

Media Diversity in Nepal: A Conduct Level Media Performance Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Media diversity has become an attraction of scholarly work for assessing the performance of the Nepalese media sector since the 1990 restoration of multiparty democracy in the country. This study aims to provide an overview of media diversity, while the media has transformed from the time of 'press censorship' to 'no censorship' in the constitutionally guaranteed press freedom. Desk research was carried out to review the performance characteristics of the Nepali press. The purpose of the exploration is twofold: first, to know the media's performance on diversity at the conduct level; and second, to identify how the Nepali press's growing weak market condition has influenced the constitutionally protected press freedom in Nepal. The characteristics of the media were explored based on democratic principles of equality. The result, however, fails to 'meet all criteria', showing a moderate level of media performance on diversity in the period. The indicators that 'met some criteria' were: the use of diverse formats in the coverage, the practice of the Code of Ethics at the national level, and allowing citizen to participate on their online portals. The Nepali press is still unable to maintain professional independence, escaping from the owners in national and regional-level media houses. Still, they seem reluctant to 'meet some criteria' in encouraging the use of content monitoring instruments, self-regulation, and promoting alternative media addressing minorities' issues properly. They give less priority to exercise internal pluralism, and provide newspapers to all citizens at an affordable cost. The descriptive analysis interprets the findings, indicating that a weakly formed media market was associated with inadequately performed conduct level media diversity in the Nepali press.

Keywords: media diversity, media performance, media market, press freedom, Nepali press

INTRODUCTION

Media performance is a product of media content (McQuail, 1992) associated with the value of diversity performing forum functions in a democratic society. Media's forum function allows citizens to have pluralistic debates with the value of interest mediation (McQuail, 1992; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). The purpose of this exploration is twofold: first, to know the media performance on diversity at the organizational level; and second, to identify how the evolving weak market condition of the media has influenced the constitutionally protected press freedom in Nepal. It is believed that the press freedom condition of news media can encourage

journalists to act independently, be responsible to society, and provide diverse perspectives in disseminating political news. Such performance can be understood as an accountable press towards the public, enhancing democracy (Norris & Odugbemi, 2010).

The political system of Nepal changed from authoritarian to multiparty democracy in 1990 and then to republican democracy in 2015. Two crucial consequences developed during this period in Nepal's media landscape. First, the press, for the first time, cherished the constitutional value of press freedom from historically attached political alignment. The free press environment structurally liberated the press from its old authoritative legacy, and the media was protected by several legal provisions, including the Press and Publication Act 1991, the National Broadcasting Act 1993, the Working Journalists' Act 1993, and the Right to Information Act 2007, to promote journalistic professionalism.

Second, many media investors entered the media business in a free environment after the 1990 democracy in Nepal. The country also allowed citizens to invest in online news portals in 2016. Surprisingly, the digitalized news portals increased exponentially, reaching 4,302 in 2024 (Press Council Nepal, 2024), and expanded media access nationwide.

As always, the newspaper's circulation in the Nepali press has been stagnant, as indicated by a report by UNESCO in 2013. For a couple of years, the Nepali press has been paralyzed because of unprecedented situations like the Great Earthquake 2015 and the worldwide pandemic COVID-19 (Adhikari, 2022; Aryal, 2022; Shrestha, 2022; Sreedharan & Thorsen, 2018). Though spreading among intra- and inter-level media, the emerging digital platform has accelerated the financial crisis in the media, particularly in the newspapers. Several reports show that the advertisement has been shifting from print media to the digital portals of the newspaper business, and it can be observed with a spiraling impact on all kinds of print and broadcasting media businesses in Nepal (Maharjan, 2022; Regmee, 2022; Rijal, 2020; Sijapati, 2021).

Meanwhile, many national and international institutions, including Freedom House, which monitors global press freedom, have still indexed the Nepali press as the 'partially free' category. For a decade, the situation of press freedom had hardly improved. The position of the freedom of the media was 58 out of 100 points in 2013, just before the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, and also a decade later in 2023, even in the republican democracy of Nepal.

Hence, there remains a gap that reveals whether the emerging weak media market condition has influenced the media performance, limiting press freedom while exercising media diversity in the Nepali press. Therefore, in a broader sense, this study explores knowledge to answer questions like how the Nepali press performs diversity in democracy in the context of the shrinking economic condition of the Nepali press.

This exploration aims to assess the impacts of developing the media market on the performance of media diversity in Nepal. The desk research method was applied to analyze the historical documents that relate to media, journalism, and democracy, mainly after 1990, when the country, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed press freedom in Nepal. This assessment is significant in many ways. It not only assesses the media landscape and analyzes the conduct level of media performance but also contributes to understand the relationship between media, media market, and democracy in Nepal. The national and international communities can benefit from this exploration, enhancing their knowledge with scholarly work in political communication. The descriptive analysis technique was adopted for analyzing qualitative data and interpreted as a high presence of the democratic values of diversity, positively correlated with high press freedom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Press Freedom and Media Diversity

Press freedom ensures communication rights of belief, speech, movement, assembly, association, and access to information based on the value of the independence of the press. It is a condition of media structure rather

than a criterion (McQuail, 1992). This study believes that constitutionally protected press freedom allows journalists to assess, claim rights, criticize power-holders, and advance alternatives in the contending domination.

Diversity corresponds closely to the idea of justice. It relates to the equality of rights and, before the law, fairness of social arrangement (McQuail, 1992). Many scholars focus their study exploring media diversity on the content level, analyzing media outlets (Hart, 2021; Nielsen, 2020; Sjovaag & Pedersen, 2019). These scholarly works focus on issues like representation, inclusion, and authenticity analyzing the media outlets. The present study was designed to assess media diversity on the conduct level analyzing media activities in the newsrooms and overall structure, such as ownership, citizens' participation, and internal policies in the newsrooms. It is believed that the media protect the value of diversity through performing normative actions such as giving 'no special favor' to power-holders and treating the political contenders equally based on the professional value of fair play (Voltmer, 2006).

Hoffmann-Riem (1987) describes media diversity and suggests four-level areas for analysis: formats and issues, media contents, access and representation of persons and groups, and the geographic location of coverage and its relevance to the news. McQuail (1992, p. 144) further suggests three areas of exploration for assessing media diversity. These areas include the population's culture, opinion, and social conditions, as well as the presence of available channel choices for the audience, including various products or services. Therefore, the present study has considered analyzing media diversity at the conduct level in the Nepali press.

McQuail (1992) argues that several internal and external factors of the media, including market forces, determine the degree of press freedom and its consequences on the media performance, such as diversity. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) suggest five different hierarchical influences from individual journalists to the media system level that intervene in the news-making process. Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified various system-level determinants, including the market condition of the media system of a nation that can influence the implementation of democratic principles like press freedom and the media performance.

