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Assessing Information Landscape in Nepal through Constructive Approach

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Abstract

Constructive journalism (CJ) was initiated in Europe with the goal of countering the negativity bias in news. It also resembles the concept of development journalism that emerged in the late 1960s in Asia. CJ aims to empower readers by providing them with information and tools to effect positive change in their lives nearly a decade and a half ago. Thus, CJ is a noble attempt in journalism to instill distinct news values. This article employs the theoretical framework of CJ to evaluate the media landscape in Nepal. Throughout this assessment, several news stories from different Nepali newspapers and online news portals have been scrutinized according to the three pillars of CJ. The systematic observation reveals that Nepali media largely fall short of adhering to the constructive approach to journalism. Therefore, the state of CJ in the context of Nepal has yet to advance.

Keywords: constructive journalism, solution-oriented journalism, constructive dialogue, multiple perspectives

Assessing Information Landscape in Nepal through Constructive Approach

Constructive journalism (CJ) originates from the noble aspiration to produce high-quality journalism that assists individuals in navigating a complex world. The Germany based Bonn Institute (2024), has initiated a mission to "take journalism into the future—with a focus on solutions, diverse perspectives, and meaningful dialogue (p. 504)," the Institute strives to offer valuable insights to individuals and foster the advancement of human society. However, academicians have linked the CJ with the evolution of public journalism which goes back a long period. Bro (2019) argues that CJ is not a new term and that its underlying principles share similarities with other well-known movements in the history of journalism. He contends that these include action journalism, which was popular on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of the last century, and public journalism, which flourished at the turn of this century. He also states that common to most of these movements is their lack of conceptual clarity. However, the concept of CJ has been gaining popularity over the years.

Lippmann (1961) argues that newspapers have watchers stationed at certain places, like Police Headquarters, the Coroner's Office, the Country Clerk's Office, City Hall, the White House, the Senate, House of Representatives, and so forth (p.338). Lippmann (1961) further states that before events become news, something definite must occur, they often need to attract attention through specific actions, such as bankruptcy, accidents, the introduction of a bill or the expressed opinion of a well-known citizen. There must be a manifestation (p.340). DeFleur and Dennis (2002) outline seven criteria for judging newsworthiness: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, novelty, conflict, and currency. In contrast, constructive journalism (CJ) shifts focus from simply reporting events to fostering deeper engagement with their context. The Constructive Institute (CI) in Denmark challenges traditional news values, moving away from the older AVIS-K criteria (Timeliness, Importance, Identification, Sensation, Conflict) toward a

more constructive, value-driven editorial approach (Jorgensen & Risbro, 2021). Since, constructive journalism-by fostering a focus on solutions, embracing multiple perspectives, and promoting constructive dialogue within society-the contemporary world of journalism needs to transcend conventional news values.

The Bonn Institute (2024) emphasizes that CJ is people-friendly journalism and aids individuals in navigating the complex world. It highlights the importance of understanding our users' needs to ensure journalism reaches its intended audience: What is relevant to them? How would they like to be informed? And how can they communicate with us if they want to know more? The Bonn Institute views this as more critical in the digital age than ever before, as journalism competes with countless other offerings to capture people's attention. In other words, it is crucial in an era of unprecedented expansion of the information and communication ecosystem.

CJ also echoes a model of endogenous communication entitled "Information for Empowerment," which was developed by Kharel (2012) based on Nepal's experience of democratic upheavals. He elaborates on his idea as follows: Empowerment of people means citizen participation to the maximum possible extent for informed communication across society, informed decision-making, informed feedback, and revision by the initiator for good governance. To achieve such empowerment and advanced public participation, Nepali media need to transcend traditional news values. In this context, Kharel (2012) states that Nepali media requires defining itself. Furthermore, he holds that they must incorporate new voices and offer niche content that is neither biased nor manipulated. Hence, the necessity to embrace new news values aligned with the constructive approach in journalism is equally pertinent in Nepal's mass media landscape.

