

# Mass Media, Trust and Governance in Nepal

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The oft-projected vision for the twenty-first century is that of an information society. Not only has the new era understood the importance of information but perhaps for the first time in the history of mankind, it has the means to use it to further human progress and prosperity. Information helps policymakers anticipate unprecedented events- even revolutions, like the constantly accelerating microelectronics revolution. At the same time, it helps gauge their impact on social and economic development, governance and the civil society. And, the more the information technology (IT) advances the easier all this becomes. Information technology concerns the techniques and skills for the production and distribution of knowledge to accomplish human progress. This technology is used by the information society in the same way as an agricultural society consumes raw materials and the industrial society energy. But IT goes beyond that. It transforms the production processes of other industries as well. Precisely because of this, IT holds the potential to alter the values of business, education, health care, governance, civic participation and social interaction. The emerging complexity and scale of social and economic systems created by information technology mark a series of power shifts-in theoretical knowledge, methodological techniques, institutions, actors and processes. The construction of information highways has made it possible to connect the different parts of the world through cables, satellites and computer technology and speeded up international communication, travels, digitized commerce and facilitated service delivery. The consequences are also political as IT has dramatically increased interdependence among peoples and nations. As a result, openness in political decision-making is not just a rhetoric but a compulsion forced by the state of today's information technology which has thus influenced the very functioning of governing institutions. Obviously, new information tools are extremely useful to journalists for finding facts, making them familiar with new events and developing methods of analysis and investigation, not to mention providing independence of mind.

## Introduction

No doubt, the information revolution is leading the society towards a more differentiated and individual kind of existence. Old bonds created by the industrial revolution are coming apart and human beings are being connected to new tissues of solidarity, networks and webs. Technological progress has even facilitated the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the new possibilities is that the information transmission from government to citizens, and from citizens to the government, has enabled enlightened communication and collective action. It is also weakening the rigid bureaucratic and class-based organisations of the industrial society, its representative process and, consequently, politicised human life for a participatory form of governance. But there are questions that need answers as well. For example: Do the new forms of communication hold the potential to free human beings from technological domination which became most strikingly apparent since the industrial revolution? Are media embedded in public philosophy or just responding to power, pelf and authority? Has information technology made communication more inclusive, practical and effective in public policy making or is it further isolating the mass from the elite? Is it functional and accessible to the public and representative of broad sections of the society? How can the national society steer, coordinate and govern the pressures exerted by the borderless new world promoted by the information revolution? How do the media enable the public to articulate their voice and facilitate the participation in the high-tech and infinitely sophisticated Internet? And, above all, how does freedom of the press foster the value of public order? Attempt will be made to answer some of these questions.

In Nepal, communication and information flows are characterised by hierarchically ordered sequences, reflecting existing power constellations and the extent of their influence. They are a manifestation of the hegemony of the political drama rather than different social points of view. Such a system limits the proportional distribution of information, making it inaccessible to a large section of the society. In other words, the existing gaps between the haves and have-nots are burdened with new additions like the digital divide. This is the reason in rural and remote areas of Nepal communication is maintained through families, relatives, friends, neighbors and governmental and non-governmental officials. Very few, if any, have access to the media world. As the media in Nepal have become concentrated in the hands of a few powerful interest groups in key urban areas, their contribution in freeing the political society and providing equal opportunity

to all is minimal. As already mentioned, they have widened the knowledge divide between the core and the periphery and the rich and the poor even further. In no way do the media constitute a vibrant public sphere in rural Nepal. And, the size of the rural society of Nepal in such a state renders even the greatest of urban media houses vain. Therefore, a major challenge for Nepal is the enlargement of internal institutional structures of the media reflecting the broader society to be able to defend the interests of the politically weak population. A media community that does not acknowledge a larger responsibility to society is less likely to engage in self-correction, in terms of how it educates the public and what opportunities it offers to them for the future. Good governance too requires an effective media to promote participation and concern regarding public goods. Only those media pursuing the public interest can play their roles effectively. "The modern economics of information emphasises that once knowledge is made public, it becomes a public good that cannot be made private again" (Stiglitz,1999:4). Without a free flow of information, socialising interactions and collective action cannot be effective. Information flow has a positive correlation between communication and awareness of people about their political knowledge and between learning and involvement in problem solving.

This study embraces four parts. The first part deals with the conceptualisation of a form of governance in which media play a crucial role. The second part deals with the political culture of the media system in Nepal, especially their place in the doctrinal system. The third part deals with the importance of media in voice and transparency in governance, social construction of trust, the institutional capability of governance and accountability. The last part draws a brief conclusion and makes some suggestions for enhancing media effectiveness. This chapter, however, does not attempt to delve into an empirical investigation of the media in general in Nepal under one overarching paradigm. Nor does it make a comprehensive analysis of communication networks of governance actors in detail. It only looks into the role of the media as a factor in understanding governance functions.

### **Media-Governance<sup>1</sup> Interface**

Governance rationality presupposes a partnership of institutions and processes. This partnership empowers public actors to pool information, knowledge and capacities to develop shared policies and practices on issues of public concern. Mass media have been instrumental in guiding and affecting the conduct of governance actors by shaping a sense of shared experience and political community. They are linked to the systems of society and situations under which a society operates. Without effective channels of communication among the members of a community, no system of governance can exist. The relation of media with governance is not only *functional* but also *transactional*- an encoding of the dynamic shatter zone between society (governed) and polity (governor). Mass media do help sustain human relationships- dialogue, engagement and compromise and reveal the mutuality of interests in governance matters. In his book *The Nerves of Government*, Karl W. Deutsch offers a telling presentation of government and politics as a decision-making system based on various information flows. The term mass media-print and broadcast- refers to the tools used in the transmission of information, messages and symbols to a large and varied audience and concerned with the ways of knowing how governance might be carried on. Media help governance by structuring institutional relations of the society and by shaping the choices of people in public policy. "Information on how other institutions work can stimulate public debate and facilitate collective action" (World Bank, 2002: 182).

It takes a lot of media deliberation to create a democratic public and influence the public institutions to be responsive to people. Sustained deliberation is essential to make those in power stick to responsible and legitimate action in their public life. Political authority and style is often monitored by the media because it is on this basis that public affairs are conducted by the multi actors of governance- the state, the market, the civil society and the international regime. After all, governance in essence is the process of *steering, coordinating and communicating* human efforts toward the attainment of certain goals (Deutsch, 1963:124)-*security, rule of law, identity and channels of participation and social welfare* (Zurn, 1999:5-6). Media effectiveness is, therefore, essential to democratic governance, a form of governance that is concerned with making, applying,

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<sup>1</sup> "Good governance is epitomised by predictable, open and enlightened policy making; a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law" (World Bank, 1994). The interface of media and governance can be captured by a number of variables such as the level of freedom of expression and organisation, freedom from discrimination, freedom from want and fear, opportunity for consultation and involvement in public policy, transparency and accountability guarantees, etc.

enforcing and monitoring the rules of the political game. Most of the media in Nepal are privately owned but they do not operate independent of government rules and regulations on content, ownership and techno-infrastructure policies. It is only through media freedom that various viewpoints can be articulated in the realm of opinion formation and judgement. This is how people are informed and are enabled to participate in the democratic process. A sound democratic process achieves greater common good for the present and the next generation.