This study believes that the media performance remains at various levels (i.e., structure-conduct-content) and can be assessed by the degree of press freedom. Independent media is supposed to increase news credibility, avoiding partisan or vested interest coverage by allowing press freedom at the operational level of media organization. It promotes a diversity of channels and formats and thus provides more choices for the audiences (Trappel et al., 2011).

This study analyzed the conduct level of media diversity following Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) indicators, proposed by Trappel and Tomaz (2021). Hence, this study has focused on assessing media diversity based on indicators like the degree of ownership concentration, volume of news format, presence of minority media, condition of affordability of the press, and the use of media monitoring instruments. Similarly, this study also assessed the level of journalists' self-regulation, journalists' Code of Ethics, audience participation in the newsroom, and the rules and practices of internal pluralism of the press.

Media Market and Performance Diversity

Media system theory was used to examine the relationships between media and political institutions by assessing the regulatory frameworks, cultural dynamics, and market forces. The media market was undertaken as the influencers that can shape the diversity and the degree of press freedom at the conduct level of media performance (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mancini, 2020; McQuail, 1992; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021).

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) identification of the determinants of the media market, such as the newspaper circulation, audience media usage habits, presence of media systems (quality vs. popular media), media access, presence of online media, use of language, and the availability of distribution channels, was assessed.

It was believed that the newspapers that address a small elite, mainly urban, well-educated, not only concentrate their readership but also actively politically advocate. The low-circulation press was considered

an unprofitable business enterprise and often dependent on political actors' subsidies. On the contrary, the high-circulation newspaper markets were deemed necessary for sustaining themselves commercially, protecting liberal values, and coexisting with the world of politics.

Previous Study on Market Condition and Media Diversity

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative study shows that the role of the commercial media was a dominant feature of the Liberal model media systems. The democratic value of press freedom was the fundamental principle of the liberal media system that was developed based on early evolving industrialization and democratization in the corresponding countries, like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland. The media systems of these countries have developed into politically neutral mass press and professional journalism, and the state has limited involvement in the media sector. The journalism practices in this model were consistent with the general liberal tendency in political economy, which indicates a high level of press freedom and media diversity in the press.

The strong development of mass circulation press was the dominant feature of the media system of the Democratic Corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The press was rooted in both commercial and party press in the countries that used this model of media systems. Journalism has developed with a high degree of association with the parties and organized social groups. The state positively promoted a diverse media system with a strong development of journalistic professionalism. The media has a long tradition of negotiating and sharing power between interest groups, political parties, and state authorities. Hence, the press utilized democratic values of freedom, exercising diversity, and keeping scrutiny over the power holders. An example of this kind of media system is found in Northern European countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and others.

Finally, the weak market condition characterized by the shrinking economy of the press was the feature of the Polarized Pluralistic or Mediterranean model of Southern European countries' media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The wave of democratization has taken hold in many of these countries, and the media have been limited in exercising independence in young democracies such as Greece, Poland, Italy, and others. The media systems of these countries were closely tied to the political culture rather than the market. The journalism practices of this model have developed with a close connection with the political regimes and address politically active elites more than the mass public. In summary, the functions of this press are relatively less likely to have public interest and a lower level of diversity compared to other liberal and corporatist models of media systems. Although Hallin and Mancini's (2004) study provides a comprehensive phenomenon of the media systems mainly the relationship between the pattern of media coverage and the market condition of the media in the basis of content level of analysis; still, they lack to provide how the media systems like media market functions at conduct level while performing diversity is inadequately addressed in a systematic exploration.

Trappel and his team studied the diversity in the conduct level of media performance across many countries' media systems in Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia in their 2011 and 2021 study. They assessed the various structural conditions that influenced the media performance, mainly regarding diversity in these countries' media systems. The identified conduct level structures vary from ownership concentration, citizens' participation in the newsrooms, to individual journalists' ethical behaviors, and so on. Their comparative longitudinal study shows that the media access, pattern of diverse content creation, audience affordability, and media consumption habits were significantly expanded across the country. On the contrary, the conditions of press freedom and the situation of journalists, particularly the precarious labour conditions of the journalists, have been significantly threatened in these countries' media systems (p. 428). They noted that press freedom was relatively low in the hazardous labour conditions of journalists in the studied countries.

Media systems' ownership and commercial model have created internal and external pressures to restrict journalists' freedom in the Chilean media. Nunez-Mussa (2021) identified that the Chilean news media consulted only political and official sources, considering their owners' interests, while performing a watchdog

role. The author notes that ‘economic crises faced by the media have weakened investigative journalism teams and initiatives’ (Nunez-Mussa, 2021, p. 139). Further, the author noted, ‘the national economy has also impacted work stability, with massive layoffs occurring quite frequently’ in the Chilean media. Similarly, increased ownership concentration in later days in the commercial media market has been restricting freedom in Sweden. The news media covered a smaller number of issues of the minority groups (Nord & von Krogh, 2021). The authors found that a few key actors in Swedish media systems dominate the commercial media market. Swedish journalists were encouraged to include only media professionals, even in the debates on media performance.

The arrival of new media, mainly social media and online digital outlets, has pushed the solid foundation of journalism in Canada into a struggle for survival. Taylor and DeCillia (2021) found that the newspapers’ advertising revenue and paid subscriptions had been shifting toward the digital platform, and the mainstream media were in free fall. The Canadian government initiated a relief plan in 2018, rescuing media and supporting them to make it accessible to Canadians for public scrutiny. It focused on communities left by the mainstream media by promoting local newspapers and social and online media to tell their stories.

However, social media and online news portals have pressured news media to face ownership concentration and a commercial model of content creation; increasing access to information in Chilean media has expanded beyond the geographical boundary and increased the pattern of media consumption among the people. These changes accelerated the formation of critical mass and were exacerbated by the social movements and coverage of protests. The author notes that such changes led journalists to take measures to protect themselves when reporting on the issues of minorities and the demonstrations.

The awareness of the adverse effects of harassment against journalists on democracy was also high in many countries, like Greece and Hong Kong, but on a practical level, it scored low. Gender equality was one of the weakest deficits in the media of these countries. Trappel and Tomaz (2021) noted that some countries, like Chile and Greece, have not even respected their fundamental rules. Intimidation by the state forces was high in these countries, and in many cases, such tendencies have become the cause of the primary deficit of limited press freedom. The power holders’ continuous threats have become the cause of declining press freedom in Hong Kong (Lo & Wong, 2021). The Central People’s Government, media owners, and advertisers threatened journalists while selecting and processing the news. It worsened the practices of newsroom democracy, particularly in the case of politically sensitive issues. The authors claimed that the freedom of the press had declined rapidly, and the newsrooms faced even more significant challenges in enacting the national security law of Hong Kong. The reporters faced intimidation by the state forces in the state-enforced ‘censorship’ in Hong Kong (Lo & Wong, 2021, p. 269).

