Community Radios in Nepal during the Pandemic: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Nepali media is prone to spreading fake news, and the damage caused by misinformation intensifies during a crisis. Taking into consideration a variety of works from scholars, the authors looked at the various factors that affected the news media in Nepal such as technology, government policies and fear during a public health crisis. In this analysis, two communication theories were used, namely, social responsibility theory of the press and agenda-setting theory. The authors intended to analyze misinformation's impact on Nepal during the pandemic and how the effect was minimized greatly through community radio. In this regard, the authors looked into instances of misinformation and drew a parallel to current situation in Nepal. Secondly, the paper analysed the negative impacts caused by misinformation in Nepal in general and during COVID-19. The third aspect that the author focused on was the positive effect that community radio had on the country and how several other measures could be adopted to tackle the situation. The authors found that community radio played an influential positive role in alleviating the threat posed by fake news in Nepal, and this method could be sought after during crises to tackle misinformation. The paper concluded with the iteration that the local communities which adopted radio as a means of communication during COVID-19 did a thorough job of holding the fort in handling the spread of fake news. It was concluded that Nepal had attempted to reach out to indigenous communities through radios, and, although many other steps needed to be taken, this was a step in the right direction.

Keywords: *Community radios, COVID-19, indigenous communities, misinformation, Nepali media.*

INTRODUCTION

Rumors and misinformation have been prevalent in Nepal online news platforms and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the initial months of the lockdown. These rumours included false advice about how the virus would spread, how to prevent COVID-19, and several remedies for treating the virus. Traditional healing practices, herbal remedies and spiritual beliefs shaped responses to the pandemic, sometimes conflicting with scientific recommendations, and this impacted the public in a serious manner. This cultural context contributed to the spread of misinformation and influenced public attitudes towards the virus (Adhikari, 2020). This further led to moral panic amongst the Nepalese and also resulted in Nepalese returnee migrants and the Muslim populations in Nepal experience severe stigma and social exclusion in the society. This also affected Nepal's poor and marginalized groups, women, and the Muslim population concerning their jobs (Budhathoki, 2020).

Social media platforms and messaging applications played a significant role in the spread of misinformation in Nepal. There had also been instances where people, through social media, posted about the rising number of COVID-19 cases without proper verification from the hospital authorities or even as an attempt to propagate fake news (Chandis, 2020). This kind of unverified information being rampant during the pandemic led to the amplification of false narratives and rumours. These instances furthered the already existing anxiety of people by prompting panic. Efforts to curb misinformation on these platforms were often met with challenges and the government of Nepal was not equipped to tackle the misinformation during this time.

Amidst the spread of fake news in online and social media, the Muslim population in Nepal was severely impacted as they were heavily subjected to Islamophobia. Moreover, health workers had a target on their backs, were denied several basic amenities, and were treated differently because of the steady rise in fake news.

During this trying time, there was a variety of factors that helped Nepal tackle the problem of misinformation. Civil society organizations, media outlets and fact-checking initiatives played a major role in combating misinformation (Haque et al., 2018). These efforts involved checking misleading claims, debunking rumours and promoting accurate information through various communication channels. As a supported form of media in Nepal, community radios mainly contributed to disseminating verified information, including reaching out to the minority communities in Nepal who may not have access to other forms of media. Community radios were influential in times of disaster, considering the inaccessibility to various terrains in the country as community radios were more available to local communities because of the lack of social media (India Education Dictionary, 2021). Moreover, community radios dispelled the misinformation that

spread during the pandemic as rumors due to fear. This initiative has vastly reduced the spread of fake news in Nepal and positively impacted the country's attempts to tackle the COVID-19 situation.

This paper aimed to shed light on the impact of misinformation in Nepal along with how community radios became a solution to the problems posed by media. It further delved into how some communities were more impacted by the misinformation than others, over and above the entire country being affected by it as a whole, and how this was limited to a certain extent by using community radios.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Acharya analyses accountability in online news media with a case study of Nepal (Acharya, 2019). The case study of Nepal is carried stating that access to online media is very limited in the country and the audience is not well aware of responsibilities that journalists must observe. This has led to limited accountability in the government considering little awareness, more so than their traditional counterparts. The significant problems within Nepal are identified as limited availability of resources, proper accessibility and literacy. It is identified by the author that the majority of the Nepalese population does not have access to the Internet and this leads to limited interaction online to ensure accountability online through monitoring. The many instances where the Nepalese media has shown unprofessional performance have been investigated in the study to look into the extent to which public accountability is maintained by online journalists in Nepal. The study further reveals the experiences of the participants related to media with a more practical approach, and the other means helped trace the history of misinformation in the country. Acharya (2019) concludes that although Western studies have stated that digital platforms tend to have more accountability, this is not the case in Nepal. It is also found that journalists and media can support partisan causes in the hopes of gaining political opportunities and can be held more accountable to political institutions, and this is viewed as a solution.