The rapid pace of technological change dictates that governance be improved in every societal sphere, not just in the government institutions. Governance issues penetrate all levels of decision making, from the office of local self-governance at the ward level to the halls of the World Trade Organisation. This means that the legitimacy of governance is not determined solely indigenously- i.e. by the consent of the people expressed through elections, public opinion and democratic will-formation. This is because Nepal is a member of many international regimes and the Nepalese governance actors are continuously interacting-competing, cooperating and conflicting-with a number of local, regional and international actors depending on their interests and functions. Each transaction is done through the power of communication. And the success of governance lies in capturing the synergy arising out of the interactions of governance actors and utilizing their complementarities and competitive advantages to benefit the Nepalese people in a sustained manner. Nepal's development partners have been increasingly emphasising policy reform, human rights, and governance improvement, that includes media pluralism, as goals of development assistance. Is this pluralism possible when one finds increasing *convergence* of the various forms of media? Obviously not. Cultural resistance to the integration of text, audio, visuals and motion pictures at the global level is a nationalist resistance against homogenisation and hegemonisation. In that sense, it is a powerful resistance in favour of divergence and difference.

In the globalised context, sovereignty in the domain of government decision-making and action has been relativised to territorial and constitutional dimensions. Governance decision-making has become de-territorialised and complex, trespassing also the boundary of the Constitutional state. As internal power is fragmented, the government is compelled to pursue policies through negotiations on shared interests. This means that the government does not have monopoly over decision-making, conflict resolution, communication and collective action. It has to share the "space" with the state, the market, the civil society and the international regime. Each actor produces its own system of knowledge, institutions and communication, own theory of symbolization and symbolic representation and seeks its own ideal form of society asserting its own validity claims on the representation of truth. As interest groups and political parties dominate the media in Nepal, their political culture is accordingly fragmented. This fragmentation arises from the varied socialisation experiences of the various groups and sub-groups and which result into a one-sided and biased fixation on the primacy of their own interests. "The control over the media of communication by political parties and interest groups means that the audience for political communication is fragmented" (Almond, 1971:46) producing often disharmonious modes of political socialisation and fragmented action. Empowerment of the people produces media visibility while marginality produces their invisibility in policy attention.

What one sees now in Nepal is that the government often chooses policies to serve partisan interests, not the general interest of the public. On the other hand, the globalisation process has de-coupled the national society from the nation state and continues to disconnect citizenship from nationality. As globalisation processes demand national consistency in laws, institutions, processes and behavioural patterns with the rest of the world, many actors in the Nepalese sub-system have been independently articulating to their counterparts abroad. This incongruence of social and political space places the Nepalese media in a dilemma: Should they be driven by self-interest like the other actors or propel themselves towards public interest orientations? As a result, in Nepal, fragmented political responses are detected in the media even on vital questions of national importance like the Bhutanese refugees, citizenship, foreign policy, exploitation of water resources etc. Many of them have even been deviating from norms and rules that are constitutive of governance. Obviously, in the Nepalese multi-party polity, the elite did alter the basic principles of politics but not the style of governance they inherited from the *ancien regime*.

Yet, it is also the media that have brought participatory rights of the people into the public sphere. The decisions of political power have thus been bound and popular sovereignty linked to universal human rights. Achieving governance goals requires the development of three critical processes: "*accountability*, which denotes the effectiveness with which the governed can exercise influence over those that govern; *legitimacy*, which is concerned with the rights of the state to exercise power over its citizens, and the extent to which those powers are perceived to be rightly exercised; and *transparency*, which is founded on the existence of mechanisms for ensuring public access to decision making" (Robinson, 1996:347). These

attributes are central in upholding the national integrity system of governance. One can also add one more process to it - *equity*- given the state of underdevelopment of Nepal in general and its media in particular. The communications policy of the Nepalese government aims to expand radio, television and internet services proportionately in order to make them comprehensive (HMG, 2002:2). At the same time, the government also seems cautious enough to make them competitive by enabling them to adjust with the obligations arising out of the nation's pending membership of the WTO. For the goal to be met successfully, synergy from the complementarity of public-private partnership is necessary in both business as well as in the media. As human beings are social beings, not atomised individuals, real freedom can exist only in a cooperative society in which a modicum of social justice is attained and people can form groups for the aggregation, articulation and communication of their interest upon the governance structures. Nepalese media, in general, have a profound influence upon the educational response to social disadvantages of people and the problems of social inequality, marginalisation and discrimination. Media discourses and research on bonded labour, Dalit, child labour, women, etc have been exemplary in articulating perspective transformation and re-socialisation. This is helping gender and child socialisation towards *freedom, equality* and *identity* and nourishing the potential for change in the dominant cultural values, including the prevailing masculine dynamics, political structure and political culture. Indeed, the Nepalese media are also helping to transform "people into public" (Adhikari, 2000:85-92) by means of provoking discussions even in pubs and private rooms.

Nepalese media have exposed the criminal negligence of decision-makers. Newspapers reported widespread hunger in the remote districts of Humla-Jumla that caused the death of 550 persons in 1998 and the death of 4,500 by viral influenza in various parts of Nepal in 2000. Journalists have been calling for interventions from the government, civil society and international community to reduce the amount of intolerable poverty, inequality, exclusion, ignorance and marginalisation. Nepalese media have thus been evoking an image of the watchdog of the society promising to liberate politics from pre-political and anti-political impulses.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with this activist understanding of democratic ideals, Nepalese mainstream media also place great emphasis on the creative role of new social movements espousing the values of peace, ecological preservation, democracy, human rights etc in democratic life. Realising the importance of unrestricted communication for governance, the notion of "media village" has been conceptualised in Nepal with the aim to establish the offices of Nepal Press Council, Department of Information and the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) in one place to expedite the collection, processing, storing, managing and facilitating the free flow of information to the public (HMG, 2002). The question about how this media village should cope with the emergence of a "virtual community" will be a moot one for Nepal's democratic governance. The right to information is not an absolute concept but one that is connected with access to hardware and infrastructure facilities such as electricity, telephone, computer, e-mail and internet facilities including education, skills and certain level of income. Otherwise, there will be danger of "digital divide," between the core- Kathmandu - and the periphery rendering the latter into the backwater of development and