In the presence of regularity of independent content monitoring bodies, the media had performed a transparent role. Padovani et al. (2021) found the favorable implication of independent monitoring bodies in Italian media. They identified that the ‘independent authority Agcom plays a crucial role in supporting the democratic function of media and journalism’. The authors further claim that the monitoring initiation of these independent bodies was able to formalize a wide set of principles, norms, and rules through the adoption of ethical codes that cover a variety of issue areas like migration, respect for children, and the use of correct language when making news about gender-based violence.

Concerning the national Code of Ethics, citizens’ participation in the news process, and rules and practices on internal pluralism, there seems to be significant progress in the news media of the representative countries. Trappel and Tomaz (2021) note that the possible explanation might be associated with the rapid adoption of new technological opportunities, such as digital chats and forums, and digitally-enabled virtual spaces, including the growing use of digital platforms. For the arrival of the social platform in the initial decade of the 21st century, almost all leading news media of these countries have adopted new technology and have disseminated news in an online digital version (p. 428).

Self-regulation is based on journalists' ethics and the organizational internal culture that shows the relationship between journalists and editors. The ethical codes seem worthless if the media house fails to form such guidelines in time. There was creating a tension between journalists and editors during 2019 protests in Chile where the journalists and the editors were considered each other as an irrelevant in the news selection process due to believing oral tradition of the organizational system but not exactly following the written editorial guidelines that contained the medium's mission and overall organizational philosophy (Nunez-Mussa, 2021).

Nepali Press and Media Market Condition of Nepal

The restoration of multiparty systems in 1990, the liberal political environment attracted many private investors running media businesses, and created a crowded media market. According to Press Council Nepal, 13,334 media outlets were registered in 2023 in Nepal. The national census (2021) shows the access and consumption patterns of the media. 96.1% (64,02,301 households) of the population have access to at least one communication medium, and 73% use mobile phones in Nepal. Similarly, 97.2% (43, 48,051 households) of media users live in urban municipalities, and 94% (20, 56,250 households) of users live in village municipalities. Although the media market has expanded its subscriptions nationwide, UNESCO marked newspaper circulation as 'very limited' in societies with low literacy levels (UNESCO, 2013).

The government allowed online media in 2016, and the registration increased exponentially, reaching 4,302 in 2024 (Press Council Nepal, 2024). Although expanding media access amplified media reach, the increasing media landscape also fueled unexpected traumatic situations in the media industry due to the emerging economic crisis in the limited media market. For a couple of years, the financial crisis of the Nepali press has been paralyzing because of unprecedented situations such as the Great Earthquake 2015, the trans-border blockade by India in 2015, and later, the worldwide pandemic COVID-19 (Adhikari, 2022; Aryal, 2022; Shrestha, 2022; Sreedharan & Thorsen, 2018).

Besides these natural calamities, various independent studies show several causes associated with the increasing financial crisis in the Nepali media. The foremost reason was that there is a limited number of newspaper circulation (UNESCO, 2013) along with the readership in Nepali society (Media Foundation-Nepal, 2012; Sharecast Initiative Nepal, 2023; UNESCO, 2013). A survey on the media situation of Nepal shows how social media has gained popularity and changed audience choices in Nepal, where only 21% of the population used Facebook as a medium for local news and information in the pre-COVID-19 period in 2020. But, the phenomenon changed drastically, and the audience size reached 41 % of Facebook users in post-COVID-19 in 2022. However, their media consumption habits showed that 15 percent (2.3 million) of the estimated adult population (18+ years of age) are readers of newspapers/magazines in Nepal. The 'daily' user audiences are: Internet 59 percent; TV 40 percent; Radio 38 percent, and newspapers/magazines 24 percent. Interestingly, the survey demonstrates that social media like Facebook has replaced radio listeners; YouTube has replaced TV viewers, and Nepali online portals have replaced the readers of newspapers and magazines at the local and national levels among Nepali media users (Sharecast Initiative Nepal, 2023). However, the media consumption pattern has dramatically increased due to the access to the Internet and social media; Onta (2006) observed that the Nepali readership of the newspapers is 'limited in the capital city' (p. 21). It was obvious that because of the lack of literacy among the rural population and poor connectivity in all geographically remote locations, the broadcasting media, mainly the state-owned radio and television, have been connecting people since their establishment across the country. One third (33%) of the adult population is illiterate (CBS, 2021), mainly from the remote rural areas in Nepal.

Another essential dimension of limiting newspaper circulation in the Nepali media market in the later years after 2015 is the expanding distribution channels of online media and social media platforms. Officially, the online news portal was started in 2016, but it rapidly increased and reached 4302 in 2024 (Press Council Nepal, 2024).

Although emerging online media and increasing social media user groups have negatively impacted the newspapers' circulation, the mass audiences have benefited from receiving diverse forms of information, not

limited to the local but also the national and international news. Subedi's (2022) study shows that the phenomenon of expansion of media reach was associated with the expansion of political information, making them aware about the rights, identities, and languages of many marginalized communities by connecting and engaging them on the forum of the public sphere through social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. While media consumption increased due to new media technology, the marginalized people became critical, exacerbated by the social movement and many cases of coverage of protests seeking their identity, respect, and fair treatment. Dahal (2023) observed that one of the causes of the Terai unrest was the lack of fair treatment of the protesters by the leading news media in the country.

Although the backward communities have been benefiting from engaging in social media and articulating their voices, due to self-generated content without any verification of the news making process, the free flow of information has been creating a space of dumbing down in Nepal. Language and media literacy have become pertinent challenges in Nepal. Most of the contents are written in English, and some is in Nepali. Still, the people who represent ethnic communities are illiterate and have no knowledge about the possibilities of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, and are still deprived of benefiting from the widespread new technology. In later days, because of a lack of media literacy, people are still becoming victims of a lack of fact-checking and misleading information due to unrestricted use of AI in Nepali society.

Nevertheless, the developing competitive media market due to emerging online media and limited circulation of newspapers has created a discourse on the role of the media, media ethics, and its sustainability in the country. In such a context, how the Nepali press exercises constitutionally protected press freedom while implementing democratic values of diversity in the conduct level of media performance is crucial to know the dynamism in the new democracy of Nepal.

