



Scope, Challenges and Prospects of Media Self-Regulation in Nepal

Laxman Datt Pant*

PhD Scholar in Communications

Kuala Lumpur University of Science & Technology (KLUST), Malaysia

082101900008@s.iukl.edu.my , laxmankasyap@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3956-193X>

Mohd Nashriq Nizam

Senior Lecturer & Head

Postgraduate Programme in Communications, (KLUST), Malaysia

Corresponding Author*

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Abstract

Self-regulation is regarded as a crucial tool to maintain credibility and uphold media's watchdog role in any democracy. It is one of the most effective ways to building trust among people about the content media produce. Both ethical standards and the practice of ombudsperson complement to enabling regulatory systems to promote self-regulation in newsrooms and safeguard editorial independence. Yet, practicing these principles remains problematic as Nepali media fraternity faces multiple challenges in developing systems of self-regulation. The current regulatory system at the Press Council Nepal (PCN) is less effective in facilitating self-regulation among journalists. The key obstacles of a functional self-regulation system include but not limited to financial crisis, government influence and intervention in PCN decisions, political alignment of the PCN board and media, and weak governance capacity to facilitate media applying ethical codes voluntarily. Lack of sensitivity on ethical standards and non-adherence to journalists' code of conduct are also complicated the situation. Absence of policy and plan to address growing ethical concerns across digital platforms i.e. online news portals has further intensified the problem. Digital newsrooms hardly have systems of transparent editorial gatekeeping. Identifying the scope of media self-regulation, this study analyzes the main obstacles in institutionalizing media self-regulation system. Furthermore, the study attempts to find out practical solutions of the problem and recommends contextual



approaches to upholding media self-regulation in Nepal. Finding solutions to the crisis of the public trust over the media emerges as a major cornerstone of viable self-regulatory systems. It is recommended that initiatives should focus on developing an independent media regulatory body with mandates to facilitate self-regulation and sensitize media on contemporary ethical standards that advocate social responsibility of the press. Applying self-regulatory ethical standards is not a stand-alone task, it thrives when various stakeholders mainly journalists, publishers, the academia, regulatory bodies, civil society organizations come together to acknowledge the broader societal role of media. Addressing public grievances and reinforcing media self-regulation will create enabling environment to uphold media credibility and press freedom.

Analyzing international studies and drawing on the observations of diverse media stakeholders, this study discusses the scope, challenges and prospects of self-regulation in Nepali media.

Keywords: Media Self-regulation, Ethical Journalism, Media Credibility, Accountable Journalism, Watchdog Role, Nepal

Introduction

Media self-regulation can be conceptualized as a crucial ethical media practice to facilitate enabling state regulation and as a resistance to direct state control. Studies highlight self-regulation as a key ingredient of press freedom, professional responsibility and public confidence in democratic and transitional environments. Comparing the data revealed that although the core journalistic virtues - accuracy, impartiality, independence, and accountability - are broadly held in common, the institutional nature of self-regulation is shaped by political culture, market size and media ownership (Todorovski, 2024). Comparable self-regulation operates unlike state regulation in that it is voluntary and of journalistic professional nature, which permits the media to correct its mistakes, ethically respond to them, and engage with the audience without requiring coercion from the government and/or judicial authorities to act. The evidence provided through practical application (European and American case studies) shows self-regulation is most effective when an adequate combination of well-defined ethical standards and clear guidelines for handling complaints are integrated. Big public service media organizations such as the BBC and NPR depend on thorough editorial standards, internal supervision positions and public correction and complaint methods to maintain the public's trust (Todorovski, 2024). Yet the evidence suggests that these kinds of formalized models are resource-intensive, and not particularly valuable for smaller or financially constrained media systems, if not too well suited for implementation.

More efficient measures—such as Estonia's Ethics Adviser and Slovenia's ombudsman system—demonstrate that individualized, flexible mechanisms may be effective as long as institutional independence, professional integrity, and public visibility are preserved. Media self-regulation is important, as a study from Moldova demonstrates self-regulation cultivates internal professional norms, ethical responsibility and freedom from political interference



(Mirza, 2021). Self-regulation in media empowers media actors to take responsibility for journalistic expectations to support the foundation of trust in media as a whole and media accountability and responsibility. This shows that in the absence of self-regulatory system, media becomes vulnerable to political capture.

