Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

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Table of Contents

Fighting Misinformation to Strengthen Democracy

Prof. P. Kharel

Information can be manipulated by those serving it to the masses in more ways than one—by reporting the facts as one sees it, by bending them the way they serve their interests the best, or not by reporting them at all. The objectivity of the first way is not much questioned as there are broad rules of the game and principles of the journalism discipline to prevent obtuse partiality.

However, there may be purists who see that facts may appear different to different reporters, whose outlooks are conditioned by differing past experiences. Since this kind of reporting is an honest effort on the part of the disseminator, it does not solicit much criticism in the wider world. If one is not satisfied with one 'angle' of reporting one can always resort to reports of another media outlet to balance any inherent imbalance that is perceived.

The second type would have been brushed off in the past as not a mainstream vocation. But, today, this seems to be a major point of debate among media academics and professionals as it appears to be getting widespread. Ironically, the bastions of free press are the ones receiving the greatest flak with such criticism. The terminology may have changed from "biased reporting" to "fake news", but such allegations are taking place not just in the propaganda realm of rival world powers, but within countries and even

within political groupings afflicting mainstream media in an unprecedented scale.

The third kind of reporting, or rather 'un-reporting', has been the most common way of keeping an audience in the dark about matters that media personnel do not see fit to pursue, although the unreported issue at hand could be of vital public interest. Certain 'un-reporting' can happen because of the inability of a reporter to be in the place or time when an event takes place. The more sinister kind of un-reporting happens when editors throw away a piece which conflicts with the needs of the media house or publisher.

Democracy

Undoubtedly, if the press were to serve as a public trust in its implied sense of a free platform for independent views, it would render a vital purpose in society. However, if it became a tool for propaganda purpose of a political party in power or otherwise, democracy would be endangered because of the risk entailed by miscommunication, disinformation and black propaganda.

Whereas misinformation is an outcome of the content of a message itself or the inability of the recipient to decode it effectively, disinformation constitutes manipulated information whose real intention might not be obvious to the receiver. Black propaganda is blatantly untruthful and goes at great length to mislead people for dogmatic and other narrow considerations of its sponsor.

Herbert I. Schiller (1996) notes how scholars describe mass media institutions as major features of the capitalist world order, producing both economic profits and the required ideology for sustaining exploitative capitalist social relationships. He calls for critical researchers to dwell upon the relationships between media and power and, in the process, expose the ideology inherent in media content.

Empowerment of citizen means understanding and distinguishing faked news and biased information received through the media, including the internet. Advanced technology has stepped up packaging style and pace, sharpened content carrying capacity angles or slants, and increased the variety of disseminating channels. Hence, the ability and energy on the part of citizens to access, verify, and critically question and evaluate contents determines the quality of information.

Colin Koopman, associate professor of philosophy and director of new media and culture at the University of Oregon, (2008): "Only a few years ago, the idea that for-profit companies and foreign agents could use powerful data technologies to disrupt American democracy would have seemed laughable to most…And the idea that the American system would be compromised enough to allow outside meddling with the most basic of its democratic functions—the election of its leaders—would have seemed even more absurd."

If powerful nations described as democratically successful and economically enormous face such daunting situations, what would be the fate of economically poorer countries where an average person barely ekes out a living amid constant uncertainty, instability and rampant corruption? Koopman raises a valid question, except that does not US refrain from setting in motion against other societies what it abhors for itself?

Propaganda and discernment

S.J. Baran and D.K. Davis (2002) prescribe for professional communicators to pursue a well-developed, long-term campaign strategy in which new ideas and images are carefully introduced and then cultivated. Harold Lasswell's 'hypodermic needle' theory views the audience as blindly responding to stimuli. But such audience passivity is not for media literate audiences.

Snapchats, like SMS, can cheat us of in-depth-comprehension of issues. As social media influencers, celebrities and stars spend considerable time in pouting and preening on the stage and anything seen as a platform offering a semblance of audience attention. Politics often excites a passion for self-praise and promotion among its actors who increasingly are scripted, packaged and presented in a strategic design drafted by specialists.

The Gulf War in 1991 and the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan showed how glaringly but unwittingly media become propaganda arms of government and fall for the phrase coined as 'embedded journalism' that refers to journalists being attached to military units and agreeing to conditions laid down by the hosts when covering an on-going war.

Propagandists design their messages and gestures to make people discount, dismiss or disbelieve campaigning views. They want to master and manipulate the mass media. Propaganda goes both ways for the initiator and the target. Its edge is a badge of insurance to be seen as an advantage or disadvantage. The primary battleground for propaganda is in the mind of people. Media should not purge people for their beliefs.

Digital dominance

The media consumer today sees a specter of misinformation so great and the countries vouching for their citizens' rights to information so helpless, only a consensual global pledge would be able to surmount the challenge facing people's right to free, impartial and useful information. Media literacy of yore has been rendered inadequate by the technological revolution playing havoc with established norms of a free press and people's inalienable right to information and expression. Only a well-regulated online platform can achieve that.

Since technology has speeded up the pace of development of the new media in an astounding manner, there is no way that the protracted legislative mechanism of the State can deal with regulating it effectively. Those trying will find that their hard work has already been rendered ineffective by new technological advancements. If countries like Nepal were hard put to deal with such problems in the past, the global reach of the problem has ensured that those around the world in a position to actually do something are finally on their side. A consensus among them on the issue is only a matter of time.

With the entrance of the phrase 'spin doctor' in the British political vocabulary during the late 1980s, the term has caught on in many other countries. It has an unflattering, negative connotation for someone who seeks favorable media reports and comments on a client or institution. Marlin Fitzwater, Press Secretary under the United States Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, (1995) defines spin as 'the weaving of basic truth into the fabric of a lie, the production of a cover garment that protects, or obscures, or deflects public examination'.

