

Global Media Narratives and Nepal's International Image

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Abstract

In the contemporary global communication environment, international media play a significant role in shaping how countries are perceived beyond their borders. For smaller and developing states such as Nepal, whose global visibility is often episodic and event-driven, international image formation is heavily influenced by external media narratives. Countries in the Global South face geopolitical risks that shape their international image through narratives that follow a pattern of selective external definition. Narratives about Nepal that attract international attention lack the detailed information needed to produce a proper understanding of its identity. This article examines how global media portrayals shape Nepal's international image. It argues that Nepal is frequently represented through selective frames that focus on natural disasters, political instability, climate vulnerability, heritage tourism, and its geopolitical positioning between India and China. While these portrayals are grounded in factual realities, they often present a partial and crisis-oriented perspective that obscures Nepal's political agency, institutional development, and socio-economic transformation. The article highlights the structural dynamics shaping Nepal's generated visibility and discusses their implications for public diplomacy, soft power, tourism, and foreign investment by analysing historical and contemporary representations. The article concludes that Nepal must adopt more proactive and strategic communication efforts to promote a balanced, multidimensional international image that reflects both its challenges and its resilience.

Keywords: global media, international image, public diplomacy, soft power, international communication

Introduction

The globalization of communication technologies has transformed how national images are constructed and circulated. International media organizations now function as key intermediaries between domestic realities and global audiences. Through selective reporting, emphasis, and repetition, global media significantly shape how countries are understood abroad (Castells, 2009). In this context, a state's international image is influenced not only by its policies and diplomatic engagement but also by the narratives that circulate in global news systems.

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National reputation has tangible consequences. International perceptions influence tourism decisions, foreign direct investment, diplomatic credibility, development partnerships, and broader geopolitical positioning. Countries perceived as stable, innovative, and reliable are more likely to attract investors and political partnerships, whereas those associated primarily with instability or vulnerability may face reputational constraints (Anholt, 2007).

For smaller states with limited representation in global news networks, international visibility tends to be sporadic and event-driven. Research on international news flows demonstrates that global media disproportionately prioritise crises, conflict, and dramatic events over gradual development or routine governance (Galtung et al., 1965). As a result, a limited set of recurring narratives often becomes the dominant framework through which a country is understood (Adhikari, 2024).

Nepal presents a significant case within these broader dynamics. International references to Nepal frequently emerge during natural disasters, political transitions, environmental crises, or geopolitical tensions involving its larger immediate neighbours, India and China. While these issues are undoubtedly important, the dominance of such narratives has contributed to a selective and incomplete construction of Nepal's international image. This article critically examines the key global media narratives surrounding Nepal and evaluates their broader implications.

Global Media Narratives: Conceptual Foundations

Global media narratives are the main frameworks that international media organisations use to depict countries, regions, and events. These narratives come from editorial priorities, institutional practices, geopolitical contexts, and audience expectations. Media scholars point out that news does not reflect reality but is a constructed representation shaped by choices in coverage and presentation (Entman, 1993).

Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media shape public perception by highlighting some issues. Framing theory explains how media influence interpretation by focusing on specific aspects of reality (McCombs, 2004). In international communication, these processes often place smaller or developing countries at a disadvantage, as they lack the resources to actively shape global narratives. Nepal's portrayal in global media must be viewed within this structural context. A limited number of international correspondents, reliance on wire services, and language barriers lead to simplified narratives that favour familiarity and immediacy over depth.

Historical Construction of Nepal's International Image

Nepal's international image has not emerged solely in the modern media era. Historical travel writing, mountaineering accounts, and tourism promotion materials have played an early role in shaping how the country was perceived abroad. Nepal was often

portrayed as a remote Himalayan kingdom characterised by spiritual depth, natural grandeur, and cultural mystique. Such representations emphasise scenic landscapes, monasteries, temples, and traditional lifestyles (Pandey, 2025).

The global symbolism of Mount Everest (Sagarmatha) has become central to Nepal's international identity. As the world's highest peak, Everest has established Nepal as a destination for adventure and exploration. Tourism campaigns reinforce this image by highlighting trekking routes, Himalayan vistas, and sacred sites. This aligns with Urry's (2002) description of the "tourist gaze," in which destinations are framed through selective imagery designed to meet external expectations and desires. Similarly, Nepal's identity as the birthplace of Lord Buddha has strengthened its association with spirituality and pilgrimage. These representations enhanced tourism and international cultural recognition, contributing positively to Nepal's global visibility (Urry, 2002).

