

ONLINE MEDIA ETHICS

A study of issues of ethical standard of Nepal's online media

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Online media¹ in Nepal is growing with web sites being launched regularly to cater the demands of the Nepali online community. However, online journalism was introduced much later than the online media as the earlier online media of Nepal were basically the online version of the printed newspapers.

Internet is relatively new media. It was only in the late 80s and early 90s that the World Wide Web (WWW) emerged and started influencing the way people live. Journalism was not left behind. The early use of internet was for acquiring information and using computer to improve reporting, but by the half of the 90s, the newspapers were already on the internet serving the people worldwide.

Early precursors of the online journalism are believed to be teletext and videotext, introduced and used during 70s and 80s but never took off. In 1978, Bulletin Board System (BBS), information and emails sharing method by direct connection between computers, began. In 1982, StarText, the first newspaper intended to deliver only to computers via videotext was established. (Washburn, 2005)

In 1990, Tim Berners-Lee created the internet. (Carlson, 2005) His invention changed the scenario as the WWW offered greater capacity, flexibility, immediacy, permanence and interactivity. (Washburn, 2005)

Chicago Tribune of USA began its online venture, the Chicago Online, in 1992. This is the considered the first online media. (Carlson, 2005) The first proper news site was put on the internet as early as in 1993 when the *The News & Observer* in North Carolina was put on the internet through bulletin board system (BBS).

After the first internet browser, Mosaic was launched in 1994; it went online as Nando Times. The pioneering site, the Nando Times pages were discontinued May 27, 2003. (Wikipedia, 2005) On January 19, 1995, the first newspaper to regularly publish on the Web, the *Palo Alto Weekly* in California, begins twice-weekly postings of its full content.

Nepalese in US began the publication of first online media on Oct 23, 1993 – *The Nepal Digest*. This continued for 449 issues and closed before it resumed publication again in 2003. (Devkota, 2005) On September 7, 1995 *The Kathmandu Post* went online on the University of Illinois website. It was joint effort of Mercantile Communications, the publication and Rajendra Shrestha, an engineering student, who uploaded the news on his personal page provided by the university. (Post, 1995)

Mercantile established *South-Asia.com* and then moved to *NepalNews.com* in 1999 paving ways for the newspapers to put up their content on the cyberspace. These sites were however only the online version of printed publications. It was only after Kantipur Publications established *KantipurOnline.com* in 2000 that true online journalism began. The site not only uploaded the publications but also has their original contents with a few reporters working for it. Lately all broadsheet dailies along with weeklies and smaller media are available online (Devkota 2005).

¹ Online Media is the range of media that conducts their operations primarily over the internet. Online journalism is the preferred term used to describe the practice of journalism over the internet. (Berkman & Shumway, 2005)

Talking about weblog or blog, the first blogsite of Nepal, United We Blog, was established on October 1, 2004. (Devkota, 2005). The number of blog sites is also increasing rapidly because one can start it free of cost and without much of technical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The internet allows news and information move at tremendous dispatch limited only by speed of the electron or electromagnetic wave. (Osborn, 2001) But the advancement of online journalism and its popularity has grown concerns of the people about the ethical standards of such medium.

Many have expressed worry that the internet will mean an even greater diminishment on media standards. (Berkman & Shumway, 2005) This is a fair concern because 'there are no guideposts, no tradition and the medium makes a mess when it comes to ethical dilemmas on the web'. (Mann, 1998)

The traditional sets of ethical standards are not enough to guide online media because the medium brings with it a new dimension of convergence of text, pictures and sound and the interactivity.

Apart from the traditional ethical aspects, there are a few sectors that bother media critics. Many of them focus on 'privacy, external linking, sponsored content or advertising, corrections, framing and copyright images'. (Palser, 1999)

Media professional working online face new potential perils and opportunities for unethical activity – electronic invasions of people's privacy, trading accuracy for speed, further blurring the line between editorial and advertising and other pitfalls. (Berkman & Shumway, 2005) Photo manipulation is the other concerning issue. (Mann, 1998)

American Society of Magazine Editors has recommended a standard for all digital media that focuses mainly on distinguishing between editorial and advertising contents, clear reporting of other beneficial programs and respect the privacy of the users. (ASME, 2004)

Online media in Nepal is rapidly growing. The quantitative growth of the online media arises a few crucial questions. Among them, one is about the ethical standards of those medium which is unbounded by geographical boundaries. There could be no arguments against the need of the ethical standards in the mass media medium but there has been a very little peek into the online media by the media researchers.