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2 For the conception of politics to be adequate, it should involve the creation of a righteous space for the citizens to communicate and resolve issues of their concern. In this space, citizens can exercise their democratic rights and freedoms as well as include a variety of perspectives to deliberate on questions and seek answers. Politics is nothing but the processes involved in the execution of these public duties. Therefore, the *dharma* (institutional duties) of politics is to serve the public. It is in this public sphere that citizens are motivated to question their leaders' transparency and accountability, remind them of their duty to society and the zeitgeist of time. Thus, the public sphere provides politics the legitimacy needed to make it the bedrock of *raj dharma*-the rights and responsibilities of public figures to conduct statecraft. Politics is essentially public in the sense that the political sphere is shared equally by every member of the polity regardless of gender, wealth, class or caste position or political power. It is not essentially a manipulative vocation. And, to the extent that it appears to be so, it is only those selfish politicians who make it a dirty game. When their numbers rise, politics gets mired in crisis. In Nepal, such a crisis has already led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the country and the suspension of fundamental rights and freedom of Nepalese citizens. It is a crisis whose roots lie in the malfunction of politics. If politics exclusively serves the private interest and exhibits apathy towards those who are not in politics but who do make up the public sphere, it cannot become a matter of public or collective concern or, by implication, political. In no way does such politics treasure a common ground for citizens and leaders of all hues. To use the public trust for private goals is just as serious a crime against the public as any seizure of public property for private gain. Anti-public politics, therefore, becomes anti-political. Democratic politics intends to widen the public sphere as it is deliberative, participatory, public, inclusive, and transparent. Anti-politics, by contrast, is essentially individualist, exclusive, private, non-public, and opaque. Anti-political trends become contagious if institutional mechanisms are not geared to correct them in time, as has happened in Nepal.

governance. Out of 75 districts in the country, 24 districts of the far western region do not publish a single newspaper (CEHURDES, 2000:5).

### **Location of Media in Doctrinal System**

Communications media are inseparable from the society they are supposed to serve- from the working of political, economic and social life. The process of knowing can neither be severed from the worldviews existing in various forms in the society, derived from natural, social and theological worlds, nor from the issues of political power. The mass media of communication, such as schools, press, radio, television, Internet and cinema, carry out *potential politicisation* of the people on a wide range of topics and situations. They also play a role in specialisation through reporting the news, reviewing the news, shaping citizens' opinions, crafting the agenda of governance actors and socialising people in public affairs. They play a critical role in linkage politics, for example, campaigning, voting, projecting the parties and personality of leaders, reflecting the views of interest groups of society and influencing public policies.

Political order is mainly derived from the general moral consensus on the written and unwritten constitutions of the state and society. In Nepal, however, the level of support to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 among the political parties has remained uneven in spite of the fact that it was they who crafted it. This has produced a kind of "divided consciousness", if not the resurrection of counter ideologies- democratic socialism (Nepali Congress), democratic liberalism (Rastriya Prajatantra Party), *Bahudaliya Janabad* (Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxism-Leninism), and even Maoist radicalism of several smaller left parties. Political parties socialise their cadres and followers on the basis of their ideologies, not on the basis of the constitutional vision and principles. The mainstream media discourse of Nepal thus seems to be driven by these ideological inclinations with an aim to create their own political constituencies. Their policy positions reflect the mirror image of the party ideology they represent. Consequently, they are rather involved in justifying or opposing the regime in power than concerned about the quality of communication in the country. Neither institutional reforms nor good governance can be expected in a situation where the proverbial watchdog is virtually absent. This suggests that the bulk of the media have become a tool of power, their effective mobilisation an important way to acquire power.

One may loosely distinguish four types of media in Nepal governed by their own doctrinal system. One group, mainly officially owned and beneficiary of government patronage, is *conformist* which blindly endorses the policies and activities of the political circuit of the system constituted by the party-parliament-government axis. This group is directly related to the systems of power and authority and represents the interests and ideology of the incumbent political class. Due to over control of the government and risk-averse tendencies of journalists in objective reporting, reviewing and analysing of news and views, they are less concerned with the restructuring of life-worlds. The second group, that one can call *reformist*, is privately owned and shares the fundamental values of the democratic system but puts critical eyes and ears on the policies and activities of the government and, therefore, seeks moderate reviews and reforms in the style of governance. This group is a powerful defender of modernity and rationality for interpreting and reforming the conditions of public life in Nepal. The third category is *radical* which advocates fundamental change in the basic rules and styles of governance. At the same time, the radical group is also concerned about developing new forms of knowledge. There are also *conservative* media which are interested in defending the past policy action of the *ancien regime* and their ideology reflects the interests and values of the old feudal, aristocratic and commercial classes of the society. Each group has its own audience, shapes its own motives and tries to attract people to its products. The preferred role for journalists would be not to form what Michael Foucault calls an "ideological chorus line" but serve as "interlocutors in a discussion about how to govern" (Gordon, 1991:7). Nothing could be more apt in describing the Nepalese situation.

The diversity of media in Nepal has built a fundamental conflict into the very structure of democracy, its constitutional system and has even caused crises in consensus building, legitimation and the process of governance. With every party crossing the constitutional line in promoting its own ideology, the sum of total political support left to carry out Constitutional prerogatives is precious little. State priorities thus got neglected to such an extent that a violent insurgency was able to capitalise on the bad governance scenario. Information asymmetries in multiple domains make it very difficult for people to judge what is true in politics, economics and society and what is not. Besides, there is a mix bag of media concerned with science-specific discoveries, entertainment and knowledge enhancement that does not exactly fit with the political spectrum described above but they do convey important messages. Media in Nepal are tightly compartmentalised into divergent interest groups which displease one another in the process of

"manufacturing consent,"<sup>3</sup> thereby intending to reduce the scope of human freedom and critical thinking. This has been confirmed by a study which says, "There is hardly any newspaper at present which can be defined as being fully independent" (Shrestha, Sigdel and KC., 1998:62). The main challenge before the Nepalese media is how to overcome the contradictions paralysing them and satisfactorily resolve a collective action situation?

This is the reason, despite the age of information revolution, that the majority of Nepalese people are terribly ill-informed. The media are powerful means for state authorities, political parties and leaders to exhort the citizens to actively support their policies. These policies are derived from a set of political beliefs, strong ideas and certain doctrinal systems called ideologies. Nepal has generally a free press, with its publications in circulation in every urban node where modern amenities are available. They reflect every political point of view and determine which events are newsworthy on a left-center-right horizontal ideological sphere, rather than on a vertical future-past dividing line. As a part of the doctrinal system, the media interact closely with the universities (Chomsky, 1997:3) where knowledge is manufactured, adapted and disseminated to shape public and private opinion. "Journalists are symbolic brokers who translate the arcane language of experts into publicly accessible language for the masses. They transmit the judgements of experts and thereby ratify decisions arrived at by that class-not by public or public representatives" (Carey, 7). This suggests that they are neither neutral nor value-free. It is, therefore, important to identify the underlying interests and ideologies of the media and the "reason" they uphold the fight either against myth, superstition and oppression or to defend the status quo.

