Ethical concerns in digital Nepal: Media professionalism, literacy and participation

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Abstract

Evolution of the internet and technological advancement has drastically changed communication, immensely affecting worldwide society, and Nepal is not unaffected. Many subtle and massive positive and negative consequences are seen. To enhance positive outcomes and tackle negative challenges, media ethics has become significant. The need for media literacy among audiences is increasing to enhance democratic participation. Digital communication with increased citizen participation in media production, has raised the need for digital media ethics and literacy higher than ever. Traditional ethical frameworks face unique challenges in the rapid digitalization, as legacy media policies cannot address all ethical considerations in the new age. This study examines the intersection of digital transformation, ethics, literacy, and democratic participation in Nepal's changing media landscape using a qualitative exploratory approach. It analyzes 60 digital media contents from randomly selected Nepali online platforms, surveys 40 digital media users including students of 10+2 to Master's level, and conducts narrative analysis of 9 senior media personalities along with interviews of

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seven professionals including journalists, policymakers, and educators.

Introduction

World media landscape has undergone dynamic transformation since the evolution of digital technologies, and Nepal is not out of this. Nepal's transition to digitalization and democratization has shown many changes, prospects and challenges. The rapid growth of online platforms, social media engagement, and citizen journalism has altered the way of information dissemination and consumption across the nation and globe. Through democratization with easier access to right to information, freedom of expression and broader civic participation, digital revolution has also introduced additional ethical challenges.

Democratic strength depends on integrity of media ecosystem. Nepal's socio-political context of federalization, diversity, and digital divide creates vulnerabilities to manipulation, though digitalization offers inclusive participation. Examining ethical concerns in Nepal's digital media is necessary in such conditions. Rapid digitization demands development of regulatory and ethical frameworks, as traditional ethics are inadequate for real-time reporting.

Research questions

The central research problem to address concerns the tension between digital democracy and the ethical challenges it introduces. It investigates how digitalization affects media professionalism, literacy, and democratic participation. With this, the study tries to look for the answers of the following research questions.

1. What is the status of existing ethical frameworks in Nepal, especially for digital media?

2. How adequate media literacy do Nepali digital media users have?

3. In what ways do digital media platforms affect citizen's democratic participation?

4. Why and how digital journalism ethics must be strengthened?

Research objectives

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the current state of digital media ethics in Nepal and assess its impact on democratic participation. This aims also to:

1. assess adequacy of existing ethical frameworks for digital Nepal,

2. evaluate media literacy level among Nepali digital media users,

3. examine how digital platforms affect citizen participation in democratic processes, and

4. identify institutional and policy interventions needed to strengthen ethical digital journalism.

Significance of the study

Existing literature on media ethics mainly focuses on traditional media ethics, with just a limited attention to digital journalism. Concerns about digital media centric ethics is nowadays growing all over the world. Nepal still lacks sufficient research on digital media ethics and literacy. While digital media ethics has been more important, only a few studies examine the issues in Nepali context, undergoing digital transformation. This research tries to address this gap by providing practical and theoretical observations and analysis.

Literature review

Traditional ethics and media literacy, rising digital challenges

The Swedish freedom of press ordinance of 2nd December 1776 is considered the first media law in the world. Discussions on media ethics also have been the matter of prime concern. Many legal and ethical frameworks are developed after that. The American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1922 developed a seven-point code of conduct, followed by the Society of Professional Journalists in 1926, the Hutchins Commission Report in 1947, and the International Federation of Journalists in 1954 (Acharya, 2021). Traditional theories of media ethics by scholars like Christians et al. (2020) and Ward (2015) emphasized accuracy, independence, fairness, and accountability, forming the foundation of journalism education and practice. However, digital transformation challenges these frameworks. Deuze (2005) argued that digital media's interactive and multimedia nature requires reconceptualizing journalism ethics.

