Accountability in Online News Media: A Case Study of Nepal

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Scholars argue that accountability of news media and journalists to the public stakeholders has been improving in the 21st century because of the increased use of digital platforms, which are interactive, immediate, and universal. Since most studies related to online news media accountability have focused on developed countries, this research study examines the state of accountability in online news media in Nepal, where access to online media is very limited and audiences are barely aware of media's journalistic responsibilities. By employing a case study research method with three data sources, and by interpreting the available data using Denis McQuail's four stakeholders of media accountability as a theoretical framework, this research study finds that online media in Nepal, despite having unique features on digital platforms, are less accountable to professional and public stakeholders than their traditional counterparts, such as newspapers and television. The study also finds that Internet accessibility, media literacy, and resource availability are of primary concern in ensuring media accountability in Nepal.

Keywords: accountability, digital platforms, media ethics, Nepal, online journalism.

Introduction

The invention of the Internet and the diffusion of online news media have attracted the attention of scholars worldwide to the issue of accountability on digital platforms. News media scholars have been generally optimistic about the capability of the Internet in assisting with maintaining accountability where journalism is concerned (Deuze and Yeshua, 2001; Fengler, 2012; Friend and Singer, 2007; Heikkila, Domingo, Pies, Glowacki, Kus, and Baisnée, 2012; Joseph, 2011; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Krogh, 2012; Lasorsa, Seth, Lewis, and Holton, 2012; Plaisance, 2000; Singer, 2005; Ward, 2010). The Internet offers affordable venues (such as blogs, micro-blogs, and discussion forums) for public discourse about journalistic performance in relation to social responsibility. Audiences, largely ignored by traditional media in the past, today, have their own digital platforms for expressing their concerns. In addition, audiences can take part in news production on digital platforms as contributors, sources, or comment providers, and, consequently, create pressure on media to be more accountable to professional and public stakeholders compared to traditional media outlets.

Online news media, despite being around for over two decades, are still considered a new phenomenon among journalists worldwide due to rapid technological changes and developments, as well as mass media convergence on multimedia platforms. These digital platforms have many features (such as universal accessibility, interactivity, and options for public participation) that are useful for upholding public accountability, however, they are not free from professional challenges such as hasty information updates and post-publication

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content modifications (Babcock, 2012; Friend and Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Such challenges may call journalistic performance into question with regard to upholding and maintaining accountability to the public and professionals on digital platforms. The concept of "public stakeholders" refers to the general public that consumes media products, whereas the term "professional stakeholders" refers to media watchdog organizations, such as press councils, ombudspersons, or any other media regulatory body that encourages journalists and media institutions to follow codes of ethics in everyday journalism.

Media accountability to these two groups of stakeholders is one of the most widely discussed ethical standards in print and online journalism. Many journalism institutions, including the Society of Professional Journalists[1], the Canadian Association of Journalists[2], the American Society of Newspaper Editors[3], the International Federation of Journalists[4], and Press Council Nepal[5] have recognized accountability as one of the fundamental standards of professional journalism. Accordingly, in recent years, there have been many studies of online news media accountability, focused primarily on developed countries in North America and Western Europe. These studies concluded that, in these countries, media accountability to public and professional stakeholders tends to increase on digital platforms (Acharya, 2015; Groenhart, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Lasorsa, Seth, Lewis, and Holton, 2012; Singer, 2005), but some of these studies also acknowledge that the practice of media accountability varies based on newsroom cultures, infrastructural requirements, and a range of external forces (Acharya, 2015; Joseph, 2011; Groenhart, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012). Basic factors, such as access to the Internet, media literacy, opportunities for interactivity, and knowledge of media ethics, can significantly impact media accountability, since audiences armed with these instruments can use them to reinforce journalistic norms (Acharya, 2015; Fengler, Eberwein, Lauk, and Leppik-Bork, 2011; Groenhart, 2012; Joseph, 2011).