Misinformation became more prevalent in Nepal as the country faced a global health pandemic. The most affected sector was the healthcare industry where healthcare workers were stigmatized due to their exposure to the virus (Nepal & Pradhan, 2020). The stigmatization became widespread due to misinformation and disinformation and created panic among the public (Bhandari et al., 2021; Regmi et al., 2022). Nepal and Pradhan (2020) analysed the various instances of stigma against healthcare workers in Nepal and other countries like India, Australia, Mexico, and the Philippines. The factors contributing to the stigmatization and the psychological impact on the doctors due to this stigma negatively affecting their performance were explained in the paper. The public's lack of awareness about the virus compounded by the rampant misinformation on social media put

the frontline workers at risk (Bhatt et al., 2020; Bhandari, 2021). It has been concluded that extensive awareness campaigns were needed to tackle the issue and put the public paranoia to rest. The government must attempt to ensure communication with the public and create awareness consistently (Nepal & Pradhan, 2020).

Further, the efforts to mitigate stigmatization towards healthcare workers, promote the use of vaccine, and elicit support from the public to control the spread of the virus required a multi-faceted approach (Nepal & Pradhan, 2020; Pathak et al., 2022; Mahato et al., 2023). Education and awareness campaigns aimed at dispelling myths and misconceptions and involving trusted public figures in the campaigns are recommended for the same (Sharma, 2021; Mahato et al., 2023). Solidarity within the community through inclusive messaging can also help arrest the intensified spread of misinformation (Nepal & Pradhan, 2020). The authors of this study then argue that due to the foregoing discussions on the ill effects of misinformation in Nepal, community radios could not just help combat misinformation about the virus but also reach as many Nepalese as possible.

The Lutheran World Federation in their report discuss how short text messages and radio broadcasting assumed the role of active journalism in Nepal during the pandemic so as to relay basic information to the people of the country(Lutheran World Federation, 2020). These methods are viewed as active methods to effectively reach out to people during disasters such as the pandemic. Rural communities need basic information to survive the pandemic and ensure safety. This indicates the crucial role of radio broadcasting and text messages during the pandemic in Nepal. Effective communication through radio and text messaging during public health crises are crucial tools in facilitating the dissemination of accurate information, debunking myths, and promoting preventive behaviours (Pavarala, 2024; Malik & Pavarala, 2022). Using text messaging as a tool for health messaging is also viewed positively as it can give real-time updates and effectively promote health-seeking behaviours .

Through an analysis of these initiatives including reach, content and impact, this review assesses their effectiveness in raising awareness and promoting preventive behaviours in Nepal. This contributes to the research of the authors as it enhances the understanding of the positive benefits of community radios in a country like Nepal.

Developing a theoretical framework for understanding misinformation during the pandemic in Nepal requires the integration of a plethora of sociocultural, technological and psychological factors. By developing frameworks of accountability for news media, academics have tried to bring the abstract concept of media accountability to life.

The pandemic has made way for the rise of fake news in various countries, many of which have been heavily impacted. One of the key theoretical frameworks that guide this study are the social responsibility theory of the press and agenda-setting theory. The social responsibility theory emphasizes the media's responsibility to serve the public interest by providing accurate, fair, and balanced information (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). In the context of Nepal, this theory highlights the importance of media accountability and ethical reporting, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The agenda-setting theory, on the other hand, suggests that media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion by highlighting certain issues and downplaying others (McCoombs et al., 2014). This theory helps understand how misinformation can spread rapidly if not countered by accurate reporting, thus underscoring the need for media vigilance and fact-checking. This study looked into the use of community radios that effectively communicated pandemic-related information and countered misinformation. It was a crisis strategy adopted by the media organizations in managing communication during a crisis, offering lessons for future communication planning and intervention strategies.