RESEARCH METHODS

A desk research method was carried out to assess media diversity and identify the characteristics that relate to political communication. The historical data were collected from various sources such as policy documents, legal documents, reports, journal articles, books, book chapters, and government decisions. These data were classified according to the themes and analyzed using a descriptive technique.

The data collection approach was mainly qualitative, applying various online and offline information sources. As a substitute research method, some media persons were interviewed; for this, two editors and three senior journalists were interviewed from the selected leading newspapers (i.e., The Kathmandu Post, The Himalayan Times, and The Rising Nepal). The interviews were undertaken in the first week of February 2024. Some interviews were taken in person, and some interviews that were unavailable in person were conducted by telephone. The supplemented interviews were also conducted with two experts who have worked in the media and are now working in academia. The respondents were interviewed mainly to explore their personal experiences and practices on the structural components like code of ethics, level of self-regulation, and rules and practices of internal pluralism in the media organization. In a few cases, quantitative data were also explored for cross-check verification to confirm the validity of the collected qualitative data. For example, regarding the issue of 'media outlets,' despite scholars' claim of 'lack of poor access to information sources,' there were several reports, including the National Census 2021, used to confirm the number of media outlets and their accessibility, as well as consumption patterns across the country. It was believed that the qualitative findings verified by quantitative data could provide more reliable and validated findings to interpret the meanings of the texts.

Many proposed themes and sub-themes were used to collect the performing characteristics of the news media diversity. The keywords were recognized in the proposed indicators based on the criteria prescribed by Trappell and Tomaz (2021). For instance, the indicator 'media ownership concentration' was explored with several prescribed thematic criteria such as 'plurality of ownership', 'transparency of ownership', 'monopoly of ownership', and 'publicly controlled' or 'state-owned'.

The explored data were tabulated and classified based on the thematic indicators and scored on a presence and absence basis following the prescribed criteria by Trappel and Tomaz (2021). Trappel and Tomaz have recommended grading schemes between 0 and 3 for assessing media performance on diversity. Generally, the indicators that fulfilled 'all' or 'almost all' prescribed criteria were awarded 3 points, and the indicators that 'did not apply at all' or if 'all major criteria were not met' in the country were marked zero points. Similarly, those indicators awarded 2 points were if the 'clear majority of criteria' or 'the most important criteria' were met, and 1 point was awarded for the indicators that 'met at least some criteria' and were considered poor fulfilment. In other words, the indicators that scored three were assessed as 'high' value for qualitative assessment. For two, it was 'moderate'; for one score, it was assessed as 'low'; for zero, it was assessed as 'no' or 'absence' value of each indicator.

The grading was done with the consultation of the academic research team based on research data or the evidence collected from the desk research and interviews, and validated through a series of university departmental-level presentations.

Purposeful sampling was conducted to search Nepal's leading newspapers. It was believed that the webpages of three national English dailies, namely TKP, THT, and TRN, can assist in identifying the organizational profile, particularly the ownership structure, vision, mission statement, publicly disclosed information such as financial audit reports, shareholders' allocation, and the activities of Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) in the pages. According to the Press Council Nepal (PCN) classification, these leading newspapers were classified as the 'Ka' shreni ('A' grade) category in terms of circulation and the required criteria of the PCN. It was also believed that representing leading newspapers could set the agenda of political communication in the country.

A descriptive technique was used to analyze the content based on the hierarchical level of influence on news productions by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). It was believed that the broader impact of extra media, such as the media systems, particularly the condition of the media market, can influence newsroom management policies and their consequences on promoting media diversity. It was expected that the weak market condition of the media systems could have a negative impact on the performance of diversity at the conduct level. It also interpreted the results with the positive consequences, that is, weak media market conditions are less likely to press freedom while promoting diversity in the Nepali press.

RESULTS

The following section highlights the results of the collected data on the explored topic and analyses of media diversity performance in the Nepali press.

Conduct Level Media Diversity in Nepali Press

The results of the media performance from diversity perspectives have been presented in the following 10 thematic indicators, along with a brief analysis and summary:

Media ownership concentration at the national level: This is a pertinent issue in the Nepali press. The government of Nepal has endorsed a national-level guideline for media ownership concentration through the National Mass Communication Policy, 2017. This guideline's Clause (2.14) states that:

with special terms and conditions that limit the same person, family or group having ownership of or operating national-level publication or broadcast media of similar nature, such as print and electronic media, to have a decisive share of ownership in other publications or broadcast media shall be made.

Despite the government's policy, some leading media houses run audio, visual, and print media under the same ownership as one media organization. For instance, the Kantipur Media Group (KMG) has been running Kantipur Television, Kantipur FM, Kantipur Daily, Kathmandu Post (English), etc., in online and offline forms

nationwide. Annapurna Media Network (AMN) is the next media house run by a single media owner, API HD television, Radio Annapurna, Annapurna Daily, and Annapurna Express (English). Another media house is the Nepal Republic Media (NRM), which runs Radio Nagarik, Nagarik Daily, and My República (English). All these media outlets have been expanding their network by publishing daily newspapers from their regional offices located at seven provincial levels. Hence, it can be observed that nearly all media houses, except Nepal Republic Media, rarely show their income, property, and distribution publicly on their websites or published documents.

Furthermore, there is a broader reach of state-owned media across the country. State-owned media like Radio Nepal, Nepal Television, Gorkhapatra (a national daily), and The Rising Nepal (English) are available in almost all parts of Nepal, offline and online. Although many of the owners seem indifferent while making their media business transparent, it is noticed that most of the Nepali press have yet to cherish absolute levels of ownership concentration in the competitive media environment at the national level. However, there seem to be more than two competitors for all news media sectors, including the press in Nepal.

Media ownership concentration at the regional (local) level: According to the Press Council Nepal, 4859 newspapers (daily, bi-weekly, and weekly) are publishing at the provincial level in 2023. It can be noticed that the number of newspapers looks pretty crowded, expecting to reach a total of 660,841 households, where one-third of the total population is illiterate across the country. As in national-level media, there is hardly any empirical data that shows the exact condition of the ownership concentration of the regional-level press in Nepal. Thus, it is difficult to speculate on the degree of ownership concentration that reveals the degree of investment, circulation, income, and expenditure of the regional press. Interestingly, many newspapers vary in volume and size but are available at the regional level and compete with the state-funded nationwide circulated press while providing national news.