However, such portrayals also simplified Nepal's identity. By emphasising timeless culture and natural beauty, they often overlook the country's political evolution, economic aspirations, and social transformation. Nepal has frequently been depicted as a country which is static and traditional rather than dynamic and modern. Another enduring representation is that of the Gurkha soldier, symbolising courage and loyalty in international military service. While this image has generated admiration, it also confines Nepal's global identity to martial tradition rather than broader political or economic engagement. These historical narratives have laid the foundation for contemporary portrayals, many of which continue to emphasise selected aspects of Nepal while marginalising others (Shrestha, 2000).

Contemporary Global Media Portrayals

When disasters strike, Nepal appears prominently in global news coverage. Earthquakes, floods, aviation crashes, and landslides quickly draw international attention. Such events align strongly with established news values that prioritise drama, immediacy, and human suffering (Galtung et al., 1965). As a result, Nepal often enters global consciousness through sudden shocks rather than sustained observation. International visibility becomes episodic, shaped by rupture rather than continuity. This pattern creates an accumulative narrative: crisis follows crisis, and each episode reinforces the previous one. Humanitarian aid responses also become part of the storyline, strengthening perceptions of dependency. Over time, resilience, everyday governance, and gradual development recede behind layers of reported misfortune. Research on international news flows shows that countries in the Global South are frequently given attention only during emergencies, leading to distorted and incomplete representations (Hawk, 1992).

At the same time, Nepal is portrayed through another dominant lens - heritage and natural beauty. Foreign coverage frequently emphasises Mount Everest, trekking

culture, meditation tourism, sacred temples, and Himalayan landscapes. Such portrayals align with what Urry 2002 describes as destinations being framed through selective, romanticised imagery designed to attract external audiences (Urry, 2002). These narratives generate positive visibility, support tourism, and contribute to soft power (Anholt, 2007) . However, postcard imagery can enhance complexity. A living economy, urbanization, digital innovation, and shifting political structures often receive comparatively less international attention. When a country is repeatedly depicted through static cultural symbols, it may appear timeless rather than evolving (Hall, 1997). Thus, Nepal risks being framed as spiritually rich yet economically marginal or politically fragile.

Political reporting further shapes this perception. International coverage frequently focuses on coalition reshuffles, constitutional disputes, and allegations of corruption. While these are legitimate elements of democratic development, overemphasis on instability can create an image of chronic volatility. Agenda-setting research suggests that repeated focus on certain themes influences what global audiences perceive as defining characteristics (McCombs, 2004). Over time, Nepal may be seen less as politically transitioning and more as structurally unstable.

Climate change narratives add another layer to this mediated image. Nepal's Himalayan geography places it prominently within global environmental reporting. International media often depict shrinking glaciers, biodiversity loss, and fragile mountain ecosystems. Environmental communication scholarship notes that vulnerability framing is common in Global South coverage, often portraying affected states primarily as victims of global processes (Brinkerhoff, 2009). While such reporting raises awareness, it can obscure local adaptation strategies, policy innovation, and community resilience.

Geopolitically, Nepal is frequently described as situated between two giants, India and China. International reporting often interprets Nepal's infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and diplomatic initiatives through the lens of regional strategic competition. Small states are commonly portrayed in global media as arenas of great-power rivalry rather than autonomous actors. Such framing risks understating Nepal's own assertive role in shaping its foreign policy and in pursuing a diversified diplomatic strategy (Keohane, 1969).

The cumulative effect of these narratives is the imposition of labels: disaster-prone, politically unstable, climate-vulnerable, spiritually exotic, geopolitically squeezed. Each label contains elements of truth, yet together they produce a partial and externally defined and biased identity. Media scholars have long argued that representation is not merely descriptive but constitutive; it shapes how countries are understood and positioned globally (Hall, 1997). Structural inequalities in global news production further reinforce this dynamic. International coverage of Nepal is often generated by

foreign correspondents or international news agencies, reflecting editorial priorities rooted outside the country. As a result, Nepal's global image is frequently shaped more by external perception and interpretation than by domestic narrative control.

These mediated perceptions have material consequences. National reputation influences diplomatic trust, investment decisions, tourism flows, and broader soft power capacity. Being globally visible is advantageous, but how a country is seen matters as much as how often it is seen. Without deliberate strategic communication, Nepali perspectives risk remaining constrained within narrow narrative frames that fail to reflect resilience, institutional learning, and socio-economic transformation.