It is the media that are capable of espousing human reason to liberate people from silence, docility, oppression and lack of freedom. They are also instrumentalised to dominate people through false rationalisation, indoctrination or "cultural hegemony," to borrow a phrase of Antonio Gramsci. In such a context, media elite become guilty of silence or they collaborate with political power and economic interest groups. The risk of falling into this trap is high as mediapersons are supposed to be continuously in touch with their sources- who are mostly the shapers of events and hence powerful. Too close a relationship with power and the media fall prey to its designs rather than be a part in shaping those designs for public good. Hence, the worldview of most of the media is often biased, false and very ideologically filtered discouraging the growth of collective action among the different castes, classes, gender and regions. This encourages a culture of fatalism and of fatal silence. The utilitarian calculations of journalists and even media houses in Nepal often suffer from an acute deficiency in their public role. The proverbial spoils of journalists, dinner parties, festival gifts, opportunities to visit abroad, lucrative projects etc. can be used to blunt their criticism. In contrast, media autonomy can exert powerful influence on the institutions of governance to shape public policies. "Autonomy in the media of communication makes possible a free flow of information from the society to the polity and, in the polity, from political structure to political structure. It also makes possible an open feedback from output to input again" (Almond, 1971:47). But, autonomy does not mean a lack of embeddedness in society.

If mass media policies are constantly shaped by advertisements from industrial and financial magnates, then they generate what Karl Marx calls a "false consciousness", confusing people about their own interests and those of the magnates. To both Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim, ideology is the symbolical expression of economic interests, the fusion of class and politics (Bell, 1990:41). The *instrumental reasons* springing from the logic of commercial advertising leads people towards their de-politicisation where people as consumers are influenced more by techniques of the media and the consumer culture it fosters. This is in contrast to the *intrinsic reasons* to constitute itself as a part of the public sphere where spontaneous socialisation and politicisation of people lead towards emancipated forms of democratic life. If the influence of power and wealth cannot be avoided in a discursive situation, the procedure of public opinion and will-formation suffers. In such a situation, people cannot communicate with each other in a dialogue of equals. If the mass media operate as a part of the political system, ideology and apparatus, argues Vaclav Havel, they deprive "us-the rulers as well as the ruled-of our conscience, of our common sense and natural speech and thereby, of our actual humanity" (Havel, 1992: 258). There is a symbiotic relationship between the private world of the individual journalist and the public world he or she wants to address. How do journalists

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<sup>3</sup> In *Manufacturing Consent: A Propaganda Model*, Edwards S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argue, "The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interests, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite."

transcend the ideological underpinnings of their position and reconcile the fragmentation of separate constituencies and belief systems and still inform the public adequately of what is good and what is bad in public and private lives? This requires courageous and successful intervention on the part of the public and the liberation of journalists from the shackles of the system. This is the way to put the fourth branch of the government along with the first three-executive, legislative and judiciary-in proper balance. An independent communication system, many believe, is a mediating branch of governance and its degree of development depends on the freedom and autonomy of the media, their relative independence from interest groups, political parties and the government, and their ability to communicate beyond ideologically trustworthy groups.

The neo-liberal ideology has been responsible for the operation of a capitalist market economy in Nepal since 1992. This has caused a conflict between the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, which provisions essentially egalitarian rights of citizenship to everyone, and the economics being followed to achieve the constitutional goals. The result is even more inequality, whether it be regarding gender, caste or class. The neo-liberal ideology identifies the state as the problem and the market as the solution to the problems of governance. Proponents of neo-liberalism were seen to link structural adjustment policies as a means of development and manipulate the media into rationalising market-oriented policies even in non-market societies. This was in fact not only an ideological shift but also a design to bring about wholesale policy shifts globally. The identity of people became redefined as consumers, not sovereign beings as recognised by the Constitution. The mass media thus mediated the relations between the world of business and the reality of the people. When the neo-liberal policies failed to deliver the dividends expected of them, the idea of "reason of state" held primacy over the fundamental rights of citizens (due to the declaration of the state of emergency) in the media discourse. Critics of the media found journalists suffering from moral decadence and lack of professional ethics in reporting fairly and objectively about the victims of the People's War and the viciousness of violence. "Economic control of the media is as dangerous to freedom of the press as the suppression of news by the government. Advertisements in the Nepalese media- the press, radio and television-of commercial products and their impact on Nepalese children and women are pervasive. Indeed, the economy, like the government, is interested in informing the public in a way that does not threaten its own power" (Peters, 1996:196).

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) is activated into social relations by its professional ideals and is articulating the language of competence and authority in empowering the media community through their professional ethics, strength in numbers and unity in action. Similarly, other media groups are engaged in collective action for the common good. But on the professional front, to increase the quality and quantity of information in circulation, the media organisations need to do a lot more. Organisation is one thing but to get the organisation to advance the profession is quite another. Overt and covert influence of private economic and corporate power on the media, concealed from public accountability, does not help keep a constitutional democratic government amply just and clean. Traditional bureaucratic governance cannot keep pace with the fast changing modern society which is moving with the speed of the digital revolution and e-commerce. New governance patterns require speedy decision-making, de-bureaucratisation, flexible organisational formats and complex management capabilities. Effectiveness of media and communications is paramount to sustain these processes. If journalists, like economists and lawyers, reflect the institutional biases of their employer, they weaken the power of the public. One can paradoxically ask: Can anyone imagine a society without interest groups and lobbyists governed by normal human instincts? If not, then, does democracy mean only taking care of the clients, not the public at large?

### **Strengthening Mechanisms of Voice and Transparency**

The constitutional provision of the *right to information* is expected to broaden the rights of citizens and access in the decision making of the government, provide meaningful control over the political processes and serve as an important tool of effective public oversight. But, the right to seek, receive and impart information is neither cost-free nor without responsibility. It depends on the ability of journalists to a) access, gather, process, verify, and accurately furnish the information; and b) reach out to the diverse people, link them to an attentive public, policy community or decision makers. Information alone is of trivial value unless there are proper devices for using the knowledge obtained to influence government conduct in the *executive sphere*,<sup>4</sup> especially in enhancing personal and national security, making and implementing of political decisions,

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<sup>4</sup> "The lifeline of communication holds the entire governmental structure together and makes possible coordinated implementation of laws and the mobilisation of societal resources. Many of the communications linking political leaders and the general public also flow through these structures" (Almond and Powell, Jr.,1978:168).

providing adequate standard of living and resolving the intensity of conflicts in society. "Transparency discourages unproductive and costly rumour mongering that in Nepal often borders on conspiracy. Rumour, even when it is not a part of a conspiracy, is a virus that thrives and multiplies in a society where the public has little or no access to what goes on in government" (Panday, 2001:43). In the *legislative sphere*, giving people a voice means a higher level of political participation in the very centre of the policy making process. A greater level of media access is the first important step in facilitating public discussion on major policy shifts, representation and reflection of public preferences in policy making and articulating even the poor and marginalized citizen's interests in public policy matters. In the sphere of *adjudication*, the media can articulate equal access to entitlements, fundamental rights and social justice for the people as well as aim to establish a system of governmental accountability and due process of law. The system of justice essentially constitutes collective goods.

