities of women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities—groups often disproportionately affected during crises. Khanal (2021) emphasizes the need for media to be sensitive to the psychological and social dimensions of disaster, which was especially relevant during COVID-19, where isolation, loss, and economic hardship deeply impacted mental health. Unfortunately, these aspects received limited, if any, sustained coverage in the Nepali media.

The experiences of the pandemic and past natural disasters underline the urgent need for Nepal's media to evolve beyond reactive reporting. A proactive, prepared, and ethically guided media landscape is essential for effective disaster management. This includes training journalists in crisis communication, investing in local media infrastructure, especially radio, and developing partnerships between media, government, and civil society organizations to ensure coordinated responses.

Conclusion

Media should be sensitive enough at the time of national crisis, transitional period and disaster. Media should not spread rumor in the name of giving information at the time of disaster. There seems uniformity among media experts that media is a means not only to change society but also to control it. As media has power to persuade people, there is

sometimes voice of people to censor it. But advocates of freedom of expression are against the idea of censorship. The number of media person in Nepal is very high who take this profession as a hobby rather than the true sense of professionalism because people have the belief that anyone can sell the news and become a journalist. The state has not been able to work for the betterment of journalist regarding their salary and other benefits. And further, the state has not tried to understand real problems of media persons. The time may come to regulate some media especially for the developing countries to some extent to make them more responsible. If they are left with much freedom than needed, autocracy may appear in them. As American Professor Peterson says that the meaning of freedom is responsibility. Where there is freedom, responsibility gets connected there. So, it is not so good for media to make the news sensational and spread rumor.

Media plays a critical role during disasters, national crises, and transitional periods by informing the public, shaping awareness, and promoting accountability. In Nepal, while media has contributed significantly during events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2015 earthquake, challenges such as misinformation, political bias, and lack of professionalism remain.

Freedom of the press must be balanced with responsibility; unchecked freedom can lead to sensationalism and public harm. As Peterson noted, true freedom includes accountability. To strengthen media's role in society, especially in developing countries, ethical journalism, better state support, and responsible regulation are essential. Only then can media truly serve as a force for positive change and democratic development.

REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2024). Natural Disaster, Internally Displaced People and Media Coverage in Nepal. In *Climate and Migration*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. Retrieved at 25 June, 2025 from [http:// www.mcrp.ac.in](http://www.mcrp.ac.in).
- Bryant, J., & Thompson, S. (2002). *Fundamentals of Media Effects*. McGraw-Hill.
- Dahal, K.R. (2002). *Mass Communication and Law [Aamsanchar ra kanoon]*. Kathmandu: Nepal Press Institute.
- Dominick, J.R. (1999). *The Dynamics of Mass communication*. America: The Mc Graw-Hill Companies.
- Hodkinson, P. (2017). *Media, Culture and Society: An Introduction*. SAGE Publications.
- Khanal, S. R.(2020). *Principles and Practices of Journalism*. Kathmandu: Vidyarthi

Pustak Bhandar.

Khanal, S.R. (2018). Radio and Society, Kathmandu: Lumbini Books.

Khanal, S.R.(2017). Introduction to Journalism and Mass communication. Kathmandu: Lumbini Books.

Kharel, P. (2016). A Study of Journalism. Kathmandu: Mandop Books.

Khanal, S.R. (2021). Bipad Patrakaritama Uthaka Prasna. SAMHITA, Press Coucil Nepal, PP.56-62,Vol-49.

Koirala, J., Acharya, S., Neupane, M.S., & Rijal, N. (2021). Role of media in managing the Disaster: A Case Study from 2015 Gorkha Earthquake. SSRN Electronic Journal, Doi. 3897583.

McQuail, D.(2010). McQuail's Mass communication Theory. India: Sage publication.

National Statistics Office.(2021). National Population and Housing Census 2021. Kathmandu: NSO

Pandey, N. & Singh,G.(2017). Role and Impacts of Media on Society: A Sociological Approach with respect to Demonetization. Impact Journal, international Journal of research in Humanities, Art and literature, 5(10):127-136.

Poudel, B.R. (2016). Developing a Disaster management framework, for News production in Nepal . PhD Dissertation, Queensland University of Technology.

Regmi, S. & Kharel, P.(2002). Development of Mass media in Nepal.[Nepalma Aamsancharko Bikas. Kathmandu: Nepal Associations of Media Educators.

Ward, S. J. A. (2004). The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond. McGill-Queen's Press.