Moreover, the media ecosystem in Nepal must be taken into consideration, including traditional media outlets, social media platforms and online news resources and how each of these outlets function around the damage that is misinformation. The psychological mechanism underlying the spread and acceptance of misinformation must be considered during a circumstance such as the pandemic, where emotional factors like fear and uncertainty play a major role. Moreover, the effectiveness of health communication strategies in Nepal, such as government messaging, public health campaigns, and community outreach efforts must be taken into consideration to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of misinformation during the pandemic and how it has been tackled.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach to investigate misinformation in Nepal and its repercussions, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection primarily involved a thorough review and analysis of existing literature, reports, and articles from reputable sources. Documentary and textual analysis were conducted to examine the content of news articles, reports, and other relevant documents that discussed instances of misinformation in Nepal. Selection criteria for texts were based on relevance to the topic and credibility as reputable sources. Data analysis was thematic, focusing on identifying common patterns, trends, and themes related to misinformation in Nepal, with a specific emphasis on its impact on various aspects of Nepalese society, including public health, social cohesion, and the media landscape. Limitations included the reliance on existing literature and reports, which may not

capture the full extent of misinformation in Nepal, as well as the absence of primary data collection methods, such as interviews, which could have provided additional insights. The study also reviewed literature and reports to assess the positive impact of community radios in Nepal, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their role in disseminating accurate information to vulnerable communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that Nepali News media has suffered from misinformation in various instances before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Anuja Baniya case, Baniya falsely claimed that she had returned 9.1 million Nepali rupees found in public transport to the original owner, and the media highly publicized it without proper verification. There have been several other instances where falsified and distorted news reports were released, diminishing the credibility of media in Nepal (Media Foundation, 2012).

During a crisis, fake news has spread quickly, and Nepal has been known to be one of the many countries that extensively deal with the problem of misinformation. Even during the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, people were misinformed, and fake news was prevalent, giving rise to panic among people. Dramatic footage and images were shared during this time regarding the earthquake, but amidst the authentic information, several fake videos and pictures went viral (Nettikkara, 2015).

It has been observed by Adhikari (2020) that, during times of such disasters, opinions are formed on social media platforms and spread quickly through these platforms, and this leads to misinformation and disinformation. After the 2015 Earthquake in Nepal, several Twitter users believed that there would be a major aftershock soon, considering the fact that aftershocks were very common after earthquakes. However, this information was circulated on Twitter, creating panic among the readers. Adhikari (2020) found that this condition of fear led people to trust information they would not rely in normal circumstances.

This provides a premise on how disasters have always given rise to false information in Nepal, which can be attributable to the lack of accountability by mass media in the country. The lack of responsibility in the country is identified as one of the significant problems for the working of media, more so during disasters, which require the effective dissemination of information.

However, this is not to state that Nepal is one of the few countries that faced misinformation during the pandemic (Singh & Banga, 2022). There are several developed countries which have provided research on the importance of accountability of media but the same is not true of developing countries (Acharya, 2019). The effect of the misinformation caused by the

pandemic could have been disastrous in Nepal taking into account the problematic terrains and lack of resources, which forms the basis for this study.

Similarly, as COVID-19, a virus whose arrival the world did not expect, started to spread, fake news in Nepal began to spread even faster than the virus (Sangroula, 2020). There have been various instances of misinformation during the pandemic, which has not only proved cumbersome to the public and legitimate media houses but also to the government, whose duty it is to maintain calm amid concerns of COVID-19.

During the initial months of the spread of COVID-19 in India, an audio clip that stated that six people tested positive for COVID-19 at Norvic Hospital went viral. The hospital, within hours of the audio clip being posted, released a public notice clarifying that the news in the audio clip was fake and called for action against the person who misinformed people (Dhungana, 2020).

The dissemination of fake news in Nepal has not been limited to just people in social media, and this has been observed as even traditional forms of media have published fake news in Nepal.

Prominent media channels in Nepal circulated a fake news report regarding a businessman from Birgunj who had tested positive for COVID-19 who then tried negative later. This reflects upon the practice of unhealthy competition between prominent news portals and the measures they are willing to take for financial profit and trending news (Khatiwada, 2020).

The police had arrested a pastor for spreading misinformation about the virus in Nepal, praying for his congregation, fearing the pandemic who was accused of spreading false information. This act had been criticized for the existence of bias against Christians and other religious minorities during the pandemic (ADF International, 2020).