Nepalese planners and policy makers have also realised the intrinsic correlation between sovereignty of the people and media freedom and regularly organize programmes on stakeholder "consultation," "participation" and "ownership" on important public matters. Nepal's government and its development partners have provided voice and participation to the media in legislative debates, preparation of Country Cooperation Frameworks and the Nepal Development Forum. It is only "through voice- through informed discussion of the policies being pursued -that effective governance can be exercised" (Stiglitz, 1999:6). Greater information and transparency are vital instruments for informed public debate and for increasing popular trust and confidence in the institutions of governance. Governance today requires embeddedness of policy making in the consultative process which involves the participation of all the stakeholders of society including the media. The public-private-donor deliberations have offered space for societal feedback, information sharing and coordination and have also enabled citizen groups to have wider access to knowledge and information. "Greater political activism means greater access, influence and control of the political system" (Patterson, 1999: 196) which broadens people's participation in public affairs. In an information-driven society, political power is increasingly defined in terms of the distribution of information. And, the media have become the central arena in the contest for power, resource and identity. The power of the media to control political thinking has been enormous.

Transparency guarantees can play an instrumental role in "preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhand dealings" (Sen, 2000:40). Technology can play a part here. In Nepal, computerised networking of local private offices, government ministries and departments is gradually introducing transparency in their activities and operations and creating a bridge between the state and society. This process is expected to build a culture of trust. In other words, technology has a key role in governance. Nepal has identified three areas of importance in formulating its information technology (IT) strategy- universal access to information and communication technology (ICT), education and training necessary for IT and identification and adoption of IT applications (Vaidya, 2001:5). Public knowledge and access to information tools are essential not only to access government information but also to avail themselves of the social services and industry and business services. Those tools empower citizens to make important choices. Apart from the greater degree of transparency that government activities are infused with, these tools also induce media competitiveness to respond to the diverse challenges that emerge. One positive attribute of Nepalese polity is that it encourages open public debate on crucial matters affecting the life of citizens. Another positive aspect is the search for public rationale for every action of the government. This means information has become a core of the governing process.

Article 12 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 guarantees the *Right to Freedom*, which includes freedom of opinion and expression, freedom for peaceful assembly, freedom to form organizations, freedom of mobility and settlement within the country and freedom to practise any profession.<sup>5</sup> Article 16 of the Constitution establishes people's *right to information*, "Every citizen shall have the right to demand and receive information on any matter of public importance." Article 13 tries to bolster this process

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<sup>5</sup> But these freedoms do not exclude the state in formulating laws to impose reasonable restrictions on any act which may undermine a) the sovereignty and integrity of the Kingdom of Nepal, b) harmonious relations among the people, c) or commit any act of sedition, d) indulge in defamation, contempt of court or incitement to an offense, and e) any act which violates decent public behavior, morality and specified national code. These provisions try to strike a balance between the sovereignty of the people and the sovereignty of the state.

with the *Press and Publication Right*<sup>6</sup> guaranteeing that "no news items, articles or other reading materials shall be censored," "no press shall be closed or seized for printing any news item, article or other reading materials," and "the registration of a newspaper or periodical shall not be cancelled merely for publishing any news item, article or other reading material."<sup>7</sup> Thus the mass media are free to do their job effectively. Denial of access to information is a violation of the fundamental right of a citizen, which can be contested under Article 23 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court of Nepal under Article 88 (2) holds extraordinary powers to enforce fundamental rights conferred by the Constitution. Laws concerning access to information on matters of public interest can determine how democratic a country's governance is. If information does not flow freely, democratic debates suffer in terms of substance and quality and the media cannot monitor the functioning of public actors and institutions. Article 22 spells out *the Right to Privacy* recognising the inviolability of the "privacy of persons, house, property, document, correspondence or information."

In spite of the Constitutional provisions guaranteeing people the information they need to go on with their daily lives and the privacy necessary to protect individuals from unnecessary public scrutiny, the legal provisions remain far behind what the Constitution has envisioned. Incomplete or yet to be legislated laws mean that the people have yet to enjoy the benefits of the right to information. There are other hurdles as well. Although there have been cases where the Supreme Court has lifted the bureaucratic veil from vital public information and made it publicly accessible, other limitations like the cost of publicising important information<sup>8</sup> and the lack of a severe penalty for not abiding by the Constitutional provisions have kept a lot of information away from the people. Similar is the case with privacy. The lax penalty for breaching privacy and defamation laws means that journalists can take sides in disputes and resort to character assassination with abandon. This is a long-standing complaint about the Nepalese media which has not had an effective remedy as yet.

One general critique of the bulk of the media in Nepal is that due to the chronic financial difficulties of publishing houses, they yield more to power and authority than to the sovereignty of people when the crunch comes. To be sure, they are interested more in technical and practical interests than what Jurgen Habermas calls "communicative action" for emancipatory interests. To Habermas, the public's communicative power is produced through a procedure of public opinion and will-formation. In the two volumes *The Theory of Communicative Action* and later in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, he tries to elaborate the theory of *deliberative democracy* in which citizens are involved in argumentation to promote public interests. All this happens in the public sphere. He argues, "As a formation of opinion and will, public discourse is not merely a cognitive exercise but mobilizes reasons and arguments that draw on citizen's actual source of motivation and volition. It thereby generates a *communicative* power that has a real impact on the formal decision making and action that represent the final institutional expression of political will" (1996:xxviii). The public thus can exert their influence on governance through their conscious will.

In two cases, however, the judgment of the Court tried to set certain limits on the public's right to information. One case relates to a petition in 1992 by a lawyer regarding the appointment of two ambassadors by the monarch without prior consultation with the cabinet. The Court came to a conclusion that the "citizen's

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6 The Press and Publication Act 1992 opened new opportunities for the growth of private media-both radio and television-which were historically a monopoly of the government. The National Broadcasting Act 1993 set guidelines for TV, satellite, cable and similar means of electronic communication.

7 The Constitution, however, does not forbid the state in formulating laws to impose reasonable restrictions on any act which has the potential to undermine the sovereignty and integrity of the country, create social disharmony, indulge in any act of sedition, defamation, contempt of court or incite an offense or any act which may be contrary to public morality.