U.S. development cooperation with Nepal dates back to 1951. Over the past five decades, the U.S. has assisted Nepal in various sectors, including

transportation, communication, public health, family planning, malaria eradication, agriculture, forestry, and energy. The MCC Nepal Compact, aimed at enhancing electricity, improving infrastructure, and advancing connectivity, includes two key projects: a 315-kilometer electricity transmission line and the construction of three new substations. However, the compact has faced significant controversy.

The U.S. government's assistance through the MCC has been the subject of debate, involving not only developing countries but also American taxpayers. In order to avoid potential complications, a provision for parliamentary endorsement was included in Nepal. However, some critics argue that the provisions of the MCC could undermine Nepal's sovereignty.

Currently, 25 countries have signed and completed their MCC compacts. Eight countries, including Nepal, are in the process of implementation, while two—Mali and Sri Lanka—have voluntarily terminated their agreements. The MCC was established by the U.S. Congress in January 2004, with strong bipartisan support, to provide foreign assistance aimed at promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and strengthening institutions. In Nepal, political parties and successive governments had been deeply divided over the MCC's potential benefits and challenges since negotiations began in 2011.

The suspicion surrounding the MCC grew following comments by U.S. Assistant Secretary for South Asia, David J. Ranz, who suggested a potential connection between the MCC and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) during his visit to Nepal in May 2019. In December of that year, some Nepalese politicians, referencing statements from U.S. officials, questioned Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali's remark that the MCC had no ties to the IPS (Ghimire, "Why the MCC," 2020). The controversy was further fueled in September 2021 when the MCC headquarters clarified that the agreement did not supersede Nepal's Constitution and had no military component, seeking to dispel growing suspicions ahead of a

visit by Fatema Z. Sumar, Vice President of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (Shrestha, 13 September 2021). Signed on September 14, 2017, the MCC Nepal Compact is a five-year, \$500 million grant agreement between the Government of Nepal (GoN) and MCC. It obviously received extensive and diverse media coverage in Nepal, with varying perspectives. However, a closer analysis reveals several issues with how the Nepali media handled the debate over the MCC. While the media presented a range of arguments, many reports fail to meet professional standards of independence, fairness, and accuracy including their clear own perspective on the basis of national interest.

An examination of the relationship between politics and the media is required to assess the media's performance concerning any public issue. As Street (2001) argues, the relationship between politics and the media is complex; it is essential to determine who is exerting power between the two. There is the power over the media—what gets shown or reported—and there is the power of the media—what gets changed by the media. In other words, it is the power to undertake political communication, which includes, as Craig (2007) observes, a form of public communication undertaken by media personnel and citizens that might be addressed to politicians and political actors, or even a more general contribution to public debate, broadly including all public discourse. Hence, the relationship between political polarization and the performance of Nepali media institutions concerning U.S. development aid through MCC shows the lack of a constructive approach in Nepali newspapers. In this context, Noel Neuman's 'spiral of silence' (Griffin, 2006, pp. 408-19) influenced even communicators, who, fearing isolation, held back bold, independent arguments rooted in Nepal's national interest and benefits. Instead, they predominantly reported on either pro- or anti-MCC opinions and activities. McQuail (2000) quotes Krippendorf (1980) to present an approach for evaluating media performance. He describes the term "performance analysis" as research designed to find answers about the quality of

the media as judged by certain criteria. In this regard, McQuail (2000) recommends objectifiable indicators to judge the media in terms of principles such as media freedom, media equality, media diversity, information quality, social order and solidarity, and cultural quality. In the context of MCC coverage, such objective indicators were largely overlooked.

Theoretical Framework

The article is based on the theoretical premise of constructive journalism as interpreted by Jorgensen, Kristina Lund, and Risbro, Jakob (2021). They suggest three pillars to enable journalists to identify good stories: ones that build trust between the media and citizens, strengthen democratic dialogue, and foster community cohesion. The three pillars that uphold constructive journalism, aimed at contributing to democracy through critical engagement, are as follows: a) Focus on solutions, b) Cover nuances, and c) Promote democratic conversation.