Some leading news titles like *Kantipur, The Kathmandu Post, Himal magazine, Nepali Times and The Himalayan Times* suspended their print editions when the lockdown was imposed (Pandey, 2020). Some other news dailies never stopped their print editions (Pandey, 2020). While most journalists worked from home, some people, like photographers or news presenters, have continued to report to the office and do field reporting. The government provided special permits to enable them to perform their work without hassles during the lockdown. While this was the scenario in 2020, the media and the public have expressed their concerns regarding the spread of misinformation related to COVID-19. This led PCN, the country's press regulator, to shut down 25 unregistered websites that had infringed the Code of Conduct of the Council and actively disseminating fake news,

to restrain the flow of fake news (Pandey, 2020).

Moreover, surveys showed that considerable ignorance has been observed from the people who were questioned regarding COVID-19. Only 56% of the people felt that the use of PPE is mandatory in an ophthalmology/ optometry clinic, regardless of reports of fatalities of ophthalmic clinicians amidst the pandemic. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO have created a list of guidelines for proper emergency care in the ophthalmic setting, which includes the mandatory use of PPE to reduce the risk of the clinicians contracting COVID-19. The PPE in the guidelines provides for essentials to cover the mouth and nose, preferably an N95 mask, eyes, face, hands, and breath shields attached to the slip lamp in the clinic. Many participants in this survey were not even aware that RT-PCR had confirmed the detection of novel SARS Cov-2. One-third of the participants admitted that they felt that hot water, ginger-garlic mixes, soup and Vitamin C intake contributed to the killing of the virus, directly or indirectly. This information was not verified although social media have propagated it to a large extent (Sanyam et al., 2020; Green, 2020; Hutton, 2020; American Academy of Ophtalmology (AAO), 2020; World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).

This establishes how rapidly false information spread in Nepal during the pandemic and how even well-educated people from urban backgrounds believed rumors regarding how to handle the pandemic. This was mainly attributable to the present fear factor and the media capitalizing on this factor.

Owing to the quick spread of rumors during this crisis, fake news and misinformation have made their way around Nepal during the pandemic. Even clinicians who are supposed to take more precautions than laymen, considering their proximity to patients, have failed to understand who would contact COVID-19, preventive measures, and treatments. They have not checked scientific evidence before altering what they believe in or recommending it to the patients (Sanyam et al., 2020). This has led to an even quicker spread of such fake news, which has resulted in people resorting to preventive and protective measures against the virus which have not even been tested and tried.

Social responsibility and agenda-setting theories are instrumental in addressing the research problem by providing a framework for analyzing the impact of misinformation in Nepal and the role of media in mitigating it. The social responsibility theory underscores the need for media organizations to prioritize accuracy and ethics in their reporting, while the agenda-setting theory highlights the media's power to influence public perception and behavior. By applying these theories, this study elucidates the challenges posed by misinformation in Nepal and proposes recommendations for improving media practices and promoting information literacy among the public.

Disadvantages of Misinformation in Nepal

When even the crucial information takes time to emerge when there is a need for information, rumors can spread rapidly. Many factors contribute to insufficient information to the public, such as journalists not having the clearance to disclose certain information, lack of a designated official for that information or the information being intentionally withheld as it is believed to be incomplete. At a time of a crisis like the Nepal Earthquake in 2015 or the COVID-19 situation when there is no much unknown to the public, they will believe the information that they can access, and this is where problems start (US Department of State, 2018).

It was observed that, online news portals in Nepal give very little priority to ethical considerations and this gives rise to the problem of the information not being authentic and accurate (Acharya, 2019). There has been a considerable emphasis on speed when it comes to online media, which trumps the importance given to accuracy. The integrity of journalists has been questioned, as there is no accountability for the information they release. Both forms of media have their inefficiencies as information published in traditional media may also be reproduced in online media, and there is a significant dependency on secondary data (Acharya, 2019).

The Nepalese communication media also suffers from a concentration within the confines of the Kathmandu Valley. The inaccessible surrounding mountains and illiteracy in the rural areas have posed a significant challenge. Print or online media was not sufficient to be made accessible to people from such areas, even from earlier times (Malla, 1983).

This results in the inaccessibility of media to many people, resulting in an overemphasis on the significance of rumors and fake news. Especially during a crisis, people from remote areas would be uninformed, resulting in chaos and confusion.