8 The cost factor seems to be a debated issue right across the world. For example, an interesting article titled Speech may be free but it sure isn't cheap, in the American magazine *Humanist*, (May/June, 1994,) Steven Hill writes: But what if we were to take the monolithic free-speech provision of the First Amendment and break it down into two distinct categories: wealthy speech and cheap speech? How would that affect our understanding and policymaking regarding free speech? Suppose our First Amendment jurisprudence were to distinguish between the free speech of, say, the New York Times and a soapbox radical or between General Electric-owned NBC and a homeless single mother. Or between nationally based cable-industry leader Telecommunications Inc. (TCI) and the smaller, locally based stations. As obvious as such a distinction may seem, current First Amendment theory depicts free-speech doctrine as monolithic, allowing very little distinction between the elephants and the ants of the media, let alone between corporations and individuals or the rich and the poor. Constitutional conservatives, First Amendment purists, and many civil libertarians take literally the First Amendment's proscription "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech." No law means no law, they say.

right to information is not an unlimited right.” The next right to information case relates to the Arun III Hydro-power Project in which the petitioner, a human rights group, questioned the equity, social, ecological and human rights aspects of the project. In this case, the Supreme Court recognized the petitioner’s right to get information from the government which had supplied too little information to them. Yet, it also noted that the petitioner had asked for too much information making it too onerous for the government. Many individuals within the Nepalese press and attentive public still demonstrate widespread dissatisfaction with the information they receive about governance.

In the case of the Tanakpur Dam Treaty with India in 1991, the judgment of the Supreme Court, however, was in favour of the petitioner who had asked for access to information and transparency on matters of public interests and demanded “parliamentary ratification of the treaties dealing with natural resources and the distribution of their uses.” The Prime Minister had tried to bypass the Parliament saying that the treaty did not need any ratification. In several cases of national concern, such as the Detailed Project Report of the Mahakali Treaty, the Extended Structural Adjustment Programme, Tariff Increase, Privatisation of Telecom, Conditionalities imposed by the World Bank etc., the Supreme Court has yet to give a verdict recognising the public’s right to information. (for media issues in Nepal see, Kharel, 2001). Critics maintain that in the case of the Judicial Council, the court tries to hide information in the name of confidentiality. Nevertheless, the right to information and guaranteed rights are the two vital means of achieving democratic goals. A free and responsible press, an independent judiciary and proper government data information systems are perceived to be keys to good governance.

### **Social Construction of Trust**

Freedom of expression and association are both the cause and effect of institution building. These freedoms are crucial to human creativity and dignity. Social groups cannot organise or act to achieve any group interest unless they can communicate properly and overcome the difficulties of collective action. Trust is the “communication system in the society, especially the mass media” (Patterson, 1999: 191) operating at both horizontal and vertical levels. James Coleman argues, “The mass media can expand their audiences (and perhaps increase the amount of trust placed in them) when they expose defects in the trusted elites; therefore they have an interest in giving selective attention to those defects, leading to withdrawal of public trust in the elites” (1990:194). The media cannot expand the generalised trust of lower socioeconomic groups in higher groups if information is unevenly distributed. If class, caste, gender, religion and region constrain the ability of the media to penetrate and inform, they cannot strengthen the notion of citizenship and effectively attach the public to constitutional patriotism.

The Nepalese mass media have been seen to generate both trust and distrust of citizens upon governing institutions. They generate popular trust on governance by joining in the celebration of national culture, national symbols, national messages and memories and the nation's historical accomplishments. Their role is enormous in civic education, especially in promoting human rights, election campaigns, voters' education, election monitoring, observing code of conduct, exposing corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and business persons and educating the people. In contrast, the mass media can also advertise the negative lists-shady deals, nepotism, official malfeasance, citizens' grievances, rumors and half-truths etc- and highlight the role of the government's opponents to erode public trust on governance. Sensational and negative reporting might increase the sale of papers in the short-run but it weakens their credibility in promoting social cohesiveness and cooperation in the long run.

Partisan media have often encouraged a cynical corrosion of trust of people in the governance process and induced a generalised distrust on political leaders, civil servants and other institutions of the state. They do not manufacture public opinion. They generate a “crisis of trust” between the government and the people” (Bhattachan, 1996: 5) and disable the regulatory institutions in combating social fragmentation and violent conflicts. One common weakness of Nepalese journalists is that they report news and views on the basis of the “power hierarchy of persons” rather than rationality of their views. The priority of news accorded to powerful persons obscures the very purpose of the media to *speak truth to power* and give voice to the voiceless. Such a media culture erodes the very philosophy of public interest and common good.<sup>9</sup> In the long run, such a trend rationalises the culture of power and victimises the powerless sections of the society.

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<sup>9</sup> Newspapers in Nepal “do not seem to be guided by any philosophy; they lack critical faculties and credibility and usually get involved in *disinformation*,” reveals a study. “The private media need to be made sober. In a country like ours the government should not only ensure freedom of the press but also make arrangements for tough laws on libel and defamation,” argues Shayam K. C., a noted media expert. (Shrestha, Sigdel and KC, 1998: 68).

For the Nepalese citizenry buffeted by a chain of high level corruption scandals- Dhamija, Chase Air, Lauda, manipulation of foreign currency exchange, privatization of public industries etc- it is a tough job establishing trust on governance institutions and political leaders. Good governance therefore has to be pursued with zeal for increasing public trust in the state, politics and politicians. But, is this possible without a democratic formation of the system of communication, information and technology? Any increase in the speed of information does not mean anything for the majority of the poor Nepalese if there is no corresponding decrease in the cost of using communication, information and technology and translating them into public good. Trust can only be created if the media help in improving educational effectiveness, ending the exclusion of the poor and strengthening national identity by dissolving people's primordial loyalties to their tribe, ethnicity, locality and sectarian interests at the cost of the national. Only then can their socializing potential evolve the feeling, "We are proud to be Nepalese." In the absence of trust, conflicts can escalate into violence. One praiseworthy trend in Nepal is that the bulk of the media is involved in educating the public about peace, countering inflammatory propaganda and promoting the values of democracy in their discourse.

### **Improving Institutional Capability of Governance**

How can mass media improve the institutional capability of the state, the market and all the intermediary institutions, organisations, networks and civil society movements?