Research has identified digital-specific ethical challenges. Singer (2006) highlighted how speed and interactivity in online journalism create tensions between accuracy and immediacy. Hermida (2012) examined how social media integration affects journalistic authority and gatekeeping. These challenges are more acute in developing systems where infrastructure outpaces institutional capacity. Nepal, with frameworks based mainly on traditional media, faces ethical challenges due to new media growth. Press Council Nepal amended its Journalist Code of Conduct in 2019, first enforced in 2016, updating some ethics for new media.

Media literacy has shifted to complex digital skills beyond awareness. Jenkins et al. (2006) through participatory culture theory emphasized how digital media enables civic engagement requiring high media literacy. Potter (2019) argued traditional models do not respond to AI curation, deep fakes, and disinformation. Studies show problems worldwide, larger in developing countries like Ne-

pal. Mihailidis (2019) noted digital adoption occurs rapidly without literacy education, making individuals vulnerable. In Nepal, smartphone adoption has surpassed literacy drives. The 2022 National Census reported smartphone penetration at 73 percent. Internet penetration was 51.6 percent in early 2023 (DataReportal, 2023). There were 15.40 million internet users in Nepal at the start of 2024, with 49.6 percent penetration. Nepal had 13.50 million social media users, 43.5 percent of the population, and 37.47 million mobile connections, 120.6 percent of the population (DataReportal, 2024). By early 2025, mobile connections reached 39.0 million (132 percent of the population), with 16.5 million internet users (55.8 percent penetration) and 14.3 million social media user identities (48.1 percent) (DataReportal, 2025).

Digital media and democratic engagement

The role of digital media in the democratic process has provoked a lot of academic discussion. On the positive side, there are views that technology will foster civic participation, government openness and citizen empowerment (Shirky, 2008). Digital means enhance the function of media as voice of the voiceless in real sense, promote inclusion by ensuring and strenghtening the participation of marginalized groups and minority communities. Also, digital platforms allow 'hitherto excluded' voices to join in the discussion of social and political issues and hold governments to account in new ways. Even so, negative studies have pointed out that digital media can be the downfall of democracy. Echo chambers and filter bubbles identified by Sunstein (2001) and Pariser (2011) do not encourage democratic deliberation but instead support what individuals hold to be true (Möller 2021).

Recently, other researchers such as Bennett and Livingston (2018) have published on the use of disinformation campaigns to control the minds of people and destabilize democratic institutions by using digital platforms. Nepal also witnesses the same scenario regarding growth in digital media and democratic participation with many

positive and negative outcomes as Timalsina (2025) states, "the rapid growth of digital platforms in Nepal has reshaped democratic participation but also intensified misinformation, undermining informed citizenship and electoral trust". The role of digital media in democratic participation has created a lot of debate among scholars. Optimistic views like those of Shirky (2008) concentrate on the good that technology has brought about in enhancing human civic engagement, government transparency and power of the citizens.

Transitional democracy and digital media system

Comparative media system framework offered by Hallin and Mancini (2004) offers some insight into the development of media in transitional democracies. The media system in Nepal bears the features of the polarized pluralist model with its high degree of political parallelism, a lack of professionalism among journalists, and state intervention. Digital transformation is complicating this model with new players, altered economic models and alternative sources of information that are not filtered by traditional media gatekeepers. Recent reports on the importance of media systems in post-conflict societies (Price et al., 2015) underline the significance of media in the process of democratic consolidation. Many Nepali and some international researchers and writers have discussed the process of media liberalization in the wake of People's Movement in 2006 that led to the emergence of pluralistic media in Nepal while bringing about new issues on political capture and commercial pressures. Professor P. Kharel (2024) has notably mentioned about such transition in his latest book, 'Democracy Rupture, Channel Capture: Beneath and Beyond the Boarders'.

Theory of digital ethics

The theory of digital ethics by Floridi (2019) offers a perspective of moral issues created by information and communication technologies. Digital ethics is broader than traditional media ethics because it involves the question of algorithmic accountability, data privacy, and mediation of human communication through technology. The

major concepts of digital ethics are information ethics and digital transformation. Information ethics places extra focus on the ethical significance of information as one of the most vital parts of the reality.