Disaster-Centred Narratives and the Politics of Vulnerability

One of the most prominent global narratives about Nepal concerns its vulnerability to disasters. International coverage intensifies during earthquakes, floods, landslides, aviation accidents, and public health crises. The 2015 earthquake, in particular, generated extensive global reporting centred on destruction, humanitarian emergency, and international aid mobilization. Disasters strongly align with news values such as negativity, drama, and immediacy. Consequently, crisis coverage often overshadows long-term development initiatives. Studies on media and humanitarianism suggest that repeated exposure to disaster imagery can construct enduring perceptions of fragility (Hawk, 1992).

While such reporting is vital for mobilizing global assistance, it can inadvertently contribute to an image of chronic dependency. Reconstruction progress, institutional reform, and community resilience typically receive less sustained attention than the initial crisis. Over time, vulnerability becomes central to international perception. This imbalance may influence diplomatic and economic engagement. Countries perceived as persistently unstable or disaster-prone may encounter reputational barriers in attracting foreign direct investment or projecting governance credibility. Acknowledging Nepal's real environmental vulnerabilities is essential. However, balanced representation requires equal attention to resilience, preparedness reforms, and local adaptive capacity (Lazzarini, 2024).

Political Instability and Governance Narratives

Global reporting on Nepal frequently emphasises coalition changes, parliamentary disputes, and constitutional controversies. Political contestation is inherent in democratic transition, yet disproportionate focus on instability can reinforce a narrative of chronic governance weakness. Agenda-setting scholarship demonstrates that repeated emphasis on particular themes shapes international perception. When headlines consistently highlight volatility, global audiences may interpret instability as structural rather than transitional (Modern Diplomacy, 2026).

Nepal's transition from monarchy to republic and its federal restructuring represent profound institutional change. However, international media often foreground moments of crisis over processes of consolidation. Such selective emphasis risks obscuring democratic learning and institutional resilience. Perceptions of instability can affect diplomatic trust and investor confidence, reinforcing the importance of balanced coverage.

Climate Change and Environmental Narratives

Nepal's Himalayan location situates it prominently within global climate discourse. International media coverage frequently highlights glacial retreat and ecological vulnerability. Environmental communication research indicates that Global South countries are often framed as victims of climate change, reinforcing vulnerability narratives (Geng, 2024).

Although Nepal faces significant environmental risks, it has also engaged actively in climate diplomacy and community-based conservation. Limited international attention to these efforts contributes to a one-dimensional portrayal. A more distinct representation would integrate environmental risk with governance response, thereby recognising both exposure and agency (Saliu, 2023).

Nepal in Geopolitical Media Narratives

Nepal's position between India and China frequently dominates global media interpretation. Infrastructure cooperation and diplomatic engagements are often framed as part of broader strategic rivalry (Upadhya, 2012).

Small-state scholarship highlights how countries like Nepal exercise agency by hedging strategies and engaging multilaterally. Yet global narratives sometimes reduce Nepal to a passive buffer state (Keohane, 1969)

Such framing underrepresents Nepal's independent foreign policy decisions and its participation in international institutions. By focusing primarily on external pressure, global media risk overlooks domestic priorities and strategic calculation (Adhikari, 2026).

Tourism, Heritage, and the Persistence of Romantic Imagery

Positive international portrayals of Nepal are often rooted in tourism and heritage imagery. Travel journalism and promotional materials emphasise Himalayan landscapes, trekking routes, temples, and spiritual retreats.

While such narratives enhance tourism and soft power, they can also perpetuate a romanticized image that marginalises contemporary realities. Urbanization, entrepreneurship, technological development, and policy innovation receive comparatively limited global visibility (Nye, 2004) .

The persistence of heritage-focused representation reinforces the perception of Nepal as timeless and traditional rather than modern and evolving. Balanced international image-building requires integrating cultural heritage with narratives of contemporary transformation.

Digital Media and Diaspora Narratives

The rapid expansion of digital media has significantly transformed the production, circulation, and contestation of national narratives in the global arena. Unlike traditional international media systems, historically dominated by large Western news organizations and professional gatekeeping structures, digital platforms provide decentralized and participatory environments for communication (Castells, 2010). Social media platforms, online news portals, blogs, podcasts, and video-sharing sites facilitate direct engagement between individuals, communities, and global audiences.

In Nepal, this transformation has created opportunities to present alternative perspectives that challenge prevailing global media narratives shaped by crisis, vulnerability, and instability. Digital communication reduces dependence on international wire services and foreign correspondents, who have traditionally played a dominant role in constructing Nepal's global image (Adhikari, 2025).