A study discloses some interesting implications of media self-regulation such as improved press freedom, media accountability and inclusive voice (Fengler et al., 2015). This study from the Europe shows quite normative support for self-regulation as a professional ideal. Echoing self-regulation as a way to balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility, a study from India emphasizes that self-regulation provides an alternative to direct state control (Rai and Kumar, 2024). Media self-regulation safeguards media independence from state interference, mainly when statutory regulation has the potential to censor journalism, this finding is backed by research demonstrating that a self-reinforcing model is the most desirable (Mathew, 2016). This study emphasizes how media self-regulation balances freedom and accountability internally.

Responding to the increasing impact of the artificial intelligence in media, scholars have underscored that self-regulation serves as a key instrument for media houses to reduce ethical risks including algorithmic bias and disinformation (Sánchez-García et al., 2025). Analyzing these diverse insights, this study critically sheds light on the various dimensions intersecting self-regulatory practices and their prospects in Nepal.

This study analyzes the perception, practice and impact patterns of media self-regulation in Nepal. In addition to identifying the weaknesses and strengths of self-regulatory model, this study explores the potential role of various sectors in institutionalizing self-regulation to strengthening ethical media practices. Analyzing the insights of highly acknowledged media sector experts, through the key informant interviews, this study examines media self-regulation in a systematic and explanatory manner.

Insights in this study were drawn from a purposively selected group of experts and cover three broad sectors: a.) media academia, b.) professional media associations, and c.) editors. Using media self-regulation as an independent variable, the study thoroughly reviews the observations linking the scope, constraints and prospects of media self-regulation in Nepal. This study provides a key contextual grounding of how self-regulation systems could be institutionalized amid the present practice of an enforceable code of conduct by the Press Council Nepal (PCN).

General Objective

Building on the key assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, this study discovers how independent variables namely self-regulation, regulatory systems and public accountability, affect dependent variables i.e. media accountability, public trust and the



accuracy of information. This purposive qualitative approach is part of the doctoral study 'Examining media self-regulation and the efficacy of journalists' code of conduct in Nepal,' which critically analyzes media regulatory systems and their links to self-regulation media accountability and press freedom.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives are:

- To assess the media regulatory frameworks to compare Nepal's systems with global practice.
- To examine the scope, constraints, and prospects of media self-regulation in Nepal.
- To identify institutional obstacles in strengthening ethical compliance in media sector.

Materials and Methods

Following the qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study examines the scope and prospects of media self-regulation in Nepal. The methodology is explicitly designed to provide an interpretative analysis of the media self-regulatory practices and challenges in Nepal. The study utilizes purposive selection of three experts that collectively represented Nepal's diverse media sector. These range from senior journalists/editors, media educator/ethics experts to civil society activists/media professional bodies. Purposive sampling was applied throughout the study to be sure that the participation of individuals who have relevant experience with major work in the domains of media regulation and media ethics.

The wider doctoral work collects findings and information from the six major variables and almost 60 questions from 12 key informant interviews (KII) from media experts, academics, regulatory authorities or associations (such as the Press Council Nepal), scholars, media civil society organizations and professional associations, and senior journalists/editors. These inputs were examined exhaustively to assess how well the Press Council Nepal and the Journalists' Code of Conduct (CoC) fostered self-regulation and press freedom in Nepal. This article, on the other hand, primarily aims to evaluate and generate recommendations in an exclusive and context-specific manner from these three experts who contributed their unique insights into the extent, issues, and prospects for media self-regulation in Nepal.

The semi-structured format of the interviews enabled to explore participants' experience and perspectives in depth, without losing focus on the interviews, allowing comparative analysis. The integrity of ethics was upheld by the use of the procedure from the data collection to analysis. In addition, by having different perspectives be included from the fields of academic, journalism, professional associations, civil society etc., the study triangulated the analysis and presented the findings in a variety of sources, which enhances in terms of rigor in the generalizability and relevance of findings.