A radio audience survey of Nepal shows that many respondents (53 %) do not care about the ownership of the media (Sharecast Initiative Nepal, 2023). The respondents who recognized the radio ownership were highly educated groups and residents outside the capital city, Kathmandu. Interestingly, the survey demonstrates that social media sites like Facebook have replaced radio listeners for several years. YouTube has replaced TV viewers, and Nepali online portals have replaced the readers of newspapers and magazines at the local and national levels (Sharecast Initiative Nepal, 2023). The survey shows an interesting phenomenon of shifting audience choices, where a few audiences (21 %) used Facebook as a medium for local news and information in the pre-COVID-19 period in 2020. But, the phenomenon changed drastically, and the audience size reached 41 % of Facebook users in post-COVID-19 in 2022. With the changing media situation, it is concluded that despite transparent media business, many regional and national media owners compete in the same small-sized audience market at the local level of media in Nepal.

Diversity of news formats: There are 13,334 registered media outlets in Nepal in 2023 (Press Council Nepal Report, 2023). Out of total media, newspapers comprise the most significant number (58.89 %), followed by online news portals (30.45 %), radio (8.89 %), and television (1.75 %) respectively (Press Council Nepal, 2023, p. 148). Based on ownership, these media can be categorized into three main types: private, community, and state-owned. Almost all national newspapers have been publishing news in both offline and online forms. Most radio stations and television channels provide constant information nationwide through their hourly bulletin and by uploading programs through their social media and YouTube channels. Daily newspapers publish news and views in different formats, such as news, features, opinion, editorial, interviews, and letters to the editor. Besides that, the assigned tasks of many journalists can be found as reporting, rewriting/editing, online/blogging, photojournalism, cartoon/graphics, translation, and editorial supervision in the Nepalese media (Media Foundation Nepal, 2012). Their reporting beats include conflict and disaster, celebrity and lifestyle, crime and court, science and technology, society and culture, and economy and politics.

According to the Department of Information and Communication of Nepal, state-owned radio station Radio Nepal, for example, started broadcasting its program through the V-SAT Network in 1999, and 30 FM radio

stations have been transmitting across the country. Nepal Television (NTV), the state-owned television, was established in 1985 and has been propagated to 20 Asian countries through an Earth satellite on Television signal frequencies. The NTV has a broadcasting program through 19 transmission stations with 24-hour services nationwide. Both media services, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television, are available even on their homepages and many social media platforms. It is noticed that Radio Nepal provides national and international news, local news, interviews, current affairs, sports, music and other programs daily (Department of Information and Communication, 2023). The online news portals of the media provide news with interactive features such as blogs, vlogs, chat rooms, comments, and so on (Press Council Nepal 2023).

Furthermore, the Nepal Media Survey (2023) provides more than 30 issues of interest to the audience. The most demanded news in the media was related to the 'quality of education', followed by 'road and public transportation'. The least preferred news was politics, government taxes, and foreign labour migration, respectively. Interestingly, 48 % of the 18-year-old population trusts social media (i.e., Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter) as an appropriate platform to share their opinion on public interest issues.

These observations conclude that the media landscape of Nepal can be characterized as a good variety of news formats; at the same time, some mainstream news media dominate but are challenged by others, including social media.

Presence of Minority / Alternative media: There are 142 ethnic communities across the country, and they use 124 languages as their mother tongue in Nepal (CBS, 2021). The major ethnic groups by language are represented as Maithili (11.05%), Bhojpur (6.24 %), Tharu (5.88 %), Tamang (4.88 %), Newar (2.96 %), and others with a total population of 29.16 million.

The available literature fails to accurately represent the number of minorities in the media and other situations of alternative media (such as the number of people using social media, YouTube channels, minority radio, and so on) in Nepal. The state-owned national-level Nepali vernacular daily, the Gorkhapatra, which is the exception, provides space for 41 out of 124 ethnic languages under the 'New Nepal' section of its pages in 2023. These ethnic languages, among others, include Newari, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Maithili, Tharu, Gurung, and others. The published news represents around one-third of ethnic languages, and the vast majority of the ethnic population (83 ethnic languages out of 124) is excluded from the dominant national press.

However, many FM radio stations seem to broadcast news in local and regional languages, targeting minorities. State-owned Radio Nepal transmits news in 21 languages from 30 FM radio stations nationwide. Likewise, despite local television channels, Nepal Television broadcasts news in nine different languages, along with Nepali and English, from 19 transmission stations in the country (Department of Information and Communication, 2023). A few regional ethnic groups like Madhesi, Tharus, and Rai-Bantaba have published a few newspapers in their languages.

Nevertheless, the alternative media situation in Nepal seems to be that some influential minorities are operating their media and are also recognized by the leading news media. Still, substantial numbers of minorities are deprived from alternative media in their language and also from the dominant media in Nepal.

Affordability of public and private news media: Trappel and Tomaz (2021) suggest that the affordability of news media is related to the average household income. According to the National Census 2021, the average number of household members in Nepal is 4.37. The World Bank shows the average annual income of an individual Nepali is 1456 US\$ in 2024. Thus, it can be calculated that each household's yearly approximate income is 6363 US\$ (exchange rate as 1US\$ equals NPR 136). The newspapers have an average annual subscription rate of NPR 3600, equivalent to approximately 26 US\$. It can be calculated that each household has to spend 0.50 % of their total yearly income on a daily newspaper if they wish to subscribe, and this percentage can be calculated as a trivial amount of the average household's annual income.

There is no annual tax or licence fee provision for the users of national television channels and radio services. Most of the online news is available free of cost, except for some subscriptions. The government of Nepal has listed the available foreign Pay TV channels and fixed a minimum price of NPR 250 per month for broadband channels, and the equivalent of this amount is around 2 US\$ per month, which is 24 US\$ per annum. The cost of the news media can be assumed as the nominal fee for the households that earn the mentioned amounts annually. However, the expected cost can be unreasonable for people living below 1.90 US\$ purchasing power parity daily in Nepal. According to the Economic Survey conducted by the Government of Nepal, some 15.1 % of the population was under the poverty line in 2022. Hence, it can be concluded that the consumption of paid news is still an economic argument for a significant portion of the Nepali population.

Content monitoring instruments: The Press Council Nepal is an independent journalists' professional body that has enforced the Journalists' Code of Conduct 2016 (First Amendment, 2019) and monitors news media complaints with those codes. The codes clearly state the tasks of the Council under the section of 'Complaints and Redress Procedures', which include receiving public grievances, conducting self-monitoring, and taking necessary actions. The PCN regularly disclosed the complaints received publicly from national and regional media. The report contains information like the names of the victims and alleged violators, the organization's name, the designation of the violators, their gender, and the actions charged. The Council has been publishing these cases in its annual report, and these reports are also available in the public domain on the book, report forms, or its webpage.