- First, in the realm of the state, mass media help citizens by increasing their voice and participation in its institutions and encouraging to press their demands publicly within the framework of the law and the constitution. They provide legitimacy to the broad policy goals of the state and the means to realise them. "The media can identify public service ineffectiveness or abuses of executive power or malfeasance on the part of ministers or civil servants, and thus directly contribute towards a higher level of public accountability of the executive branch of government" (Watson, 1999: 4). Imperfections of information in the public sector create disparities between the "actions of those governing and those that they are supposed to serve" (Stiglitz, 1999: 6) and create incentives for secrecy. On the legislative front, "scrutiny of draft legislation, spending plans or the performance of executive, good communication between parliaments and the public is essential" (Watson, 1999:4). In Nepal the problem of transparency is particularly acute as civil servants take an oath of "confidentiality" of the work on vital matters of public importance and have yet to internalise the value of transparency in democratic governance.
- Second, in the market realm, free flow of information connects the consumer to the producer, reduces information problems and lowers transaction costs. Mass media help the market institutions to penetrate the society, facilitate the exchange of goods and services, improve the effectiveness in the distribution of goods and services, link the managers to the shareholders and increase the costs for the powerful interest groups of society to manipulate the market system. Transparency in the marketplace means making the "invisible hand" of the market visible to the public. It also means advocating anti-corruption policies where anti-graft agencies like the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) and the Auditor-General's office play an effective role in maintaining the integrity of the governance system. It also involves open and accessible courts, effective bankruptcy laws, sound securities and competition regimes. Journalists must be free to disclose market information. Nepal has hundreds of pockets of unconnected small markets, some are even governed by customary practices and local laws and are unable to operate on a larger scale. They could come together to pool their capital, enter into a generalised form of trust and capture the economies of scale thus available. *Dhikuti* among Thakalis, *Bheja* among the Magars, etc are examples in small scale traditional but efficient cooperatives. Development infrastructure helps here. A proper information and transportation system can connect smaller economies into a larger national market within which division of labour is possible.
- Third, in the sphere of the civil society, NGOs, the private sector, the mass media can band together with the citizens' popular voice in the creation of a deliberate public capable of influencing public policy. This way two vital functions can be performed effectively: *problem solving* and *decision making* (Simon, 1986: 1). The mass media, as a part of the civil society, must make information on their activities and decision making processes transparent in the same way they demand this of the state and market institutions. If media institutions undertake public functions, they must be subject to public scrutiny. Only then can they give meaning and structure to the society's public sphere. The media cannot help improve the institutional capability of governance if their services are unevenly distributed like wealth and income. This is one of the basic issues on which all media outlets should come to have a consensus on. There are policy matters as well, e.g. national security, fundamental needs of the populace etc., where

convergence is a necessity for the media to effectively contribute to governance. In the case of Nepal, no institutional innovation exists to encourage policy measures for even a fair amount of cooperation for regulating the basic structures of the society. The state of inequality in the distribution of income in different regions of Nepal is a key indicator of the state of inequality in the access to media. True, information problems cause failure of the actors of governance but sectoral representation by media causes their own credibility deficit. Revitalisation of governance in Nepal, therefore, requires not only reforms in the governance institutions. It needs responsible and efficient media persons who have gained new technical skills, mastered new technologies and are capable of reconciling the social contract with the principle of rational self-interest. Corresponding to this prospect, the public and people's representative should be "prepared to backstop the programmes of the community media agencies with the required expertise, training and resource management techniques" (Pokhrel, 2001:91).

### **Strengthening Governance Accountability**

A free and responsible media is an important tool to make government accountable to its actions and make it responsive to the diverse needs of society. Freedom of communication is indeed a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for its appropriate democratic performance (Meyer, 2000: 15). The public purpose of the media is to articulate the societal purpose to the institutions of governance. Though the government has a provision for spokespersons in each ministry and important departments in Nepal and that it organises meet-the-press to facilitate the flow of information to the citizens, the exchanges between the government and media persons have not been satisfactory. The main problem appears to be a lack of experience with dealing with the media by the spokespersons. In fact, both sides are constrained by shortages of experts, resources and information base as well as a culture of listening and learning. Self-censorship or ethical codes of conduct of the media are an oft-advertised mode of self-regulation. But they are meaningless terminologies if they are not checked by other institutions of governance, such as an attentive public, effective judiciary and legislative means and even a responsive executive that does what it promises. Fair competition in the marketplace also helps ensure a free press. In Nepal, competition between daily and weekly papers exists only in Kathmandu and a few cities. Similarly, there is an acute shortage of standardised information, commentaries and articles. This suggests that Nepalese press is free but not strong enough to facilitate inter-ethnic, inter-regional and inter-religious communication aiming to contribute to the nation-building process. Media discourse in Nepal is, therefore, weakly institutionalised and poorly sustained.

Nepalese media often conduct on-the-spot interviews with the man on the street to help bring pressing societal problems to light. But such interviews are largely conducted in urban areas, mostly in Kathmandu, where 60 per cent of all the publications are concentrated. By educating the public, the mass media can affect policy debates and policy choice thus connecting people to the institutions of governance. A broader spread of education and information and the growing pluralism of the society are certainly new pressures on public authorities to respond.

### **Conclusion**

Modern societies are gauged by the level of media involvement in monitoring the exercise of political sovereignty and affecting the conduct of governance. The policy question is: Do media promote good governance? Yes, they do. The effectiveness of many functions of governance actors depends on the media. Independent journalists report, analyse and criticise social evils and denounce injustice and oppression wherever they occur. At the same time they create incentives by positive coverage of the social ideals. In Nepal, the relationship between the mass media and the performance of governance actors has to yield more. Obviously, communication forms the basic cells of public and private life in Nepal and regulates the inputs and outputs of the governance system. Owing to their key roles, media professionals in Nepal are invoking the principles of integrity and accountability of the private and public sectors and seeking rationale of every action of the government. One can also notice parameter shifts in media freedom in Nepal with the level and intensity of the democratisation process.

Media regulation, media professionalism and responsibility and the state of governance go hand in hand. One should not also forget that newspapers are confined to small elites in urban areas and are quite unimportant in the overall process of communication since they do not reach a sizeable public in rural areas. This means that there could be a serious problem of urban biasness in governance institutions if corrective measures are not taken. This is the imperative to expand media reach to the farthest corners of the country. Indeed, decision-makers must be freed from a syndrome of listening only to the loudest voice. Functional

literacy in Nepal hovers around 30 per cent and per capita income is very low (US \$ 210). This indicates a wretched trend toward the readability of newspapers and the capability of buying papers. In this context, *Radio Nepal* and *Nepal Television* have done better jobs in terms of broadcast coverage. But, both are under government control which often hesitate to air "voices of dissent." This poses difficulty to "check on the accuracy and fairness" of the message. The second question is the style of ownership and autonomy of media in Nepal which inhibit *intrinsic* role in constituting itself as a part of the public sphere and its *instrumental* role in educating the public beyond partisan and group interests.