This article aims to critically analyze and create recommendations considering the perspectives of the experts who had unique insights into the extent, issues, and future opportunities of media self-regulation in Nepal. These elements covered the following main aspects:

- a) Current perceptions and scope of media self-regulation in Nepal based on stakeholder understanding and limitations.
- b) What impact grievance handling mechanisms have on preventing public complaints and ensuring journalistic standards?
- c) The independence and competence of the Press Council Nepal (PCN) for the effective and impartial enforcement of the Journalists' Code of Conduct.
- d) Access to complaints processes — the transparency as well as the ease of complaint procedures and inclusion of complaints.
- e) Trust deficits in grievance processes (feeling of fairness and objectivity of complainants and journalists).
- f) The perceptions of the Code of Conduct (CoC), whether it is seen as a legitimate self-regulatory tool or a tool for state control.
- g) The role and coherence of post-publication remedies to these issues (i.e., corrections, apologies etc.) in remaining ethical.
- h) Issues surrounding ethics in digital media, such as whether there are existing models for monitoring misinformation or user-generated content.
- i) Contributing to the weakness of the credibility of regulatory codes which include: lack of awareness, political interference and ineffective enforcement.
- j) Possibilities to support media-independent regulation frameworks for media self-regulation through capacity-building, stakeholder engagement and adjustment to technology.
- k) How to make certain that self-regulation could be independent of government and does not promote undue intervention of the government

Limitations

This study partially addresses two of the three research objectives (ROs) and corresponding research questions (RQs) outlined in the broader doctoral study. This study investigates the scope, constraints, and prospects of media self-regulation in Nepal, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of the Press Council Nepal's (PCN) public grievance mechanism in promoting self-regulation. This article centers on how self-regulation functions within the institutional framework of the PCN and identifies both the opportunities and challenges faced in strengthening self-regulatory ethical standards in the newsrooms in Nepal.

Although the research offers high-level consideration on major independent variables (media self-regulation and professional standards), such are probed primarily by means of response-lines organized into eleven key, targeted questions concerning these variables. There is, then, some consideration of dimensions of dependent variables, that is, regulatory processes and



public accountability, only when they have relevance for the effectiveness of the grievance mechanism in stimulating self-regulation.

Indeed, as in qualitative studies based on expert interviews, these findings are situation-specific and might not easily generalize beyond the specific media setting in Nepal. Because the data is self-administered, participants may be susceptible to bias (social desirability bias), which can shape perceptions and influence their responses. The assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), as formulated in the Commission on Freedom of the Press, include a number of core expectations regarding the media as part of society. These include offering a true, broad and intelligent description of daily events while sharing information, enabling public critique, representing different sectors of society, clearly defining the purposes and ends of all society and providing wide availability of critical information. While this theory champions both rights and responsibilities of media, critics argue that its call for government encouragement or control can potentially justify censorship and limit press freedom (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1984).

This study employs the SRT as its theoretical approach which centers on the trade-off between media freedom and accountability in Nepal's journalistic ethos and self-regulatory systems.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) of the Press, which arises from the 1947 Hutchins report 'A Free and Responsible Press', provides the foundation for the need of media self-regulation (Hutchins Commission, 1947). Evolving from the libertarian press model's overreach: the claim that truth would be the only dominant factor without supervision, the theory highlights the responsibility of media to provide the public with a truthful, full and balanced story (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1984). McQuail (2003) recognizes the Social Responsibility Theory of press as one of the four main press theories: Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet. At the heart of the theory as put forward in Siebert et al., is the media's role in using its status to assure the truth and propriety that information is communicated to the public.

Acknowledging the weakness of human beings and the complexity of modern society, the Hutchins Commission insisted upon the responsibility of the press not simply as a purveyor of information, but as an arena through which various social groups can exchange ideas and clarify the values of the community. This model considers the media as a strong social institution and advocates that it is central to ensuring the public's right to receive appropriate information, thus contributing to informed decisions (Hutchins Commission, 1947). Recognizing that there subsists tension between independent media and the government policies, the theory warns that for a government to use control of the media as 'media responsibility' narrative can be detrimental to dissent, henceforth undermine democracy. Press freedom and social responsibility are two components in tandem that allow for an informed citizenry and accountability to power (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1984).