The state generally monitors the flow of mediated political communication in election campaigns. The Election Commission of Nepal and some other non-government organizations conduct media monitoring programs in association with the Press Council of Nepal. The Commission has formed a directive - Election Code of Conduct 2015 - to ensure free, fair, impartial, transparent and reliable elections, and the concerned stakeholders, such as the political leaders and parties, including the media. They must follow the directions while covering politics during the elections. The PCN also publishes the media monitoring report of the election coverage, which is also publicly available. The PCN's role in this regard is to take actions like attention, notification, clarification, direction, and postponement to the media based on the identified violating cases.

This phenomenon can be noted that most of the news media do not use content monitoring instruments themselves. Still, a few independent organizations, like the Press Council Nepal, monitor the published content regularly and election coverage as needed based on the complaints received and self-assessing mechanisms, and they publish their reports annually.

Code of ethics at the national level: The state had formed the Press Council Nepal ad hoc in 1957, and today's PCN was formed with the promulgation of the Press Council Act 1992. As an autonomous, authorized professional body, one of the purposes of the PCN is to promote the ethical standards of a free press, regulate media outlets, and deal with public concerns about the press (Khadka, 2020). Since its inception, the Council has been making a Journalists' Code of Conduct, hearing complaints, and taking action at the national level. Thus, the primary function of the Press Council Nepal is to monitor the ethical issues of journalists and the mass media regarding the implementation of the Journalists' Code of Conduct in the profession.

The PCN monitors the media performance, categorizes it, and publishes information annually. While functioning in its roles, the PCN responds to press complaints, takes necessary actions such as suggestions and warnings, and instructs on some obligatory guidelines for ethical violators.

Journalists' Code of Conduct, 2016 (First Amendment 2019), and the Online Media Operation Directive, 2016, are the main ethical guidelines for the media of Nepal. Along with other ethics-related issues, the Codes ensure that journalism is the profession of truthfulness, accuracy, balance, fair play, and impartial values for the public good. The role of journalists seems to be that they prepare the codes and follow them in their profession. It can be expected that the journalists follow the Code's norms and guidelines to perform highly professional,

decent, accountable, and responsible actions following the principles of journalism and international standards and values, such as the freedom of the press in the Nepali press.

There are many journalist associations, including the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), the umbrella professional organization that represents all journalists of Nepal. Although these professional organizations claim independence, but most of the respondents who were interviewed for the study, claimed that the professional organizations of the journalists seem like a wing of their political parties, aligning with their political ideologies, primarily in the organizational elections. Some organizations, like the FNJ, have been disseminating good practices such as improving and raising ethical publishing standards on their home pages and also through annual reports. Despite such efforts, they cannot assess the impact of this information on the target groups. Hence, it can be concluded that despite the presence of a clearly stated Journalists' Code of Conduct, active Press Council, and other professional organizations, the mounting violating cases of the codes every year show some of the leading news media of Nepal lack to manifest the practices of press freedom and also accountable performance unanimously in all circumstances in society.

Level of self-regulation: The self-regulation mechanism is prevalent in the Nepali press. Journalists generally follow the Code of Conduct, which is formed by their representative bodies and enforced by the Press Council Nepal at the national level. All media organizations adopt and follow the guidelines of the journalists' national-level Code of Conduct that encourage them to follow editorial values and integrity rooted in the foundations of professionalism, such as accuracy, truth, honesty, impartiality, and fairness. This Code also mentions formal systems for hearing complaints if journalists violate ethical standards and instructs them on the right to reply. As an ombudsman, the Press Council of Nepal can enforce a code of conduct, taking necessary actions on complaints received on the content of newspapers (UNESCO, 2013, p. 54). However, the PCN is not the sole authority; some regulatory institutions are involved in establishing media organizations, such as in the registration process. For instance, the office of the Chief District Officer (CDO) and the Department of Information and Communication are involved in registering newspapers and accrediting journalists in Nepal (UNESCO, 2013, p. 54).

In general, it is claimed that many leading newspapers have mentioned their mission statement of ethical commitment on their webpage, namely that they are accountable to the citizens, primarily considering the issue of gender balance. These newspapers generally tend to respond to readers' complaints and make corrections by placing 'errors' or 'apologies', usually on the inside pages of their publications. Despite such a provision, there was not unanimous response that ascertained the letters received were addressed adequately. The UNESCO (2013) report also stated that nominating an independent ombudsman was important, but it was also 'yet to begin even though more than decade in Nepal'. Hence, it can be concluded that almost all leading newspapers practice self-regulation through the national level journalists' Code of conduct endorsed by the Press Council Nepal, but in the absence of internal formal codes or an ombudsman, most of them practice 'apologize' and 'corrections' as an oral tradition while responding readers' complaints in Nepali press.

Citizens' participation: Most leading Nepali newspapers hardly provides an opportunity to open newsrooms to the public in person. These newspapers especially respond to readers' voices, allocating space for the 'letters-to-the-editor' section. The newspapers also allow the public to participate in surveys on different issues. Because the newspapers' visible response mechanism is absent, it is hard to assess whether their provisions manifest public perceptions in their work. Newspapers also provide space for commenting on their online form next to the news items, which are available to and visible to all readers.

Since 2016, when online news media were officially launched in Nepal for the first time, they have been providing constant information through digital audio, visual, and textual content. It can be observed that almost all digital forms of mainstream news media, such as newspapers, television, and radio, have been taken for granted, using all interactive features such as blogs, vlogs, chat rooms, and comments made available to the citizens. Almost all leading newspapers also provide space for citizens' feedback or comments on each news item, which can be seen at the bottom of each online version of the news. The Kantipur Daily, for example,

puts an 'opinion poll' asking questions with different possible options on its news pages to collect readers' opinions, but its final results on the newspaper's online portals are rarely observed.

Most newspapers also use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as links to published content and other organizational activities. Users can comment and provide feedback per the respective media's stipulated feature. An observation shows that the weekly and daily newspapers have shared significantly fewer news stories on the official Facebook pages (Thapaliya, 2022, p. 260). For example, the Saptahik Weekly shared only one-fourth of the news, and the Kantipur Daily kept more than two-thirds of its published news on Facebook. While observing the global outreach and effective audience engagement, Thapaliya (2022) also notes that 'social media have been receiving feedback in the form of likes, sharing, putting emojis, and commenting on the news' (p. 254).

Nevertheless, it is noted that most Nepali newspapers hardly provide an opportunity to open a newsroom to the public in person. It can be noticed that the growing popularity of the online portal of the leading newspapers includes space for comments and feedback next to the published news items, and it is also visible to all readers.

Rules and practices on internal pluralism: One of the primary recommendations of the survey report of Media Foundation Nepal to media organizations in 2012 was to 'promote pluralistic ideologies and practices within organizations to terminate political partisanship for greater editorial independence gradually' (Media Foundation Nepal, 2012, p. 166). In this regard, the Press Council Nepal has produced some directives, including Women Responsive Communication Guidelines, 2019, and one of the main aspects of this guideline is to ensure the promotion of the essential equality of women, mainly in the issue of gender and social representation in the newsroom.