While traditional news values often prioritize stories involving conflict, abnormality, current events, or the exposure of wrongdoing and anomalies among public officials, the first pillar of CJ not only exposes problems but also seeks out potential solutions. Unlike the traditional approach to news reporting, the second pillar of CJ focuses on covering nuances, which are subtle differences in meaning or expression. It aims to present the best obtainable version of the truth by considering various perspectives. The third pillar of CJ promotes democratic conversation by prioritizing news values that facilitate and engage in debates within the society.

Similar to the CI, the Bonn Institute also elucidates the three elements of CJ. In explaining the first pillar, it states that traditional journalism often concludes once a problem has been adequately identified or described. Unlike traditional journalism, CJ goes a step further: it also reports on solutions to societal problems, thus broadening the scope of journalistic inquiry. Hence, as the

Bonn Institute argues, "Who is doing it better?" is one of the central research questions that solutions-oriented journalists pose.

Regarding the second pillar, the Bonn I argues that journalism should have its sights focused on the diverse information interests of various segments of society. Journalism that incorporates a multitude of perspectives is considered relevant journalism. The concept of embracing diverse perspectives also entails examining systemic factors, whether they relate to the composition of personnel in a newsroom or department, or one's own blind spots and biases, and how to address them effectively. For instance, questions such as: "Is my perspective perhaps influenced by a tendency to focus on the negative?" or "Am I unconsciously seeking confirmation of my existing beliefs during research?" are essential for self-reflection. Furthermore, it's crucial to assess whether there is adequate diversity within our content-producing departments to authentically reflect the diversity present in society.

In describing the third pillar of CJ, the BI states that constructive dialogue is the third central element of CJ. Journalists are not only needed as mediators of relevant information and different perspectives but also as moderators between various societal groups. According to the BI, constructive dialogue is an important tool for organizing human understanding. It creates spaces, including digital ones, where people can exchange ideas, facilitates conversations between individuals from diverse backgrounds, and encourages and moderates peaceful, future-oriented debates on relevant societal issues, thereby making media a true public sphere. The BI believes that all of this foster progress and can significantly contribute to social cohesion, strengthen democracy, and mitigate corrosive polarization.

Methods, Materials and Discussion

The article is grounded in interpretive and analytic approaches to examine Nepali media products, particularly focusing on the content of print and online

media. Thus, it employs a qualitative approach. Several stories have been analyzed through the theoretical lens of CJ. The stories that were seemingly not based on the awareness of CJ have been analysed here. Furthermore the news stories that clarifies the rumor spread by some sort of media wrere also analysed to demonstrate the overall atmosphere of information ecosystem. The news media includes the major daily such as Kantipur daily, the Kathmandu Post daily, Khabarhub online, Himal media, The Rising Nepal daily, The Republica daily, and Setopati Online. These stories are examined using the indicators of all three pillars of CJ. In the case of the first pillar, the analysis attempted to assess the prominence given to potential solutions, the presentation of evidence supporting their effectiveness, the consideration of the transferability of approaches, and whether limitations and obstacles are adequately addressed within the stories.

Table 1

CJ is Journalism for Tomorrow

CJ: Nature	Breaking News	Investigative Journalism	Constructive news
Time	Now	Yesterday	Tomorrow
Goals	Speed	Blame	Inspiration
Questions	What? When?	Who? Why?	What now? How?
Style	Dramatic	Critical	Curious
Role	Police	Judge	Facilitator
Focus	Drama	Crooks & victims	Solution & best practice

Note. The information in the table was obtained from CI & IMS (2021).

As shown in Table 1, CJ focuses on "What now?" or "How" and tries to present solutions. It complements the traditions of both breaking news stories and investigative journalism. CI (2021) states that CJ responds to the news media's increasing tabloidization, sensationalism, and negativity bias.