The managers, editors and reporters of the online media on lack of the clear ethical guidelines are in dilemmas. Although there are no universally accepted ethical standards for the online media, there are certain universally accepted values that should be applied to those.

OBJECTIVES

The major objective of the study is to evaluate Nepal's online media under the lens of the new sets of ethical norms emerged after the advent of the internet. The study attempted to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. How Nepal's online media are operating?

2. How much they are following the ethical standards?
3. What is the overall perception of ethical concerns among the managers of the online media?
4. Are the managers of online media clear on ethical issues? Or they are facing dilemmas?

The study will help the existing and upcoming online media to consider the practice of online journalism based on the ethical issues. It will also assist them to be ethically correct in various new norms.

The conclusion of the study will also guide the online media to cope with any ethical issues arising during the practice of online journalism and help to create a better and ethically sound online environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study is neither fully qualitative nor quantitative. The basic method used is the schedule interviews with the managers of the selected online media for the collection of primary data.

The four online media were selected as the representative of Nepal. The one among them, *NepalNews.com*, is a full-fledge independent news site while the other, *KantipurOnline.com* is a half independent and half online storage of print publications.

Cricket.com.np has been taken as the specialized sector media and *Blog.com.np* was selected as the representative of the emerging journalism on the internet.

The managers of all four media were interviewed and a specially prepared form was filled by the interviewer. The outcomes of the interviews were qualitatively as well as quantitatively analysed.

FINDINGS

i. Issues relating to privacy

Of the ethical dilemmas facing websites today, probably the most troubling is privacy. (Mann, 1998) Cookies, those electronic markers that track when someone comes to your site and indicates what he or she has visited, are becoming omnipresent. (Mann, 1998)

Misuse of personal descriptions and tracking to surfing habits of the users is the most concerned field in online media ethics in developed countries but among the Nepali online media, either because of 'lack of advertising and buyers of email addresses'², the issues of privacy has not been the concerning issue.

Although all the online media studies ask user personal information such as name, address and email

² Interview with Divesh Rana, manager, NepalNews.com

during comments or feedbacks, they either don't keep them or keep them secret. None of the media require user to input personal information to surf. None of them have a newsletter facility thus they rarely use the emails if they have kept them.

The Nepali online media may use the email address to send replies if necessary but half of them won't send you any mails. The visitors of Nepali online media could be assured that their emails won't be sold to anybody. None of the sites used cookies thus they're not tracking the users.

Despite that, the most striking factor is that only one among four studied sites, *Cricket.com.np*, has a privacy policy which is viewable to all users. The others don't think in the present context of Nepal it's required.

Privacy policies should be the most public and visible of all Internet codes; there are few reputable news sites that don't already boast privacy emblems on their front pages. (Palser, 1999) Palser's conclusion long back still applies to Nepali reputable sites.

Issues relating to copyright

The issue of copyright³ also brings us to the issue external linking. Can a site link to the story published in other website. It's still an issue being debated on.

Nepali online media do not follow similar rules in the issue of copyright. Although all of them believe it's okay to use the materials from other sites with credit, all of them say it's not acceptable to use the materials from other sites without crediting the original source.

They all have experienced other sites using their content with credit, with credit and link and even without credit or link which they all believe is unethical practice.

Blog.com.np said a reputed site even used the summarized version of the article published with link but without credit and permission.⁴ All of them will permit to use the materials of their media by the other if they are asked and if they think it's fair use but not without credit.

All of them denied using materials from other sites.