The participatory democracy theory

The participatory democracy theory, as expounded by Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984), focuses on participation of citizens in democratic rule-making processes other than through the ballot box. This framework discusses the impacts of digital media on the opportunities of meaningful civic participation. Core elements are: i) deliberative participation which means citizens discussing the issues of interest to the society in a reasoned manner, and this necessitates access to valid information and different views, ii) inclusive participation that refers to the capacity to make sure that all social groups have the possibility to participate significantly in the democratic process, and to overcome the challenges of financial disparity, geographical isolation or social marginalization, and iii) informed participation meaning the citizens with enough knowledge and analytical skills to participate in democratic deliberation.

Theory of media literacy

The theory of media literacy in contemporary times, which has been elaborated by theorists such as Potter (2020), Kellner and Share (2007), is based on the ability to critically analyze various media environments. This framework goes beyond the simple evaluation of information to comprehend the production, distribution and consumption processes of the media. Important elements of the theory of media literacy are:

i) Critical Analysis Skills: the skill of analyzing sources of information, identifying bias and establishing credibility in situations where there may be no traditional gate keeping processes in place,

ii) Digital Production Competencies: the ability to know how digital media content is produced, edited and distributed so that more sophisticated consumption and participation can be achieved, and

iii) Civic Media Literacy: relating media literacy skills to democratic citizenship, with an emphasis on the ways media consumption and production can be used in citizen actions.

In the Nepali context, theory of media literacy frameworks can be used to examine the relationship between the growth of digital media and the ability of citizens to critically respond to the information on digital media.

Theoretical integration

The above reviewed theoretical frameworks intertwine in the analysis of Nepal's digital media. The theory of digital ethics offers normative criteria to assess the practices of online journalism. Participatory democracy theory provides guidelines to be used when determining whether digital media is strengthening or weakening the democratic participation. The theory of media literacy determines what skills are needed by citizens in order to be able to act in democratic environments successfully using digital media.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative focused convergent parallel mixed-methods design, which uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to give a broad analysis. The methodology combines the content analysis, survey, interviews and narrative analysis to triangulate the findings and make solid conclusions.

Research design

The qualitative focused convergent parallel design permits the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, and integration occurs during interpretation. This method is especially appropriate when considering the complex social

phenomenon such as media ethics where patterns of numbers have to be considered within the wider contextual parameters. The research philosophy embraced by the study is pragmatic and focuses more on practical solutions to a problem rather than on its purity.

METHODS

Content analysis

Using observational analysis method, 60 randomly selected digital news content of leading Nepali online published within a 15 days duration (5th -20th August, 2025) were analyzed. Popular Nepali news portals such as OnlineKhabar, Setopati, Ratopati, eKantipur, Barhakhari, Nagarik News, Himal Khabar, Annapurna Post Online, Khabar Hub, Nepali Times were visited and reviewed.

Survey and observation

Survey on 40 digital media consumers was done by asking some close ended and open ended questions and noting their answers. The question asked mainly measured the level of media literacy and digital media consumption trends. The respondents were randomly selected among the college students, 15 from 10+2, 15 from Bachelor and 10 Master's level representing from all geographical and provincial regions of Nepal who regularly use social media as well as other digital platforms.

Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis method was used to collect qualitative data. To explore and explain the observations, experiences, and readings of senior media professionals, narrative analysis of nine reputed media personalities was done. Ideas of senior professional journalists at editorial leadership level, publishers, media house owners, policy makers, and educators were analyzed. Their shared ideas, experiences, opinions and information were incorporated as data and analyzed to draw findings and conclusion. Audio records and verbatim transcriptions of their speech are the data sources.

The expert speakers had shared views as guest lecturers in the weekly media talk series *"Media Matters: Experts-Scholars' Idea Exchange 2024"* organized every Friday by the scholars of Mphil-PhD in Journalism and Mass Communication (JMC) at the Camera Building of Tribhuvan University's Central Department of JMC.