Free from the power centers i.e. the government or private sector, a self-regulating media is a critical condition for democratic legitimacy. Additionally, it stimulates public trust on media and ensures media accountability. On the downside, relying on bare minimum legal limitations results in a concentration of media, with few powerful, unaccountable actors in the field and problems exacerbated further by the rise of data-driven and AI technologies; and when no positive intervention takes place these tend to pose an existential threat to plural media and democratic conversation (Habermas, 2006).

It has been contended that freedom of media expression is essential, but some in developing countries have used the Social Responsibility of the press as justification for censorship by scholars that posits the theory emerged in response to the limits of Libertarianism, where the press were called upon to provide truthful information within an acceptable legal scope of expression (Obagwu & Idris, 2019). If possible, and an ideal case for democracy, the media could, without external authority, use ethical codes as the means by which the media could self-regulate its influence – reconciling freedom with responsibility. The theory calls not for censorship, but for authentic and reliable reporting to serve the public interest (Obagwu & Idris, 2019). The Social Responsibility Theory asserts that the media needs to represent the public by presenting accurate, fair and moral information and having responsibility.

The do's under the Journalists' Code of Conduct adopted by the Press Council Nepal relate directly to this theory as they stress factual reporting, human rights respect and professional conduct. Journalists must work together to bring about social harmony, safeguard other vulnerable populations, maintain editorial independence, and be transparent about sponsorships and responsibility. They need to correct mistakes rapidly and react to public concerns, building trust and accountability (Press Council Nepal, 2019).

The don'ts under the Journalists' Code of Conduct is an example of a social responsibility code which prohibits content that damages the national unity, creates hatred and violates privacy. Journalists should be wary of using media for personal gain or giving or receiving undue influence from advertisers or political groups. The code prohibits the distribution of harmful material and visual manipulations that corrupt the audience and focuses on the respect of the justice process, and respect for the integrity of minorities, women, children and other vulnerable communities (Press Council Nepal, 2019).

First, the current journalists' code of conduct in Nepal reflects the ideal of social responsibility and encourages accountability through ethical self-regulation. Implementing the SRT as a theoretical framework for the research on scope, constraints and prospects of media self-regulation in Nepal shows that the efficient self-regulation should rest on media's support for accountability and trustworthiness. The central open-ended questions posed in this study attempt to investigate the juncture of media self-regulation —as the independent variable— in



combination with social responsibility theory (SRT) as theoretical framework as well as relevant ethical norms for journalism.

The questions were constructed in order to explore if the adherence to the Journalists' Code of Conduct enforced by the Press Council Nepal corresponds with the normative expectations of SRT namely accountability, freedom and social responsibility. This analysis seeks to determine whether the enforcement practices of the Press Council Nepal adequately embody and promote the ideals of SRT as a way of fostering significant media self-regulation across newsrooms of Nepal.

Literature Review

Although media self-regulation is considered as an effective ethical practice to promote editorial freedom, issues such as poor enforcement capacities, voluntary compliance and dispersed systems of regulation, remain the main concerns. These realities show that in the absence of strong and facilitating oversight, media self-regulation does not prevent abusive behavior such as biased reporting and media trials. Highlighting significance of media self-regulation in the digital age, scholars argue for new tools such as to enhance transparency, audience relations, and trust (Hulin & Dvorkin, 2014).

In Nepal, the current grievance handling system at the Press Council Nepal (PCN), is perceived as not transparent enough for addressing ethical violations. Experiences from other countries are useful to design a media self-regulation model in Nepal mainly for two reasons: a.) to balance freedom of the press and to protect the public's interest and b.) to establish a trustworthy self-regulatory system, capable of restoring public confidence in the media.