Issues relating to accuracy and corrections

One of the most obvious concerns of the media critic is the speed of the online media hampering the accuracy of the content. Much of the concern about the Internet's impact on journalism centers on the new medium's emphasis on speed and immediacy, which properly remain central tenets of online publishing. (Lassica, 2001)

The challenge facing online journalists is to balance the legitimate desires of the online audience for up-to-the-minute reports with the profession's traditions of fairness, completeness, balance and

³ The concept of copyright could be best described as a property right that recognizes the creator of an original published or recorded work as its owner and as such he or she has the exclusive right to control how that work is produced, reproduced (copied) and distributed. (*Berkman & Shumway, 2005*)

⁴ Interview with Dinesh Wagle, co-founder, United We Blog, *Blog.com.np*

accuracy. (Lassica, 2001)

All Nepali online media considers speed of the news dispatch is 'important' but not 'very important.' That's because they have to 'compromise between speed and accuracy'⁵. They believe the factual accuracy in any news is the foremost important and grammatical accuracy is 'needed.'

Reputed sites have editors to check the content once it's written while the sites being run on individual's endeavours sans editors thus publishing whatsoever is written by reporters or volunteers. All of them believe requirement of speed has hampered the accuracy although the degree of the affect varied among the managers.

Despite focusing on speed, some of them believe it's not what required. Since majority of the visitors are Nepalis living abroad, it's an unnecessary competition to break the news as they surf the sites at the time of evening or midnight of Nepal Standard Time.⁶

If an online error is caught quickly enough, it can be erased without a trace or a second thought, which is why online newspapers have been slow to adopt the correction policies of their hard-copy counterparts. (Palser, 1999)

It's also notable here that none of Nepali sites have a correction column as most of them chose to correct the minor errors quietly. Or if they find major errors, they would correct it with a tag and update attached to the content.

Issues relating to advertising

All the Nepali online media have advertisements. Most of them level the advertisement while some of them have separate special advertising places such as banner or sidebar. None of them entertain sponsored content. They all say if they choose to entertain such content they would level it accordingly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The online media in Nepal do not have their own sets of ethics nor have any related organizations issued one. They are following the basic journalistic ethics which they themselves feel 'not enough' to guide them. The most encouraging factor found during the study is that they all are willingly to follow the ethics.

Although the conclusion of the study rate all these media as being indifferent to online ethics, on the brighter side, they have not been unethical in many concerning issues. Lack of privacy policy is one example.

Nepal's online media is not considering assuring visitors of privacy as they are not using the personal information they get from the users for any advertising or selling them. But this would be inappropriate to remain in such a state for long as its increasing being difficult to distinguish between

⁵ Interview with Akhilesh Tripathi, editor, KantipurOnline.com

⁶ Interview with Divesh Rana, manager, NepalNews.com

good motive sites and bad motive sites.

Advertising or sponsored content is not to be worried as those sites are following the ethical standards, knowingly or unknowingly.

The two areas that will concern the media critic most is the issue of copyright and speed hampering accuracy.

All of the media have experience their content being used by other sites, mostly without giving credit. The online news sites even take tips for the updates of breaking news from the other which is most disturbing fact.

Copying other's content, or modifying them in attempt to make it different than original is unethical practice that many sites are following. Although most of them say they would permit fair use of their material if asked permission for, they have rarely received requests to re-publication.

The competition among the online media is hampering the ethical standards.

In this regard, it's also disturbing that all of the managers of online media believe using content of other sites with a credit is an ethical practice. However, the practice is not ethical at the time when the critics are even debating if it's okay to link to the stories of other sites.

This is one area where the online media professionals need to think seriously. There is no mechanism to protect the copyright of the online content in Nepal thus the concept would increase the unethical practice in coming days with more online media entering the cyberspace.

Speed hampering accuracy is not a new debate. The emergence of television spurred the debate. Digital media are even faster. The competition of online media is not too fierce because of the lack of financial reaps, even though they feel need for speed has hampered their accuracy. This will certainly grow worse once the online media begin getting financial reaps of their popularity.

Even the reputed online media are short of manpower as they average only 7 per media thus lacking the proper editing and fact-checking mechanism. Although, the reputed media say they have editors doing the basic editing, they also admitted that on many occasions, the stories have been published without much editing and fact-checking.