Similarly, when assessing the state of the second pillar concerning multiple perspectives, the analysis aimed at examine diversity, complexity, angles, levels of detail, and self-reflection. Regarding the third pillar, four imperatives were used to evaluate the stories: prioritizing similarities over differences, fostering empathic interest, maintaining impartiality, and adopting a forward-looking perspective.

Table 2

CJ at a Glance

	Constructive journalism is	Constructive journalism is not
I.	Aiming to be crucial, objective and balanced	I. Promoting a specific agenda, crossing the line between journalism and politics
II.	Tackling important issues facing society	II. Uncritical or naïve
III.	Based on facts and unbiased	III. Promoting heroes, governments or civil society
IV.	Calm in its tone	IV. Obscuring critical viewpoints
V.	Does not give in to scandals and outrage	V. Activism in any shape or form
VI.	Bridging not polarizing	VI. Dumbed-down, trivial or happy news
VII.	Forward-looking and future-oriented	VII. Giving in to false equivalence/balance
VIII.	Nuanced and contextualized	VIII. Advocating one solution over another
		IX. Oversimplifying complex problems or solutions to complex problems

Note. The information on the table is obtained from Constructive Institute, Journalism for tomorrow (<https://constructiveinstitute.org/why/>, 2024)

Table 2 contemplates the three pillars, namely solutions, nuance, and democratic conversation, as they form the foundation of a constructive approach in journalism.

Constructive journalism in the context of Nepal is scarcely reflected in the content of various media outlets. Take, for example, this headline: "Kathmandu Named World's Most Polluted City, Once Again." Published on April 10, 2024, in *The Kathmandu Post*, this news understandably alarms the general public.

However, the story falls short of providing adequate perspective. It fails to indicate any solutions to the environmental degradation it reports. Neither does this brief story adopt a solutions-oriented approach, nor does it explore proven and effective methods to address the issue. It lacks any useful insights or lessons for readers and does not present relevant ideas about potential solutions. Overall, it does not contribute meaningful insights that could benefit the people of Kathmandu or others affected by similar issues.

On April 23, 2024, *The Rising Nepal* featured five headlines. Two stories covered the Prime Minister's recent speech, while another focused on the Finance Minister's assurance regarding investment policy stability; both were formal and ceremonial in nature, lacking a constructive approach. Additionally, there was coverage of the Amir of Qatar's visit to Nepal. Out of these five stories, only one could have been approached with a constructive journalism perspective. The headline of the fifth news story was "Residents Alerted of Heat Waves in Tarai." This story, based on an alert issued by the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology of the Government of Nepal and subsequent conversations with a senior officer, warned readers about rising temperatures in the Kathmandu Valley and the entire Tarai region. While the story effectively alarmed readers, it failed to provide any suggestions for mitigating the adverse effects of temperature rise.

A story published in *Kantipur Daily* on April 22, 2024, reported on a protest rally organized by victims of cooperative scams in Pokhara. Given the rally's roots in a longstanding issue, the article could have delved deeper to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation. It could have served as a platform to educate the public about cooperative scams by presenting nuanced details. However, the story titled "Cooperative Victims Rally in Pokhara" merely provided a straightforward account without fully capturing the complexities and context. Nepali media outlets often report on events and highlight problems but tend to shy away from discussing potential solutions. Likewise, a story published

on *Setopati online* on April 24th, 2024, discusses the operation of motorboats on the Narayani River. One noteworthy aspect of the story is figuring out the absence of laws regarding the export of Nepali-made motorboats to other countries, which could be viewed as a future perspective.

Beyond the previously mentioned incomplete news stories within the framework of constructive journalism, let's explore how rumors can spread when a constructive approach to reporting is lacking. An example of the media's failure to facilitate meaningful discourse and counter the spread of misinformation—and even baseless disinformation—was evident in the controversy surrounding Nepal's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact.