Despite the acceleration of female journalists' representation, the selected media houses have yet to fulfil the national policy of 33 % of women's participation in the workplace. There were 2,408 female journalists' memberships in 2023, but only 430 in 2006 (FNJ Report, 2023). Along with the increasing representation of women journalists, there seems to be a comparative improvement in their representation in the newsrooms and the recruitment process (Kafle, 2022). But, women journalists' recruitment is only in junior posts, and salary dissimilarity prevails (Kafle, p. 26). However, the scenario regarding the representation of minority groups in the media, particularly the Dalits, is still marginal. Even though the Dalits hold 13.1 % of the total population, they represent only a small number (1.31 %) in the newsrooms while assessing 12 national dailies of Nepal (Bishwakarma, 2013, p. 43).

Another essential feature of the Nepali press is that there seems to be a high degree of involvement of political leaders from all sides, such as news sources and regular columnists in the leading newspapers in Nepal (Dahal, 2023). While practicing freedom, the respondents claimed that they have to be responsible for the content they produce. The situation was similar even in the 12 years ago, when the survey by Media Foundation Nepal (2012) had shown that most journalists (86 %) responded that they had to be responsible for the content they produce. Despite number of structural changes, implementing national policies, such as the directives of the PCN that support journalists in exercising press freedom in newsrooms, still seems ineffective (Acharya & Sharma, 2022). Most media houses have not endorsed the PCN's directive of Women Responsive Communication Guidelines, 2019, which ensured women's proportional representation by developing a standardized procedure in the media houses. Such issues have become only a matter of discussion in the newsroom meetings.. Instead of limiting space, almost all leading newspapers generally provide space for readers' letters in hard copies, but the editors decide the priority.

Nevertheless, despite various legal and procedural provisions, including the Women Responsive Communication Guidelines, 2019, that encourage all Nepalese media to promote internal pluralism, treat all journalists equally, and support women journalists in their workplace. Still, due to lack of some standardized procedure for actions are prevalent, considering that the task is the responsibility of the leading persons in the newsroom.

Table 1 - Summary Results of Conduct Level Media Diversity in Nepali Press

S.N.	Indicator(s)*	Findings	Obtained score (out of 3)
1	Media ownership concentration at the national level	Although many of the owners seem indifferent to making their media business transparent, it is noticed that most Nepali press have been cherishing moderate levels of ownership concentration in the competitive media environment at the national level.	2
2	Media ownership concentration at the regional (local) level	Despite a transparent media business, most regional and national media owners compete in the same small audience market at the local level of media in Nepal.	2
3	Diversity of news formats	A good variety of news formats can characterize the media landscape of Nepal; at the same time, the increasing popularity of social media is challenging the domination of some mainstream news media.	2
4	Minority / Alternative media	Some influential minorities operate their media and are recognized by the leading news media. Still, a substantial number of minorities are deprived from their language media and also from the dominant media in Nepal.	1
5	Affordable public and private news media	The consumption of paid news is a minor cost for more than 80 % of the population. However, it is still an economic matter for a significant number of Nepali populations who are living below the poverty line.	1
6	Content monitoring instruments	Most news media do not use content monitoring instruments themselves. Still, a few independent organizations, like the Press Council Nepal, regularly monitor the published content based on the complaints received and self-assessment mechanisms and publish it in their annual reports.	1
7	Code of ethics at the national level	Despite the clearly stated Journalists' Code of Conduct, active Press Council, and other professional organizations, the growing number of violations of the codes shows some of the leading news media of Nepal fail to manifest accountable performance unanimously in all circumstances in society.	2
8	Level of self-regulation	All of the leading newspapers practice self-regulation through the national level journalists' code of conduct endorsed by the Press Council Nepal, but in the absence of internal formal codes or an ombudsman, most of them practice 'apologize' and 'corrections' as an oral tradition while responding to readers' complaints in the Nepali press.	1
9	Citizens' participation	The Nepali press hardly provides an opportunity to open a newsroom to the public in person. Still, the growing popularity of the online portal of the leading newspapers includes space for comments and feedback next to every published news item, and it is also visible to all readers.	2

10	Rules and practices on internal pluralism	Although the Women Responsive Communication Guidelines, 2019, and other various levels of legal and procedural provisions, including those that encourage the press to promote internal pluralism, treat all journalists, particularly women journalists, in their workplace. However, due to lack of some standardized procedure lingering for action, considering that the task is the responsibility of the leading persons in the newsroom.	1
Total			15/30

Note: The identified indicators were based on the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) framework, proposed by Trappel et al. (2011) and Trappel and Tomaz (2021).

DISCUSSION

Diversity in Crossroads in Shrinking Media Market in Nepali Press

The primary purpose of this exploration was to provide a critical overview of how the Nepali press performs diversity while communicating politics. This exploration aimed to assess the situation of press freedom in Nepal. This study has intended to reveal significant characteristics of media diversity in the Nepali press that developed after the political changes in 1990. The period was marked as a multiparty democracy with constitutionally protected press freedom for the first time after 30 years of ‘censorship’ in the authoritarian regime. This study used a desk research method supplemented by interviews to explore the existing phenomena regarding media diversity at the conduct level of the media performance. The media’s performance in political communication was analyzed based on the democratic value of equality (McQuail, 1992). The data were collected and analyzed qualitatively based on the criteria proposed by Josef Trappel and Tales Tomaz (2021). The structural component of media diversity was assessed at the organization level of the Nepali press.

The overall assessment of media performance in the Nepali press shows that they perform a moderate/considerable level of media diversity. The analyzed diversity indicators, such as ‘news format’, ‘code of ethics at the national level’, and ‘citizen participation’, scored two, meeting the most critical criteria. Similarly, the second vital media performance characteristics of the diversity dimension that scored one were ‘rules and practices on internal pluralism’, ‘use of content monitoring instruments’, ‘level of self-regulation’, and ‘presence of minority/alternative media’ in the Nepali press. These criteria met at least some requirements in the diversity value of the Nepali press.