The Nepali diaspora represents a particularly significant actor within this evolving digital landscape. Spread across North America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and East Asia, the Nepali diaspora communities actively participate in transnational discourse concerning Nepal. Scholarship on diaspora communication demonstrates that migrant communities often function as "bridge actors," linking domestic and international audiences while influencing homeland narratives (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

Through social media advocacy, online commentary, professional networks, and cultural promotion, members of the Nepali diaspora diversify representations of Nepal's political, economic, and cultural realities. These actors frequently highlight themes underrepresented in mainstream global media, including technological entrepreneurship, educational mobility, remittance-driven development, and community resilience. Digital platforms thus enable diaspora communities to contribute to nation-branding and the formation of soft power beyond official diplomatic channels (Nye, 2004).

Digital media also provides visibility to marginalised and underrepresented voices within Nepal. Independent journalists, researchers, civil society actors, and content creators increasingly disseminate local perspectives in English and other global languages. Networked communication allows these voices to bypass traditional gatekeeping institutions. In doing so, digital spaces carry the potential to democratise narrative production and foster a more nuanced international image of Nepal (Smith, 2024).

However, despite these opportunities, digital narratives about Nepal remain fragmented in their global influence. Diaspora advocacy, independent journalism, and civil society communication often lack coordination and long-term strategic focus. Public diplomacy research highlights that narrative coherence and institutional alignment are essential for sustained international influence. Without such coordination, digital efforts struggle to compete with the agenda-setting power and algorithmic amplification enjoyed by established international media organisations (Melissen, 2005).

A further challenge lies in limited institutional investment in digital public diplomacy. Although digital platforms have become central to contemporary international communication, Nepali state institutions have yet to fully harness their strategic potential. Scholars emphasise that effective digital diplomacy requires professional training, consistent messaging, and policy integration (Bjola, 2015). In the absence of such frameworks, engagement remains reactive rather than proactive, constraining Nepal's capacity to counter incomplete or negative portrayals.

Moreover, the unregulated and fast-paced nature of digital media environments poses risks. Misinformation, sensationalism, and polarisation can undermine credibility and dilute constructive narrative-building. When competing narratives lack evidence-based grounding, they may weaken rather than strengthen Nepal's international image. Therefore, while digital media and diaspora networks represent powerful tools, their effectiveness depends on credibility, coordination, and institutional support.

Analysis

The foregoing analysis indicates that Nepal's international image is shaped by selective global media narratives embedded within structural inequalities in international journalism (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Framing processes play a central role in this dynamic. When international reporting repeatedly emphasises instability, vulnerability, or dependency, these frames become cognitive shortcuts for global audiences. Over time, such representations solidify into dominant interpretive lenses, influencing perception even when domestic realities evolve.

Agenda-setting research further demonstrates that the frequency and prominence of specific themes influence what audiences perceive as important or typical (McCombs, 2004). In Nepal's case, disaster events, political contestation, and geopolitical positioning often dominate global coverage, while institutional consolidation, social innovation, and policy achievements receive comparatively limited attention.

Nepal's constrained capacity to shape global media discourse exacerbates this imbalance. Historically, limited international media engagement and the dominance of foreign correspondents have enabled external actors to define prevailing narratives. As a result, Nepal's contributions to peacekeeping, climate diplomacy, community-based

governance, and digital entrepreneurship often remain peripheral in global reporting (Adhikari, 2024).

Digital transformation offers corrective potential, yet the absence of coordinated strategic communication limits its impact. Without sustained narrative-building efforts, alternative portrayals struggle to displace entrenched frames.

Conclusion

Global media narratives play a decisive role in shaping how nations are perceived in the international arena, and Nepal is no exception. As this article has demonstrated, Nepal's international image has largely been constructed through selective and episodic portrayals that emphasise disaster vulnerability, political instability, environmental fragility, and geopolitical positioning. While many of these representations reflect genuine challenges, their disproportionate emphasis produces an incomplete and even biased depiction of national identity. Consequently, Nepal is often framed as disaster-prone, aid-dependent, or strategically constrained, overshadowing its social dynamism, democratic evolution, and international contributions. These representations reflect broader structural inequalities in global media systems, in which smaller states receive conditional, crisis-driven visibility.

However, Nepal is not merely a passive subject of representation. The country possesses significant capacity to influence its global image through strategic narrative-building. Contributions to international peacekeeping, climate advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and regional cooperation demonstrate active global engagement. The expansion of digital media and diaspora networks further expands opportunities for narrative diversification.

Realising this potential requires effective coordination. Responsible global journalism must be complemented by proactive engagement from Nepali institutions, civil society actors, and digital communities. Strategic communication, media diplomacy, and sustained interaction with international media organisations are essential for ensuring more balanced representation. By investing in institutional capacity and narrative coherence, Nepal can move beyond reactive responses and assert a more multidimensional presence within global discourse through proactive initiatives.

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