There is also a *reverse causality truth* between the media and governance: Good governance also promotes media professionalism. Demand and supply of information go together. One cannot be included at the exclusion of the other. The media are powerful proxies of governance. What is still important is that new forms of information systems require new skills for journalists to be able to use the instruments to participate in innovation and market creation. Since governance is a purposive process striving to achieve societal goals, the media of communication serve as bridges linking the bottom with top social groups. The following tasks have to be accomplished by the media in Nepal:

- Prepare Nepali journalists to better address the needs of the disenfranchised groups at the margins of Nepal's society, economy and polity and help them project the truth independent of government influence and control. Provide greater representation to the voices of those historically marginalised and excluded in the public policy and effect legislative discourse. The solution to this problem lies in diversifying the ownership and control of media. An enforcement of the code of ethics through training also helps accomplish this objective. Equally important is to make people aware of the main provisions of the Constitution, including their fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of information and making people active in public life, being players, not spectators. The help of the media themselves can be sought here.
- The print media's limited reach was attributed to the lack of literate people in the past. This should not be so any more as the literacy rate is rising and people could be forced to seek alternative literatures. And in the absence of day-to-day information about the state of the nation that may prove to be problematic to governance. In terms of access, the TV or other high-tech electronic media face similar problems in Nepal where not only income levels but also lack of infrastructure like electricity prevent the majority of the population from accessing any information available thus. A number of relay stations have been started at regional levels and satellite links have been provided. Even the private sector has started participating. But all these are developments related with the businessman's instincts for profit, an attempt to capitalise on the urban consumer's rising needs, rather than a serious attempt to fill the void in the national information landscape.

This makes radio still the most widely available information medium in Nepal as it could theoretically reach every nook and corner of the country. And cheap receivers have been available that could mean that the radio is the most powerful medium available in Nepal today. But the development of this sector has not been commensurate with that power. It took about 50 years for the only station to create regional relay centres even while the costs of electronic equipments had been steadily going down. But the greater problem in the radio sector is hardly the price of the hardware. It has more to do with the representation of news and views from all walks of life. Local language broadcasts are available but the information flow is still largely a one-way process, from the centre to the local and not vice versa.

The problem of reach can be overcome by distributing free radio sets to households, using the voter's list perhaps. There are even sets available that do not require any power source to run. Besides, local FM stations can be encouraged by local governments for a free flow of information at the local level. A form of decentralisation of the information system is an imperative. For more costly TV and internet options, community services can be started and subsidized to some extent by the local government. And, finally, for newspapers, a better channel of distribution needs to be developed than the one present today. This means that transport networks will have to be made more effective and new networks added. This is not only a problem related with information flow but one that has to do with the larger question of the pace of economic development.

- Another aspect of a proper information flow is in the ownership structure of the media houses. When the government was the sole owner of the largest media houses, the criticisms were simple to understand - that the government should not be the one to disseminate information about itself. But now the private sector is the more powerful counterpart in the news business. In the private sector also, it is the larger

business houses that have been dominating the show. Known businessmen have owned the large publication houses, FM stations and even TV stations. This has led to criticisms regarding partisan reporting, which is alleged to be worse than the government media reporting as they have been protecting their business turfs through misinformation rather than seeking to fulfill the public's right to information. There have even been cases where two large publications have been battling out in the pages with one writing exactly the opposite of what the other writes. This has nothing to do with trying to fulfill the public interest but rather about domestic private interest groups taking up the available tools (this time the media outlets) to lash out at each other. This shows that accountability of the newspapers is to the powers that be and the interests that own them rather than the people.

The ownership structure debate is a real one in Nepal as it transcends other boundaries that South Asian media houses have yet to cross. In spite of objections by the majority of media houses to foreign involvement in the sensitive information dissemination business, media control by foreigners is not a big problem in Nepal. To make matters worse, a domestic TV channel is fighting it out with a government minister who has allegedly prevented it from satellite broadcasting its programmes. It is forced to uplink from another country. Although one may have bureaucratic reasons for these discrepancies, one cannot ignore the fact that the Nepalese public arena is being used to promote the private interests of not only the local interest groups but also foreign ones.

- Legal provisions to separate the editorial and publisher's rights and duties. Delineation of the duties of the publisher from that of the editor would not compromise editor's imperative to pursue with fair reporting of events and issues with the publisher's petty interests.
- The profusion of media outlets is not commensurate with the input capability of the Nepalese information sector. In a country where small urban sector is bombarded with so many newspapers, the role of news agencies is conspicuous by their absence. This means that reportage has a great tendency to be painted with partisan colours of a newspaper or other similar outlet. There is so far only one news agency in the country and it is owned by the state. Most newspapers either carry the same news or, at times, rewrite the only news agency's reports as they see fit. In spite of the stark need felt for another news agency, investors appear happy with investing only in the newspapers which can serve their private interests with advertisements but not news agencies that have a larger public interest role. Most of the newspapers have the latest hardware, colour printing and the like, but the software part, the news and views, leaves much to be desired.
- Ombudsmen help media houses answer criticisms about lack of public sensitivities. They should hire ombudsmen.
- There is also a need to train the security personnel on the rights of people. In spite of the strong constitutional guarantees, there have been plenty of high profile cases of arrests of journalists even where the journalists were not found to be guilty of anything. This is a symptom of a wider problem of power abuse by a few to such an extent that it overwhelms the social needs of many. This is also why corruption appears to be engulfing the whole society in every sphere. Transparency and accountability provisions in the law need to be properly enforced for this to stop. Physical safety of journalists needs to be ensured and legal obstacles to media freedom removed.
- The spokespersons need to be qualified people who can address the legitimate needs of people from the mass media. So far, they have been seasoned bureaucrats rather than communications graduates who know little about the needs of the mass media. Periodic training to spokespersons to handle the situations that arise is a must.
- There needs to be a minimum criterion for people to turn into journalists. Professional development requires a set criteria for people to participate in otherwise, journalism is likely to remain an attraction for charlatans defaming the profession itself.
- Another criticism has to do with the capital goods being imported to serve information needs. Availability of the latest technology in the information sector means that there are very few people who understand what goes where. There have been cases where government officials have colluded with corrupt elements to bring in equipment that do not serve the purpose of the people in the long run. As the

digital revolution is a speedy one, one needs a proper strategy to avoid duplicating mistakes while adopting the strategy. Otherwise, the people of a poor are forced to pay exorbitant rates for an obsolete service. In other words, since the country does not develop hardware, a low cost, far-reaching and long-term strategy needs to be developed for the information technology sector. What looks like a perfectly normal purchase agreement could be a very corrupt pact between government officials and outside elements. There have been many mistakes in the past for this consideration not to be included in government purchase policies.

- Nepalese media have yet to prove to what extent they are a response to and a reflection of social pluralism and represent public needs, interests, views and ideologies. To make sure that they do reflect the society and keep serving it, there is a need for the media to have a mechanism to keep introspecting to root out the weaknesses that may creep into the profession. In societies with a developed mass media sector media review by specialist publications<sup>10</sup>, media bodies and concerned professionals is a recurrent phenomenon.

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<sup>10</sup> A sample of some publications and the headlines given here could describe what kind of reviews are carried out: CQ Researcher, "Have the News Media Gone Overboard In Covering Whitewater," *New Republic*, May 27, 1994., May 23, 1994, "Anatomy of a yarn-spinner: Limbaugh's Lies" *US News & World Report*, May 9, 1994. "A Kinder, Gentler Hollywood: Violence in entertainment," *Economist*, May 28, 1994, "Films and the Fear of Aids."

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