Scholars argue that while the practice of self-regulation in media contributes to press freedom and prevents state censorship, the limitations include weak implementation body, voluntary participation, and inconsistent standards across different media platforms (Chavhan & Sen, 2024). These risks result in poor self-regulation and oversight, especially on cases of media trials and hate speech, hence self-regulation may not be adequate if it is not well implemented. An observation in India finds that self-regulatory bodies (SRB) have no power to enforce their decisions, instead they allow media organizations to ignore ethical standards. The voluntary membership within SRBs found to have undermined the effectiveness of such regulation. In one instance a television channel namely Republic TV was punished by the News Broadcasting Standards Authority (NBSA) and then withdrew from the SRB to form a new organization, showing how broadcasters can challenge accountability (Chavhan & Sen, 2024). By ensuring consistent ethical standards and improving grievance redress systems, Nepal could perhaps learn from this experience and prepare to establish a unified and enforceable media self-regulatory system.



A study shows that while the Botswana Media Complaints and Appeals Committees were set up to encourage the self-regulation of media operations and prevent government intervention, the effectiveness of these committees was compromised by the limited ability to enforce which led to rampant noncompliance of these functions, notably by government owned media outlets such as Botswana Television and Daily News (Akpabio & Mosanako, 2018). For perception of bias, delays in administration, scarcity of funding and dual regulatory bodies has eroded public trust and efficiency, this lesson suggests weak self-regulatory mechanism promotes direct power of the government. The Botswana case should serve as a reminder that effective media self-regulation requires authoritative, transparent, funded, impartial committees, effective regulation and a government that takes informed public engagement seriously.

A study shows that traditional self-regulatory measures such as ethical codes and press councils have little effect on the ethics of journalists, whereas internal company guidelines and media laws have a greater effect because they are immediately linked to careers (Urbaniak, 2021). Stating that journalists are regarded as rational actors motivated by self-interest to reach the largest results possible, this study concludes ethical behavior is based on incentives-related to career advancement (Urbaniak, 2021). Reforms for Nepal would engage reinforcing workplace ethical codes linked to career achievements, sensitizing journalists about practical drivers of ethical behavior. Evidence in this area is based on observations showing self-regulation supports both press freedom and ethical journalism with increased credibility and public trust (Hulin, 2014). However, in fragile democracies, this puts risk that statutory endorsement in media self-regulation may lead to censorship.

A comparative study provides an inclusive and comprehensive picture of new aspects surrounding media self-regulation by analyzing the situation through the prism of the changing media structure in Malaysia and the UK's significant historical data-basing experience (Haron & Shuaib, 2022). An important aspect to this study is placing media self-regulation in the context of national and constitutional regimes and legislation, as it illustrates that, in the Malaysian case, where government has historically exerted effective regulation on the press, through strict regulation on the media via draconian legislation, pure self-regulation still faces inevitable structural resistance (Haron & Shuaib, 2022). This study posits that: self-regulation holds out for flexibility, industry expertise and less state meddling but that industry-driven practices and voluntary compliance combined with weak enforcement mechanisms have often compromised it. Although one of the pioneering examples of a self-regulatory press council, the British model went through decades of criticism for failing to achieve effective regulation, being partisan, and not keeping serious ethical abuses from occurring. Importantly, this study demonstrates that within the context of statutory underpinning and formal recognition mechanisms, such as in the UK's Royal Charter system, self-regulation can be ineffective when enforcement is toothless (Haron & Shuaib, 2022).



A study identifies three major mechanisms for media self-regulation— Codes of Ethics, Press Councils and Media Ombudspersons (Poposka, 2024). Codes of ethics are bedrock expectations that outline journalists' responsibilities in pursuit of accuracy, fairness to the press, neutrality and avoiding harm. Press councils are autonomous institutions that have a main composed of media professionals and public representatives who handle complaints and promote transparency and ethical standards. Media ombudspersons are representatives acting in-house within news organizations and are intermediaries between the media and the audience.

In order to enhance effective media self-regulation and to cement the social responsibility of the media while protecting ethical standards, Poposka, 2024 suggests the four measures:

- a) The media should maintain and standardize codes of ethics and should tailor content to the national context and encourage journalists to refrain from being dominated by management or owners to enjoy trust.
- b) Ensuring diverse stakeholder representation at press councils, independence, and transparency in complaint handling processes and build public confidence in ethical accountability.
- c) Media should institutionalize ombudsperson roles and their authority and visibility so that audiences are heard, and media personnel are always self-regulating.
- d) Capacity-building efforts to overcome digital obstacles, such as disinformation, and the implementation of cross-border media operational standards are important for the transformation of self-regulation practice to the contemporary media landscape.