Spin doctors are seen as distorting information for favourable public responses. They seek to manage and manipulate media for

the gains of those who they work for. It is generally subtle in societies where media literacy is high. In societies with low media literacy and where partisan political press has a strong presence, subtleties are thrown to the winds.

Fake accounts infest social media networks. Celebrities, models and athletes have millions of fake followers for online influence. Such accounts are actually counterfeit coins in hunt for mass audiences seen as vulnerable consumers to be monetized. The New York Times (2018) estimated that as many as 48 millions of Twitter's active users are automated accounts designed to stimulate real people, though the company claims that number is far lower. In November, Facebook disclosed that up to 60 million automated accounts may roam the world's largest social media platform.

Today, even those in the remotest and poorest corner of the world can communicate with the rest of the world at the flick of a button very cheaply. Countries that provide the infrastructure for such communication, i.e., the richer ones, are those in total control of modern-day communication. There is concern throughout the world that control over all forms of modern communication is being left in the hands of the rich nations. It is their hoped for benevolence that the rest of the world is forced to count on, if it wants to continue enjoying the fruits of the communication revolution. (Kharel, 2016)

Literacy factor

The public needs to see leaders in their actual worth and not in the images built, doctored, or toned up by specialists. The grammar of propaganda is to create an image visualized by the initiator for acceptance by the intended recipients. Politicians in Nepal have expressed their dissatisfaction with media functioning from the early days of democracy.

As a former prime minister, Tanka Prasad Acharya, in 1957, said: "There should be criticism-counter criticisms, inspired by not hate and jealousy but for the development of democracy along with a desire to unite all." Nepali Congress leader Ganesh Man Singh, another towering politician, complained: "The few journalists, who are in the country today, have not been able to conduct themselves more than as cheerleaders for political parties or some highly ambitious capitalists." (Devkota, 1995)

Gatekeeping is selection, rejection, retention, expansion and compression of news and views, and agenda-setting. Information sources, gatekeepers, media owners and editors try to go against decentralization when it comes to topic choice, volume of coverage and magnifying or underplaying of an issue. As far as involvement is concerned, professional media need to be above the cut and thrust of mundane politics. Media flirting and bedding with vested interest groups is professional perfidy.

McChesney (2010) cites the case of journalists having long faced pressure to shape stories to suit advertisers and owners. He refers to one survey, conducted by the trade publication Electronic Media, which found the vast majority of TV station executives in the news department "cooperative" in shaping the news to assist in "non-traditional revenue development", in which the news department cooperates with major advertisers to co-promote events and uses advertisers as experts in stories.

Kunczik (1997) lists a variety of media ownerships, of which the diagonal (or conglomerate) could compromise the contents of news media the most. This form of ownership involves the proprietor in various markets (e.g., merger of a newspaper house, entertainment TV, fast food chain with whisky producer). Diagonal concentration embraces the merger of enterprises operating neither in the same relevant market nor being in a buyer-seller relationship.

Nepal's experience

The very nature of conglomerate's composition makes its communication constituents vulnerable to commercial considerations that take precedence over content. In Nepal, all large media houses are conglomerates, some of them also engaged in heavy cross-media ownership.

Nepali journalism has suffered from reporting bias of many types, not just those brought about by a developing media sector, but also because of deliberate efforts by institutions to mislead the audience. Today, it has been a subject of much debate among academics and journalists alike ever since Nepal began implementing, or purported to practice, the essentials of a democratic order, in this case, right to information.

The seemingly chaotic Nepalipress scene did see the offshoot of media consumers who were more discerning than those who were hardly initiated in the shenanigans going on in the name of free press. These were the first 'media literates' and consisted of those directly affected by press reports. They knew that depending on only one or two media outlets for information would make one a victim of more dis- or misinformation instead of truth. Media literacy was the only way out of lopsided 'facts' about an event or idea.

Such scenario has repeated itself with the rise of multi-channel radio, television and the internet. Only this time, one needed to watch or listen to different multimedia outlets, just like one needed to do with newspapers earlier. The rapid rise of multi-channel audio and video media is a stark contrast to the long and winding road that global press had taken over centuries. The radio/TV revolution in media was soon to be superseded by the online platform that combines all the three media—press, audio and video—and serves them in one package, making things more complex.

If there were problems in any of the media, they would now have a combined impact on the media consumer. Additionally, easy availability of technology has ensured that individuals can now form networks through which information can be shared. The amount of information swamping the consumer is so huge that it is virtually impossible to wade through to be able to make any practical use of it, unless one has the right technological tools. So, no matter how media-literate an individual is, s/he is forced to depend on the providers of such tools, like search engines and news aggregators. Or, in other words, another layer in the information value chain from the producer to the consumer.

That is not just a question of the magnitude of media impact, but also its hitherto unforeseen dimensions. Audio and video had already broken the geographical barrier to reach their audience, but new media came with the additional ability to distinguish the differing tastes of the consumer and serve their products accordingly. The ability to tailor media content according to individual preference and even be able to predict what a particular media consumer would want to be informed about in the future is an unprecedented development. The newer variant of the media carries enormous capacity to fragment the

audience into small sections of any size. This means enormous political power and, along with that, a greater stake in trying to shape the mind of the consumer according to one's interest.

In sum, democracy is expected to show due deference to public opinion. No democratic government can ignore public opinion and negate public feedback. For that matter, even authoritarian regimes try to create an impression of complying with public opinion by mobilizing channels of communication to the best of their ability and resources. Here, the news media have a professionally vital role to play, keeping in mind that credibility is to journalism what sovereignty is to the State.

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