The Impact of Fake News in Nepal during COVID-19

The spread of fake news in Nepal during the pandemic has sown the seeds to fear and stigma among people and led to the social exclusion of minority religions, healthcare workers, and other sections by society to a great extent. Due to the bias, there have been reports of violence against these people during the pandemic.

During the end of April 2020, health workers who had gone to Udayapur for contact tracing after the district saw a surge in COVID-19 cases, were not provided food and lodging in hotels and restaurants. Many doctors have claimed that, even in big cities like Biratnagar, Birgunj and Chitwan, health workers have been manhandled by mobs and denied entry into their homes (Poddel, 2020).

Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital (TUTH) health workers, among others, have been facing stigmatization when cases of COVID-19 spread. When a six-year-old patient contracted the virus and this had been detected in TUTH, there was a state of chaos that followed this news. Landlords resorted to denying lodging to frontline healthcare workers, especially doctors and nurses. Fellow tenants of these frontline workers asked them to show their transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) reports of COVID-19 for them to continue peacefully living in the apartments (Nepal & Pradhan, 2020).

In June 2020, the United Nations Country Team in Nepal along with several National and International organisations launched a campaign, as a means of curbing the stigma and discrimination against people at the time of the pandemic. This action was taken when reports of accounts of stigmatisation against health workers, recovered people and their families and returnee migrant workers were increasingly reported in Nepal (Poddel, 2020).

Through the pandemic, the fear that people harbored towards healthcare workers has grown, and they have developed a stigma against them, denying them various privileges that they would typically have. Further analysis reveals a pattern of blame which was directed towards healthcare workers despite their consistent efforts during the pandemic.

In addition to this, Hindu nationalist fundamentalists in India took advantage of the pandemic situation to promote Islamophobia in Nepal through media. The Muslim population in Nepal have admitted to being worried about the rise of Islamophobia in the country (Budhathoki, 2020).

Paranoia against Muslims in Nepal has been steadily growing during the pandemic, especially since the 13 men in Udayapur in a mosque had been detected with the virus. A vast number of these men were Indian Muslims who had travelled to Nepal for a Tablighi Jamaat congregation. After this news, various popular online and traditional media brands spread false information that these men had been hiding in the mosques (Aryal, 2020).

In April 2020, a couple of ten-rupee notes fell from the pockets of two Muslim women in Nepal, which was caught on a CCTV camera. This incident was sensationalized by social media, accusing these women of spreading the virus deliberately by spitting on the notes and dropping them on the road. This viral video led to the arrest of the two women, followed by rapid diagnostic tests being performed on them, which later revealed that they were not COVID-positive (Aryal, 2020).

This establishes that media houses capitalized on the hatred towards Muslims during the pandemic, as it is a more compelling article

to read. While this kind of news was not unseen in print media earlier, the extent of capitalization during the pandemic in social media was much more significant, seeing the rampant spread of hate during the period.

These instances are merely the tip of the iceberg. Several influential people, including journalists, have been open about the role that Muslims have had to play in the spread of the virus and have even gone to the extent of speculating if the virus was something that the Muslim population in Nepal had planned on spreading. The Muslim community has been slandered during the pandemic by hate speech on both online and social media, rarely even through traditional forms of media, and this has led to the community has been subjected to social exclusion in society.

The Positive Role Played by Radio

In Nepal, newspapers could not be considered as quick communication media because of the difficult terrains and inaccessibility. Illiteracy of people in remote places further added fuel to the fire, and furthered the difficulty in media accessibility. Even as early as 1951, when Radio Nepal came into existence with the political revolution, it played a positive role in the country by propagating news at a faster rate and to remote places (Malla, 1983).

The people of Nepal started to value local broadcasters when the pandemic started to spread in the country and have its impact. These local broadcasters were relied upon by the rural and semi-urban communities in Nepal for information that they can rely on, amidst the spread of misinformation.

The importance of proper communication was amplified during the pandemic, and it identified that several voices had gone unheard, which may be of use in disseminating adequate information. Nepalese people who live in poverty need to know appropriate and verified information as well, and they cannot be in the dark just because they lack the facilities to read online news or social media. Community radios proved to be an effective means of communication for such people. The vulnerable population requires information for survival, especially during disasters, to be fully equipped with what needs to be done to prevent and protect, and community radios have been a critical communication link amongst this population. Support has been received from National and International actors in furthering the cause that community radios wanted to achieve (Basnet, 2021).