In-depth interviews

Data were also collected through in-depth interviews with seven key informants to gain insights into challenges and opportunities in digital media ethics. Informants included three journalists (reporters, editors, media managers of online media), one digital activist from civil society organizations in media freedom and digital rights, a digital media policymaker as a government official in media regulation and digital policy, and two media educators teaching journalism and mass communication under TU.

Limitations of the study

This research is confined within Kathmandu and the number of content analyzed, survey respondents and interview participants is small. Most of the survey respondents are from Madan Bhandari Memorial College representing all parts of Nepal. Documents and interviewees are in limited numbers. Broader application of methods, sampling, research area, and time frame was not possible due to time and resource constraints, which may have caused underrepresentation. A 15-day content period for analysis may not reflect long-term trends.

Findings and discussion

Reality of the digital media in Nepal is complex and there are both challenges and opportunities to practice ethical journalism and democratic engagement. Findings of this study are presented based on three major themes which include practices of digital media platforms, level of media literacy within the audiences, and the democratic participation or engagement patterns.

Analyzing ethical policy

Ethical policy analysis of the included platforms showed major differences in the actual deployment of ethical framework. Only 30 percent of the observed platforms had digital ethics guidelines to cover unique issues such as social media authentication, moderating reader comments, and corrections.

The analysis revealed ethically dubious notions or digital-specific gaps. Only 40 percent of analyzed articles provided clear attribution of verification methods. Journalists' phone-based verification failed to transfer to social media, resulting in repeated not-verified information. 80 percent of platforms had some correction policies, but only one-third had systematic processes for updating digital content. Platforms often deleted content without notifying corrections transparently.

Social media integration produced ethical issues most networks had not addressed. Moderation rules differed widely; some platforms left discussions unfiltered, while others heavily sanitized them. Systematic content analysis showed problematic trends in digital journalism quality. Fact-checking indicators like multiple sources, expert validation, or data validation were present in only 65 percent of articles, poor compared to international standards. Most articles (70%) relied on official sources, with few citizens, civil society, or marginalized voices, showing democratization of source selection is not fully achieved.

Despite ethical issues, Nepal's digital journalism shows positive innovations. Online media reported breaking news better, especially running 24-hour newsrooms to respond quickly. Issues ignored by mainstream legacy media are getting coverage through digital platforms. Advanced platforms experimented with data visualization, visual maps, and reader polling to enhance civic interaction, promising greater democratic participation.

Analysis of survey findings on media literacy

The questionnaire of 40 people using digital media also indicated a wide digital media literacy gap in the Nepali population. Based on a 10-point media literacy scale, the total average was 4, with 80 percent of participants scoring below the 6-point pass under corporate digital media literacy competency standard. The media literacy assessment explored five major areas of competencies as follows:

Source evaluation

After testing, only 30 percent of the respondents demonstrated high-functioning capability in evaluating credibility of digital sources. Being secondary, Bachelor and Master's level students, there were even such samples who failed to realize the difference between a news report and opinion piece, a rough conception of the editorial process, and placing excessive trust in the popularity of Twitter accounts and TikTok videos as a signal of credibility.

Information verification

On the verification of the information through cross-referencing, only 20 percent of respondents affirmed that there was systematic information cross referencing. The majority of consumers used only one source or social confirmation but not independent confirmation.

Limited knowledge of digital media economics

There was very weak awareness on how digital media platforms make money and how this affects their content production. Very few (only 10 %) knew even the basic concepts of filter bubbles, algorithm bias, echo chamber, targeted advertising and click-based revenue models.

Digital rights and privacy

Limited information on digital rights and data privacy and online security was evident among the respondents. Only 40 percent of the

respondents reflected knowledge on digital rights and 30 percent showed their knowledge and experiences about privacy. But still inadequate and improper knowledge and awareness about digital rights and privacy even among the media students is a very serious issue.

Civic media engagement

Respondents appeared to be divided into those who posted political information and those untouched by the political process over the Internet. Most did not have to show a highly developed level of understanding and use of computer functioning as a media conduct for civic participation.