Findings and Discussion

The context of media self-regulation ranges from existing structures including tools that can address public grievances, promote ethical standards, and media self-regulation via the existing mechanism such as Press Council Nepal (PCN). Some serious obstacles to this end include resource constraints, complexity in grievance handling, arbitrary enforcement of the journalists' code of conduct, and questions on the PCN's autonomy. Nepal requires to develop institutional capacity and improve transparency to build trust by effectively enforcing the code of conduct and improving the grievance handling process. Collectively, these findings highlight the pressing necessity and promise of developing and establishing a robust, autonomous and participatory self-regulatory system in order to maintain the media professionalism in Nepal and uphold press freedom.

Prof. Regmee asserts that the knowledge of media self-regulation in Nepal is limited, in part because regulatory bodies such as the PCN have long vacillated between control and facilitation, generating uncertainties about the trade-off between freedom and regulation. This is the bedrock of confusion that obstructs a culture of self-regulated journalistic creativity and ethical boundaries (Regmee, personal communication, November 14, 2025). Nirmala Sharma also agrees that the gap between recognition and understanding of self-regulation among



journalists and media institutions is vast. Although media actors understand the concept, they seldom adopt it as a social duty. Moreover, the Code of Conduct (CoC) is archaic and poorly developed in alignment with the dynamic landscape of increasing digital media (Sharma, personal communication, December 5, 2025). Editor Kamal Dev Bhattarai revealed that self-regulation is only thought-provoking and more abstract than practical; so many of the media personnel treat the CoC as a set of rules, rather than as a living ethical obligation. This suspension undermines the social responsibility of media (Bhattarai, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Collectively, these insights on Nepal's media self-regulation indicate a lack of uniform understanding about the institutional roles and conventional ethical frameworks.

Prof. Regmee analyzes that grievance the current handling mechanism at the PCN, is troubled with political interference, weak enforcement and reactive rather than proactive monitoring. These limitations lack both remedial and educational values. Substantiating this, Sharma stresses that an immediate step should be taken to address accessibility challenges, mainly for grassroots citizens and journalists working across digital media. She sees them as a group typically falling beyond the reach of traditional regulatory system. Considering PCN's current grievance handling system as punitive and stigmatized, Bhattarai sees this as a discouraging factor, responsible to disintegrate complainants and journalists from the Council. Appointment of the politically motivated people in the PCN board including its chairperson further undermine the Council's mandate to serve as a fair arbitrator. This makes grievance handling system structurally weak and prevents PCN to play a facilitating role towards developing a system of self-regulation.

Voicing together that political interference, lack of capacity and resource constraints place PCN at complicated juncture, all three experts questioned the mandate and capacity of the PCN in facilitating a system of self-regulation in media.

Prof. Regmee underscores that the dominance of government over case developments undermine PCN's autonomy and credibility. Proposing for the parliamentary oversight model, Sharma calls for the isolation of PCN from direct government control. Bhattarai is of the view that in the absence of independent leadership, the PCN becomes a compromised entity, thus failing to establish the essential trust within which effective self-regulation can thrive. This demands two crucial reforms viz. political autonomy and improved capacity to institutionalize effective self-regulatory system within media.

Identifying bureaucratic hurdles, lack of public awareness, and difficulty in access particularly for deprived communities as the key obstacles of the current complaint procedures, Prof. Regmee calls for simplification of the process to ensure meaningful inclusion. Adding that there is confusion on the PCN jurisdiction on the ever-elusive digital media, Sharma analyzes that geographic limitations keep many out of the grievance process. Fear of reprisal and lack



of confidence in PCN's neutral stance, makes complainants even less likely to use the system, Bhattarai analyzes. On the whole, accessibility continues to be a major issue which requires reform and enhanced clarity.