According to research (India Education Dictionary, 2021), community radios have also resorted to podcasting to reach out to people who cannot be communicated with through regular broadcasting. Podcasting has also provided a means to reach out to people who prefer to

rely on audio content on online platforms, such as the youth, who are more prone to come across fake news on social media and be wrongly influenced by it (India Education Dictionary, 2021).

While community radios broadcasted its information offline, which helped to reach local communities that were otherwise inaccessible, there was also reliance on podcasting during the pandemic, which provided a solution to reaching out to the younger generation of the country.

A capacity-building virtual program was held by AMARC Asia-Pacific, with the support of UNESCO, detailing community radios in Nepal about the methods of podcasting, why it is essential during the pandemic, and how it could help reach vulnerable sections of society. This training was a part of the "Community Radio Campaign against COVID-19". At least 15 community radio journalists from eight stations participating in this training programme enumerated the importance of podcasting and equipped the participants with skills. Although radio stations have attempted to stream audio and radio programmes online, podcasting was not recognized as a means of proper dissemination of information, and the radio stations did not possess the wherewithal to conduct such programs in an organized and regular manner. An experienced podcaster guided the broadcasters who participated in this webinar-based training program to learn about the process of podcasting from the grassroots. The expert enumerated the online resources available to help broadcasters understand the basics of podcasting and spoke about the role that podcasting plays. The series of webinars also concentrated on how podcasting could be a means of income generation and how one could promote their podcasts by using social media (India Education Dictionary, 2021).

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has been preparing information campaigns through radio and dissemination of materials that have verified information during the pandemic to support the vulnerable communities and remote areas, where reliable information is not easy to access. The LWF has employed the usage of short-text messages and radio broadcasts in local languages to equip vulnerable communities in Nepal with reliable and useful information to prevent and protect themselves from the virus. Although government leaflets were circulated with verified information when the virus started to spread, many people in remote areas and vulnerable communities, especially the elderly, could not read and understand the Nepali language. The LWF ensured that messages were being broadcast on local FM stations in the local Santhali language so that people who are vulnerable and from remote places could understand the severity of the pandemic situation and be prepared for it (Lutheran World Federation, 2020).

Similarly, Fondation Hirondelle, a Swiss non-profit organization that strives to provide information to populations when they face a crisis, has

extended support to online media in the second semester of 2020 to improve the capacity of the Nepalese media to face challenges that the pandemic has imposed. This project included producing news, broadcasting, and training sessions for the local broadcasters. "Taking COVID" was an initiative that the Foundation took weekly, where reporters sent in their reports from various places in Nepal. This was broadcast through 20 radio stations countrywide and reached millions of people, including those without access to reliable information. These weekly talk shows featured reports from various journalists all over Nepal, an interview with an expert, updates on how other countries were coping with the pandemic situation and Q&A sessions with a mental health expert (Fondation Hirondelle, 2021). This contributed to awareness raising, and nations could mutually help each other by adapting strategies to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, as opposed to how blindsided the developing countries, one of which was Nepal, had been.

Owing to the support extended by National and International Organizations to community radios, Nepal has organized to curb the spread of false information among the Nepalese population. Although there was a lack of resources in Nepal to spread information on a regular basis through community radios, the support that these organizations extended has played a massive role in reaching out to vulnerable communities.

Keeping the solution of radio aside, Nepal could resort to many other solutions which would curb or atleast reduce the spread of misinformation. If these practices are normalized in the day-to-day lives of people, this situation of fake news could be controlled drastically. In order to reduce the flow of fake news, fact-checking organizations play a significant role in informing people about what news is authentic and what news is not (Haque et al., 2018). In Nepal, there is one fact-checking organization named South Asia Check, which was started in 2015, verifying various people's claims (Haque et al., 2018). There were five significant challenges that these organizations faced that were identified: lack of resources, lack of digital archives, lack of a sustainable business model, and political pressure (Haque et al., 2018). If these challenges were tackled and more fact-checking initiatives were supported in Nepal, the problem of fake news could be tackled more efficiently.

Research has shown that the online news portals in Nepal are not built to receive and handle complaints efficiently. It was found that many news portals did not have proper contact information for the newsreaders to give feedback; there were only general templates for receiving feedbacks that were not useful (Acharya, 2019, p. 29). Therefore, the Nepali media must also use two-way communication techniques and ensure accountability. The interference of a third party, such as a press council or ombudsman would be helpful in addressing complaints from the public (Acharya, 2019).