Aspects of media use

Analysis showed troubling habits of consumption that add to media literacy deficits. 70 percent of respondents counted less than three as a regular use of sources of news with Facebook being the main source of 60 percent of respondents. The problem of misinformation spread was caused by 70 percent of respondents, who shared news materials without prior verification. Emotional response is strongly correlated to sharing as opposed to the assessment of accuracy. Trust in the digital media was found to vary largely with social media sources gaining higher rate of trust than older established news media by the younger respondents. This pattern is precisely reversing the natural hierarchy of credibility and may be indicative of the fact that digital platforms are expediting the emotional appeal when measured against conventional media houses.

Analysis of democratic participation and engagement

- Political Knowledge: Positive relation between higher media literacy and political knowledge, but overall weak as only 40 percent answered simple political culture questions accurately.

- Civic Engagement**:** Digital media use linked to online political discussions and social media activism, while offline physical involvement was weaker.

- Government Accountability: 70 percent (28) respondents said government reacted to social media campaigns, showing impact on governance.

- Digital Divide: Internet penetration grows but access barriers remain. Renters (55%) had less than 3 hours online daily, permanent urban residents (35%) more than 5 hours, while 20 percent in hostels/with relatives showed moderate activity. Despite access, skill barriers limited participation; online civic engagement was high mostly among higher-educated, self-earning, employed, and own-home respondents.

Digital media and democratic participation

The digital platforms showed a different effect on democratic participation with varied effects among the respondents as mentioned below.

- Facebook: It was used as the main political discussion platform, for 12 among the 40 (30%) respondents. This platform had an echo chamber effect and the spread of misinformation. Political discourse tended to enforce the preconceptions that people had rather than lead to any deliberative democracy.

- YouTube: It became the most influential source of political education in the form of video, although the quality was highly uneven as found in the survey. According to 9 (22.5%) survey participants, YouTube was the most extensively utilised by citizen journalists to record political activities and issues in the society.

- TikTok: For 10 among 40 (25%) respondents, TikTok was the main source of information. It has rapidly evolved beyond just entertainment but also as a space for democratic participation and civic engagement. It was once banned and now again open

due to the national and international public and media freedom pressure. It has been instrumental for grassroots campaigns, fostering activism and movements through an interactive, participatory environment in which users engage in debates, challenge dominant narratives and access alternative perspectives.

- X: X, popularly known as Twitter previously, is the user base, however not very large but has the consequent effect on political discourse is disproportionately huge as viewed by 2 (5%) of total survey participants. It became the main platform of real-time politics commentaries and interaction between journalists and politicians.

- Messaging Apps: For 7 (17.5%) of respondents messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Viber helped information to spread quickly, but they also enabled far more sophisticated disinformation campaigns. The group messaging dynamics had to favor speed over accuracy dynamics according to the response of the interviewees.

The narrative analysis: Insights of experts and key informant interviews (KII)

Data from nine expert speakers in the talk series '*Media Matters: Experts – Scholars' Idea Exchange -2024*' and key informant interviews, gave findings on digitalization, media ethics and democratic participation as below:

- Pressure to Generate Revenue: Online networks are revenue-driven, focusing on clicks over quality; systemic issues with ethical standards in digital environments exist.

- Popularity Focused Content and Virality: Senior journalist Babita Basnet said she became a video content creator with her YouTube channel "*Samaya Bhitrako Samaya*". Many professional journalists turned into online creators for popularity and income, while amateur creators focus only on income, ignoring ethics and democratic strengthening.

- Inadequate Resources for Technical Capability: Most newsrooms lack infrastructure, training, fact-checking tools, data analysis software, and multimedia facilities. Younger journalists are more technically skilled but lack ethics training, while older ones struggle with digital challenges.

- Fundamentalist Digital Activism: Civil society leaders in digital rights focus on fundamental systemic issues as viewed by experts, policy makers, media educators, and professionals.

- Absence of Regulatory Frameworks: No clear media rules for digital context; existing broadcasting laws ineffective for online content. Algorithmic choices of international platforms affect Nepal's information flow, yet platforms lack accountability under Nepali democratic processes.