Fake news and misinformation surrounding the MCC largely overshadowed objective indicators in Nepali newspapers and news portals. BBC News Nepali ([bbc.com/nepali/news-58547861](https://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-58547861)), for example, reported in September 2021 that a fake agreement letter, purportedly signed by MCC officials, had spread on social media, including YouTube. The MCC office filed a complaint with Nepal Police regarding the forged signature. Similarly, *Khabarhub* (english.khabarhub.com/2020/03/7304) reported on the growing sophistication of fake news, with sensational headlines and false stories making it difficult for the public to discern fact from fiction. One particularly harmful rumor, reported by *The Republica* (myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/fake-news-can-destroy-nepal-s-relations-with-india-china-and-the-us/), claimed that the U.S. planned to set up a military base in Nepal if the MCC was approved, further stoking fears of foreign military involvement.

Other Media Outlets, such as Ratopati

(<https://www.ratopati.com/story/199278/2021/9/14/mcc-fake-document>) and Himal Khabar (<https://www.himalkhabar.com/news/125820>), reported on similar incidents. Kanak Dixit, a prominent journalist and social activist, filed a case with Nepal Police's Cyber Bureau after his name was falsely linked to the distribution

of money to journalists in exchange for favorable coverage of the MCC. News of Nepal (<https://newsfnepal.com/2021/09/10/434700/>) also covered the incident involving a fake document with a forged signature of an MCC official.

The analysis of the news stories discussed above demonstrates that overall information ecosystem has been impacted by the news stories covered by the print and online news portal without constructive approach. The news on various issues mostly discussed problems and an attempt to present solutions are not made. Likewise, many a time news stories are being instrumental in spreading rumor. The information or more exactly misinformation over MCC represents one such case. The extensive spread of misinformation has created confusion and heightened tensions in Nepal's public discourse regarding the MCC. It underscores the need for responsible journalism that prioritizes fact-based reporting and upholds ethical standards, particularly when dealing with complex international agreements such as the MCC. CJ demands context, along with the avoidance of sensationalism and negative bias, in addition to upholding the traditional norms of fairness and accuracy. However, it is observed that stories in the Nepali media often dwell on past and present perspectives while overlooking future considerations.

Quoting psychotherapist Steve de Shazer, the BI emphasizes, "Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions," a principle to which CJ adheres. Given CJ's emphasis on systematic questioning techniques that foster forward-looking perspectives and the identification of potential solutions, Nepali media institutions' newsrooms need to engage in profound discourse focusing on solutions, covering nuances, and promoting democratic conversation. Constructive dialogue lies at the core of CJ, prompting it to prioritize questions like "to what end" and "where to" over "why" and "from where."

Any news story that aligns with the three pillars of constructive journalism—providing remedies, offering detailed analysis, and fostering public

discourse—upholds the spirit of responsible journalism. Today, it is more crucial than ever to understand that journalism is not merely about transmitting information; the role of interpretation has gained increasing importance. As such, the mass media's role in suggesting solutions, explaining the complexity of problems, and bringing issues into the public domain to foster dialogue has become paramount.

Conclusion

Today, across the world and within Nepal, on one hand, every individual is capable of spreading information and opinions, while on the other, misinformation and disinformation are increasingly difficult to tackle. The emergence of advanced information and communication technology, including the internet, as well as the trend of media convergence, has added more responsibilities to journalists. In this era, where journalism is not only a prominent actor in the information and communication domain, journalists must adopt a constructive approach to make the general public dependent on them. They also have responsibility to combat disinformation by providing verified facts in public domain.

In this context, Nepali media must not only inform people about current events but also elucidate important connections and provide actionable measures to foster broader public trust. Juxtaposition to the expectations of CJ analysis of the contents of the Nepali news media shows that the overall information ecosystem is not supporting the constructive approach. Public trust rests on journalism's ability to serve as the basis for informed individual decisions. In this regard, the Nepali media can contribute to create an overall atmosphere conducive to constructive approach. For the they need to refine the news values and way of news presentations. Practicing CJ guides media in this direction, as journalism flourishes by building trust among citizens, enhancing dialogue and discourse, and fostering societal cohesion. Thus, all forms of Nepali media need to endeavor

to adopt new news values beyond the traditional ones in order to internalize the constructive approach in the content production process.

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