Since 1990, when multi-party democracy was restored in Nepal, the social responsibility theory of news media has been discussed extensively by the public as well as the Government (Acharya, 2019; International Press Institute, 2012; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO Office, Kathmandu, 2013). For example, Nepali journalists have a clear code of journalistic ethics, which includes accountability and responsibility of the media to the public (Acharya, 2019). According to an interview conducted by Journalist Acharya, however, the structure of Nepali media was not built on the fabric of accountability (Acharya, 2019).

Apart from the solution of community radios in Nepal, if the Nepali media houses imbibed accountability in their functioning, this fake news problem could be resolved to a considerable extent.

CONCLUSION

The virus has made way for the rise of fake news in various countries, many of which have been heavily impacted. One of the countries that have had to face the wrath of misinformation among its people during the pandemic is Nepal. During the initial months when the virus started to spread, fake news had already reached people through online media and social media. This was the cause for the fear and stigma that people had harbored, against several communities.

The media took advantage of the cluelessness of people in Nepal and used this to spread hate against minority religions, healthcare workers, and returnee migrants. While the pandemic is a primary concern to people, the spread of hatred against specific communities, which served the purpose of having someone to blame for, would only increase the chaos that the pandemic already poses. Having taken an active part in healing people who were affected by the virus and providing for their well-being during the pandemic, frontline workers should have been treated with proper respect, if not more, and the Nepalese people have denied them basic amenities like food and shelter just because of the stigma that has been propagated through fake news. This stigma could still be a threat to vulnerable communities in the case that there is no alternative other than social media, which has little to no accountability.

While various International and National organisations stepped forward to curb this problem of misinformation and reach out to the vulnerable and oppressed parts of the society, the journalists in Nepal themselves have been absorbed into various programmes conducted by these organisations that train them on how to utilize community radios to effectively establish a communication link with the people in remote areas. Community radio has grown significantly during the pandemic and gained the trust of several vulnerable communities. However, community

radio cannot hold the entirety of the country on its own. While fact-checking initiatives and accountability have been made a part of the Nepali Media, they need to be employed effectively to ensure that the information that reaches people is authentic. During a crisis like the pandemic, this would save the media and lives.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Misinformation has been an issue that the Nepalese Media have always been prone to, and is not an issue that has arisen recently. Since 1990, the media's social responsibility to the public has been a debated topic in Nepal (Acharya, 2019; International Press Institute, 2012; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO Office, Kathmandu, 2013), and online news portals have only furthered this debate. Online news portals in Nepal are known to perform in a sub-par manner when compared to traditional media concerning accountability, considering how several obstacles can be found in their functioning while dealing with complaints (Acharya, 2019). In addition to market influence, political influence is also considered a pressing issue when it comes to Nepali media because of the increased intervention in content selection by politicians (Acharya, 2019). The instances of fake news have only increased with time (Media Foundation, 2012), and Adhikari (2020) discusses that disasters accelerate the spread of fake news due to the chaos and moral panic that ensues during such times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been such a time where the pressure on media has been heightened in addition to which, the lockdown has led to the suspension of many print editions in Nepal (Pandey, 2020). The dissemination of such false news is not just the result of the inefficiency of Nepali media but also of considerable ignorance exhibited by the citizens of Nepal. For instance, despite being healthcare workers who are supposed to ensure several precautions in their work, ophthalmic clinicians have disregarded many emergency care guidelines issued by WHO. They, like many others, were only well-versed with disinformation about prevention methods, the cause being unverified information on social media and online media (Sanyam et al., 2020; Green, 2020; Hutton, 2020; AAO, 2020; WHO, 2021).

On a lighter note, it is significant to note the constructive role of Radio Nepal in repairing the damage done by fake news during the pandemic. Community Radios in Nepal have provided a means of ensuring proper audio communication through podcasting by training many broadcasters through capacity-building programs (India Education Dictionary, 2021), messages in the local language (Lutheran World Federation, 2020) and even weekly talk shows with proper updates about the situation (Fondation Hirondelle, 2021). The support from National and International organizations has played a huge role in protecting the interests of vulnerable communities in Nepal. Despite the various efforts taken in the past year, the country has so much

more to learn and grow to defeat the negative impacts of fake news. The Nepali media must undergo a revolution and inculcate several changes in their functioning while also striving to reduce the influence of other irrelevant factors in the creation of content to ensure proper dissemination of news to the public.

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