- Need for Training and Education: Media literacy teaching and digital journalism training are needed but absent from formal education. Experts emphasized developing and revising courses for media literacy and academic syllabus.

Discussion

Research indicates digital journalism in Nepal faces a professionalization crisis. The imbalance between conventional ethics and digital practice is global. Nepal needs to update its ethical and legal frameworks with digital priming immediately. 70 percent of sites lacking adequate digital ethics policies pose a major threat to democratic development. Financial pressures create worrying dynamics, with click-based revenue models encouraging sensationalism over accuracy, conflicting with informed deliberation. This economic challenge requires systematic, industry-wide solutions rather than personal ethics alone. Encouraging trends also exist: technology enhances accessibility, government transparency, crisis communication, and interactive functionality that fosters civic participation.

Some 80 percent of surveyed digital media consumers scoring below basic competency (6/10) threatens Nepal's democratic future. Democracy assumes citizens evaluate information and make informed choices, but media literacy gaps undermine this. Demographic patterns urban-rural divides, educational disparities, generational differences worsen inequalities and risk new democratic exclusion. If the discourse remains limited to digitally literate groups, democracy disconnects from large populations. Social media's dominance, especially in rural areas, raises concerns as it lacks editorial oversight. Emotional response drives sharing, meaning engagement often outweighs accuracy.

Digital media in Nepal shows potentials and alarming limits. Social media campaigns led to government policy change, amplifying marginalized voices and political accountability. Yet, discussions mostly occur in echo chambers, reaffirming opinions instead of fostering deliberative democracy. Weak association between digital engagement and offline participation suggests online activism replaces rather than adds to traditional activity.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined ethical concerns in Nepal's digital media, analyzing media professionalism, literacy, and democratic participation. Findings reveal challenges and opportunities as Nepal navigates digital transformation.

The democratizing role of digital media was less apparent than expected, dominated by elites and digital divides. Gatekeeping persists, shifting to algorithms and platform policies. Risks of misinformation, disinformation, virality, and polarization increase, raising ethical professionalism concerns.

Practices lag behind standards, with no comprehensive ethics policies; traditional frameworks fail against digital challenges like verification, corrections, and algorithms. Consumers score below competency, especially in rural, older, and less-educated groups,

creating new exclusions. Platforms enable accountability and marginalized voices but also misinformation, echo chambers, and concentration of discourse among literate groups.

Recommendations

This study suggests many ways forward for the researchers, plan setters and policy makers to think and do as indicated below.

- Introduce inclusive curricula and programs on evaluation, verification, digital economics, algorithms, rights, and privacy.

- Prioritize rural, elderly, and less-educated populations.

- Industry, regulators, civil society, and education must develop ethics covering:
  - ➢ Social media source verification
  - ➢ Real-time corrections
  - ➢ Reader engagement and comment moderation
  - ➢ Algorithmic content regulation
  - Media houses need:
  - ➢ Technical infrastructure and tools
  - ➢ Digital journalism training
  - ➢ Professional growth in ethics
  - ➢ Government/donor support for investment
  - Reform press regulation to fit digital context while upholding democracy:
  - ➢ Transparent digital regulations
  - ➢ Mechanisms for digital ethics
  - ➢ Accountability for international platforms
  - ➢ Federal, provincial, local coordination
  - Ensure cooperation among law/media agencies, journalism schools, academia, regulators, NGOs, local organizations,

international partners, technology firms, and democracy supporters.

- Establish forums to oversee and adjust interventions as problems and opportunities arise.

This research opens room for further studies on democracy implications of digital media in Nepal. Future studies should measure and monitor media literacy, ethical performance, and democratic participation over time to assess interventions and establish trends. Longitudinal studies can show if challenges are transitional or structural. Comparative analysis of digital media ethics can identify effective models of interventions. Nepal's experience may be generalized to issues faced by developing democracies and post-conflict societies. More specific analysis of impacts of certain digital platforms on democratic participation can guide interventions, as platforms affect political discourse differently. Platform-specific research may inform regulation and education.

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