All experts report widespread skepticism about fairness and impartiality of grievance procedures for managing grievance complaints. Prof. Regmee emphasizes that political pressure fosters mistrust. There is no transparent, uniform, effective enforcement. Sharma believes that treating PCN as punitive and not a supportive entity leads to alienation and having a more diverse board can increase trust. Many journalists regard PCN as political instrument Bhattarai observes, so has only limited role in nurturing trust among both media insiders and the public. Trust depends on transparency, fairness, timely justice, and independence.

As Prof. Regmee describes the perceptions of Journalists' Code of Conduct (CoC), the CoC is "torn" by having to be a real ethical guide on the one hand, and a direct puppet of the state on the other. The result is an inconsistency of internalization and acceptance between journalists dissuading them from practicing self-regulation. Sharma laments the CoC's antiquated features, claiming not to properly tackle some of the sharper contemporary issues, particularly in digital media. Bhattarai discusses how practitioners often treat the CoC mechanically and regard enforcement by PCN as coercive, not collective ethical work. So reforming and clarifying the CoC as a way to foster ownership and alignment with media realities is the only solution.

Prof. Regmee urges to bolster corrections of post-publication, apologies, and clarifications so that public trust will be restored without the need to use punitive action. He believes inconsistent application is making accountability weaker. Fear of reputational damage, observes Bhattarai, leads to many media houses and journalists avoiding their own transparency – something that curtails their remedies' potential. Analyzing such remedies as inherent part of everyday newsroom behavior and self-regulation practice, Sharma voices for the consistent and clear remedies to promote media credibility.

The volatile ascent of digital media has occurred faster than usual self-regulation, presenting challenges for stakeholders to address the issue of self-regulation in media. Prof. Regmee underscores that existing systems fall short of monitoring the growing digital disinformation including hate speech mainly in the digital space. Sharma criticizes the vagueness of the PCN jurisdiction concerning the monitoring online media content and the limitations of traditional code of conduct. The key challenges according to Bhattarai are sensationalism and very little editorial oversight in digital media, which requires an urgent response from the self-regulatory frameworks. An updated code of conduct to facilitate self-regulation, planning and executing for digital literacy campaigns, and enabling regulatory tools can be helpful to tackle present day digital media challenges.



According to Prof. Regmee, the credibility of the CoC is at critical stage because of its' outdated nature. He is of the view that the increasing political interference at the PCN and the lack of awareness on contemporary ethical standards among journalists, has further intensified the issue. Sharma adds fragmented legal frameworks compound these credibility issues. Bhattacharai says economic crisis and lack of professional ethics education contribute towards ineffective implementation of the code of conduct. This calls for reorientation of the PCN functioning to promote self-regulatory system including transformation of media governance.

For enhancing self-regulatory systems within media houses and for PCN to play an enabling role, Prof. Regmee recommends multi-stakeholder collaboration, capacity development, amendment to existing CoC, and the insertion of internal monitoring systems i.e. ombudsperson into media houses. Sharma recommends massive media literacy programs, updating regulations, and diversified PCN governance to enhance credibility. Bhattacharai suggests the establishment of in-house ethics desks and elimination of the government control over the PCN. Collectively, this creates a blueprint for stronger and wider media self-regulation.

Conclusion

Considered to be both emerging and challenging mess, Nepal's media self-regulation ecosystem requires an immediate reform. The current ambiguous regulatory framework confuses its stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities mainly about the effective oversight and accountability systems. The independence of the PCN is compromised by limited resources and the political interference. These conditions have limited PCN's power to investigate accusations of abuse, demand ethical behavior and incentivize media development.

The existing Journalists' Code of Conduct (CoC) enforced by the PCN has never encouraged newsrooms to develop and practice self-regulation. Little cooperation or invisible collaboration exists between the PCN and media houses to instill self-regulatory ethical standards in newsrooms. Instead of offering a supportive framework, the PCN's actions have, in many cases, increased the distance between newsrooms and the regulatory framework. Newsrooms, while functioning with their own guiding principles and disconnected from the formal Code of Conduct, may undermine the efficacy of the PCN's mandate and hamper the evolution of a culture of accountability. Unfortunately, the PCN's ethical guidelines are old-fashioned and do not respond adequately to the changing nature and call for a collaborating approach to promote self-regulation.