Other media such as *Blog.com.np* and *Cricket.com.np* are volunteer endeavors of hobbyists, thus they not only lack the manpower but also create a situation where their popularity can hamper the creditability of whole online media.

Even the managers of the online media rated overall condition of ethical standards of online media as being average and there is a pressing need for improvement. It is safe to say that Nepal's online media are standing on the edge of an ethical slide with very less priority given to the ethical consideration of their content and practices.

Although one can assume it's very early to consider all the ethical aspects, it's not fair to spare the fastest medium of journalism on that ground alone.

The finding of study prompted to the following recommendations for the concerned online media, online media professionals and other related organizations:

- Online media should immediately formulate privacy policy and put in on the sites view-able to all users from all pages.
- Online media should refrain from using content from other sites unless the concerned sites permit them to do so.
- The fact-checking and editing should be made a compulsion before publication of any item in the online media.
- Online media should put a correction column with the updates on what have been changed in the published stories.
- Online media or journalistic organizations should prescribe a new ethics with the provisions on non-traditional issues like privacy, electronic commerce, copyright, photo manipulation, framing and linking.
- The government should recognize online media as a journalistic medium thus bringing them under the existing laws and regulations.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule with Online Media Managers

- Dinesh Wagle, co-founder, United We Blog, *Blog.com.np* on Oct 21, 2005 at Kantipur Publications, Kathmandu
- Akhilesh Tripathi, editor, KantipurOnline, *Kantipuronline.com* on Oct 28, 2005 at Kantipur Online Office, Kathmandu
- Nilesh Acharya, writer, NepalCricket, *Cricket.com.np* on Nov 30, 2005 at his residence, Bhaktapur
- Divesh Rana, manager, NepalNews, *Nepalnews.com* on Nov 30, 2005 at Mercantile Communications Pvt Ltd office, Kathmandu

Appendix 2: Online Ethics Guideline

American Society of Magazine Editors

Credibility is key to the success of all digital-media businesses with an editorial component. Users must trust the advice and information given, just as they do that of offline brands. While linking and other technologies can greatly enhance the user experience, the distinction between independent editorial content and paid promotional information should remain clear.

Thus we recommend the following standards (subject to change as the medium evolves):

The home page and all subsequent pages of a publication's Web site should display the publication's name and logo prominently, in order to clarify who controls the content of the site.

1. All online pages should clearly distinguish between editorial and advertising or sponsored content. If any content comes from a source other than the editors, it should be clearly labeled. A magazine's name or logo should not be used in a way that suggests editorial endorsement of an advertiser. The site's sponsorship policies should be clearly noted, either in text accompanying the article or on a disclosure page (see item 8), to clarify that the sponsor had no input regarding the content.
2. Hypertext links that appear within the editorial content of a site, including those within graphics, should be at the discretion of the editors. If links are paid for by advertisers, that should be disclosed to users.
3. Special advertising or "advertorial" features should be labelled as such.
4. To protect the brand, editors/producers should not permit their content to be used on an advertiser's site without an explanation of the relationship (e.g. "Reprinted with permission").
5. E-commerce commissions and other affiliate fees should be reported on a disclosure page, so users can see that the content is credible and free of commercial influence. Exact fees need not be mentioned, of course, but users who are concerned about underlying business relationships can be thus reassured. (See Conde Nast's statement at the bottom of the Epicurious home page regarding its relationship with its featured merchants.)
6. Advertisers or e-commerce partners should not receive preferential treatment in search engines, price comparisons and other applications presented under the content provider's brand. An editorial site should not try to vouch for others' tools that it may offer.
7. A website should respect the privacy of its users. If a site intends to collect information about its visitors-whether the data will be disseminated to third parties or not-it must offer users a chance to decline if they choose, through an "opt-out" option. As part of its privacy policy, the site should explain its use of cookies and other data collection methods and tell what it intends to do with the information it gleans. Potential benefits to the user-broader site access, better personalization features, etc.-should be presented as well.