Nevertheless, there might be several influences in explaining media performance on diversity, from individual journalists to the media routine and the whole media system in the Nepalese context. In this case, the media system theory can be an appropriate explanation for understanding media performance on diversity in the Nepali press. This understanding is that the financially strong media can utilize the power of the press to promote diversity in the press. On the contrary, the weak market condition encourages media to align with the politics that hold legitimate power by endorsing and restricting media policies and financial resources (McQuail, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Financially weak media markets cut off resources for journalists, limit press freedom, and restrict media performance while promoting diversity (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

For a couple of decades after 1990 in Nepal, the news media have been suffering from a weak condition of the media market, due to natural disasters and also the emerging competitors such as the digital news portals, and the media were seeking to escape from the crisis (Shrestha, 2022; Subedi, 2022). In such a context, it can be argued that the weak media market condition of Nepali media can be explained as one of the primary determinants that limit the investment of required sources and encourage journalists to perform a moderate level of diversity following the management’s decisions. Although this finding is important to understand the

phenomenon of media performance at the conduct level, there is a need for more exploration to understand the situation better, exploring press freedom and diversity in the content level of analysis in the Nepali press.

This tendency of the media organization was also prevalent in many leading news media outlets in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The situation of press freedom was challenged by declining revenues in Chile (Nunez-Mussa, 2021), a shrinking number of journalists working conditions within newsrooms of Canadian media (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021), and lack of resources to produce quality content in Swedish press (Nord & von Krogh, 2021) and existential threat by the power holders, such as the owners and the advertisers in the media of Hong Kong (Lo & Wong, 2021).

In brief, it can be noted that political communication in the Nepali media can be characterized as a moderate level of media diversity, coupled with a partially practiced press freedom in the conduct level of media performance. Before concluding the overall assessment, the following sections highlight some recommendations for the effective implementation of the national policies guided mainly by the constitutionally protected press freedom to enhance media performance in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section highlights some recommendations. Some recommendations are concerned with the state mechanism, and others are specifically concerned with the news media houses for the enhancement of democratic values of diversity in the conduct level of media organizations:

For the government:

1. **Media ownership concentration:** The government can implement effectively the existing media ownership-related provision that aims to strengthen the plurality of ownership across the country.
2. **Presence of alternative/minority media:** The government can endorse a policy to strengthen and regularly promote alternative and minority media in their language to minorities/ethnic/marginalized groups.
3. **Affordability:** The government can endorse policies to cover the price of the subscription to the leading quality newspapers/broadband access to the population who are below the poverty line,
4. **Content monitoring instruments:** The government can endorse the policies that encourage the establishment of independent, organized, and permanent content monitoring institutions at the national and local levels. The institutions shall be obliged to:
 - a. publish monitoring reports of relevant news media on a regular basis for the public to be available,
 - b. make regulatory provisions for monitoring the balance between men and women subjects in news content,
5. **Implementation of code of ethics:** The government can revisit and strengthen the roles and responsibilities of existing PCN and Information Commission and ensure ethical standards and accountability, incorporating a large variety of possible measures by implementing standards and editorial policies for news media in line with the norms of formal rules, being responsible toward civil society.

For the news media organizations:

1. **Media ownership concentration:** The media houses can reveal detailed information about their owners, shareholders, financial results, and responsibility in the organization, posting it on the organization's website for public notice, and can ensure transparency.
2. **Diversity of news formats:** The news media can expand diverse news formats by providing online outlets specialized in news, 24-hour news channels, etc.
3. **Presence of alternative/minority media:** The media houses can endorse policies/guidelines that can enhance access to information to the minorities/ethnic/marginalized groups in their language on a regular basis, and the media can serve them by using social media/weblogs in their own languages.

4. **Internal code of ethics:** The leading media houses can make editorial guidelines stating a mission statement with possible measures for effectively implementing the code of conduct or code of ethics, and ensure their accountability in society.
5. **For self-regulation:** The news media can clearly state their organization's code of ethics or code of conduct, referring to democratic values and containing journalistic obligations for politically balanced reporting. Such a task can be done by forming internal rules or developing a formal system that ensures -
 - a. Citizens' right to reply,
 - b. Hearing complaints about alleged violations of ethical standards, by establishing an independent ombudsman in the organization,
 - c. Forming sanctions for those who violate ethical standards or the organized process of self-criticism against journalists, and
 - d. Forming policies or taking efforts to guarantee gender balance in the news subjects,
6. **Citizens' participation:** The news media can ensure and develop a culture of always welcoming the public for their active involvement in the news-making process, not limited to online spaces, but also in the newsroom.
7. **Internal pluralism:** The news media can make newsroom policies and develop a culture that can follow known and standardized procedures to ensure different voices are reported and democratic equality is guaranteed to various groups. For this, the news media can:
 - a. Accommodate different groups of people in different positions within the newsroom,
 - b. Implement rules that apply for presenting divergent opinions of journalists within the same newsroom,
 - c. Engage media persons in regular internal debates on different positions,
 - d. Establish and promote a culture of respect for internal rules or guidelines specifying that all relevant information and socially significant views must be given their appropriate weight in the coverage,
 - e. Encourage journalists to use information and views favoring the other side, even if the medium is allied with a particular party or ideology,
 - f. Encourage journalists to treat politicians and experts from all sides, given the chance to present their case,
 - g. Allow readers to provide all types of feedback on their respective channels,

Nevertheless, the mentioned recommendations are crucial for strengthening democracy in the country. For this, the government and the news media can consider the mentioned suggestions as an urgent need to promote diversity in the conduct level of media performance in Nepal.

CONCLUSION

The present research on media diversity in the Nepali press shows that Nepalese media less likely give high priority promoting the democratic value of equality in the conduct level of media performance. They fail to encourage a balance of internal pluralism, unable to treat all journalists equally, and hesitant to follow a standardized procedure for implementing required action. The media's such action has led to a power imbalance in newsrooms. The press is reluctant to encourage the use of content monitoring instruments and facilitate journalists to implement a self-regulation mechanism. The presence of minority media has become a negligible issue in the media institutions, and the issue of ownership concentration is still valid in the national and regional media landscape. The affordability of newspapers is still a pertinent issue for a bulk of financially underprivileged citizens of Nepal. Besides expanding media access, promoting diverse values appears inadequate in Nepal.

It is important to note that the press is yet to be able to adequately perform media diversity and exercise constitutionally guaranteed press freedom in the Nepali press. Nevertheless, this study is an initial exploration that limited its scope with macro-level interpretation mainly from extra media system level influences, such as media market interventions at the conduct level by analyzing existing literature and interviewing with a few

concerned respondents of the newsrooms' policies and actions. But, this research is also unique in this type; it can enhance practical knowledge in the field. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the state can forcefully implement constitutionally protect press freedom keeping center to the citizens promoting the value of democracy. Equally, the media organizations can form internal policies and in line with the national policies and implement it in the organizational behavior. These internal policies have to ensure the proportional representation of the communities, endorse clear guidelines that protect journalistic professionalism and enhance overall democracy in the country. The findings also opened up the research area for further exploration in the media, communication, and journalism, particularly in the field of political communication in Nepal.

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