The systems of grievance handling at the PCN are criticized for being slow and biased. Political interference also erodes the Council's neutrality providing space for questioning the legitimacy of its regulatory mandate. To address these broad problems involves a multidisciplinary approach to define regulatory functions, maintain the Code of Conduct current and work more closely with newsrooms to promote self-regulation. Capacity building initiatives are essential



to equip journalists, publishers, regulators and the citizens mainly on the intersections of media ethics, self-regulation, media development and press freedom.

Promoting media literacy will ensure a more critical mindset to engage with the media. It is equally important to go through structural reform to protect the PCN's independence. Creating an inclusive and participatory regulation will work to repair trust and narrow the gap between regulatory bodies and the media.

Nepal's media self-regulation system is at the critical juncture as no concrete actions are in place to encourage and institutionalize internal systems within newsrooms. In the absence of an inclusive reform strategy to enhance dialogue and collaboration on the intersection of roles, rights and responsibilities of media, media self-regulation is not prioritized both in policy and practice. Yet, opportunity prevails for Nepal to go for a sustainable culture of media self-regulation, through a locally adaptable modality to maintain the balance between press freedom and media accountability.

Recommendations

Nepal requires a combination of a wide range of inter-linked reforms to develop and practice an effective media self-regulation ecosystem. First and foremost, institutional, ethical, procedural and educational aspects should be addressed to reform the Press Council Nepal (PCN) to project it as a facilitating body. Moving its oversight from the direct engagement of the government to an independent and autonomous body is key to protect it from political interference.

Similarly, bringing non-journalists experts in the PCN board would help achieve a better balanced governance and promote institutional credibility. Going for a sustainable funding modality is also vital to promote operating independence of the PCN. This will open avenues for collaboration to internalize CoC, subsequently strengthening newsrooms to develop and enforce self-regulation.

The Journalists' Code of Conduct (CoC) requires an immediate amendment to address contemporary ethical challenges in media. The amended CoC should reach out to multiple stakeholders as an ethical commitment to practice self-regulation. Also, reforming the grievance handling system would be critical in rebuilding public trust and ensuring that complaints are more openly entertained.

A post-publication remedy such as timely rectification, issuance of apologies must be systematized in all media houses to ensure transparency. The PCN has a facilitating role on this end, which is unfortunately missing. Also, media should be trained on issues related to ethical remedial and fair play practice.



Media literacy initiatives to inform public of their rights and the systems available for holding media accountable, are tremendously needed alongside constant ethical sensitization programs for journalists to remind the media's social responsibility. A multi-stakeholder collaboration between regulators, professional associations, tech platforms, media and editors, and civil society is vital to address emerging challenges effectively.

A local approach towards the self-regulation of media can be instrumental. To this end, media organizations should be encouraged to set up ethics committees and complaint handling desks to foster discipline from the inside-out. Practice of the peer reviews can contribute to build an enabling environment for the growth of ethical self-regulation. These initiatives will enable Nepali media to constantly update, amend, create and re-enforce the self-regulatory frameworks, as they adapt to changing media challenges.

Finally, this study recommends for the future studies to comprehensively analyze whether the existing code of conduct and the PCN system of grievance handling contributes to fostering self-regulation among journalists.

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Annex I: A Short Overview of the KIIs.

Prof. R. K. Regmee

Prof. Regmee is a University Professor and the most senior media educator in Nepal, with 40 years of experience in journalism and teaching. He has been a journalism faculty member at Purwanchal University for the past 25 years and was Chief Reporter for Rastriya Samachar Samiti, Nepal's National News Agency.

Nirmala Sharma

Sharma is the Chairperson of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), Nepal's largest professional journalists' association with nearly ten thousand members. She is a member of the Press Council Nepal (PCN). Earlier, Sharma served as Chairperson of Sancharika Samuha, the largest network of women journalists, with nearly one thousand members.

Kamal Dev Bhattarai

Bhattarai is the Editor of the Annapurna Express English Daily, and has been in the journalism field for more 20 years. He frequently writes for international media on Nepal's foreign policy, especially relations with India and China. Previously, he served as the New Delhi Bureau Chief for the Kantipur Media Group, Nepal's largest media organization.