While these studies present a substantial account of online media accountability in developed countries, they largely fail to account for some of the major accountability challenges faced by developing countries. Nepal is a case in point because it is a country where more than three-fourths of the population does not have access to the Internet[6] and, as a consequence, audiences are unable to participate in online activities that would empower them to ensure media

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[1]SPJ-Society of Professional Journalists. (2014). *SPJ code of ethics.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/1n GWBzP. [Accessed: 22 October 2017]

[2]CAJ-Canadian Association of Journalism. (2011). *Ethics guidelines.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/ 2RwPvEr. [Accessed: 13 June 2017]

[3]ASNE-American Society of Newspaper Editors. (1975). *Statement of principles.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2E5P9BS. [Accessed: 27 May 2017]

[4]IFJ-International Federation of Journalists. (1986). *Status of journalists and journalism ethics: IFJ principles.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2QxltPr. [Accessed: 20 June 2017]

[5]PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2016b). *Journalist Code of Ethics-2016.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/ 2QyQVNd. [Accessed: 22 January 2017]

[6]Internet Live Stats. (2016). *Nepal internet users.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2QBkKNn. [Accessed: 22 June 2017]; Statista. (2018). *Internet penetration rate in Nepal from 2005 to 2016.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2C0v51a. [Accessed: 29 February 2017]

accountability online through constant monitoring and interactivity. Nonetheless, hundreds of online news portals are in regular operation. According to the annual reports of Press Council Nepal from the last five years[7], there have been a significant number of complaints from the general public regarding violations of professional standards and codes of ethics by Nepali journalists and news media, leading to breaches of public accountability. The number of complaints that focus on unprofessional performance by online news media has been increasing every year. In 2013, for instance, PCN[8] recorded 63 complaints (including registered 39, *suo moto* 2, and case referrals 22), whereas, in 2017, the PCN[9] recorded 55 complaints against print media, and 65 against electronic media (i.e. radio, television, and online portals). A growing number of complaints have warranted PCN's intervention to apply a code of ethics, and improve professional behaviour among journalists[10].

Nepal has a diverse media environment that includes more than 800 newspapers, five hundred radio stations, four dozen television channels, 300 online news portals in regular operation, and more than 10,000 people who identify themselves as journalists[11]. In addition, PCN is mandated to develop, as well as update professional standards and codes of ethics for Nepali journalists, in consultation with the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), to make sure news media in Nepal are responsible to society[12]. However, media scholars and institutions in Nepal (e.g. Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009[13]) note that various unprofessional practices are more dominant in online news portals than in traditional media. Such practices include newsbreaks without proper verification, sensational news presentations, use of secondary sources, the rarity of error correction, and avoidance of critical comments and opinions. This situation is opposite to that described by media scholars from the developed countries (such as Babcock, 2012; Fengler, 2012; Friend and Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Krogh, 2012; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), who hail digital platforms as tools for upholding media accountability. There is not

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[7]PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2013). *Annual report of press council Nepal*. Kathmandu: Press Council Nepal; PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2014). *Annual report of press council Nepal*. Kathmandu: Press Council Nepal; PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2015). *Annual report of press council Nepal*. Kathmandu: Press Council Nepal; PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2016a). *Annual report of press council Nepal*. Kathmandu: Press Council Nepal; PCN-Press Council Nepal. (2017). *Annual report of press council nepal*. Kathmandu: Press Council Nepal. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2NsS5YW. [Accessed: 2 January 2017]
[8]PCN. (2014). *Annual report of press council Nepal*, p. 61.
[9]PCN. (2017). *Annual report of press council Nepal*, pp. 11, 61.
[10]PCN. (2016b). *Journalist Code of Ethics-2016.*
[11]FNJ-Federation of Nepali Journalists. (n.d.). *Members.* Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2RwjfBe. [Accessed: 15 September 2017]; MoIC-Ministry of Information and Communication. (2017). *Details of FM radio*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2PgYV5f. [Accessed: 21 April 2017]
[12]IFAMMN-International Fact-finding and Advocacy Media Mission to Nepal. (2012). *Safeguarding media rights and ending impunity in Nepal*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2zVRjjn. [Accessed: 25 October 2017]; IMMN-International Media Mission to Nepal. (2008). *An overview of Nepal's media and recommendations for development priorities: Building for the future*. Denmark: International Media Support; Media Foundation Nepal. (2012). *Media and Nepali public*. Kathmandu: Media Foundation Nepal; Press Council Act. (1992).
[13]IMMN (2008), Unesco (2013).

a single law in Nepal that is appropriately mandated to monitor online news portals[14]; the code of ethics for Nepali journalists, which does not effectively cover online media issues with regard to accountability, is widely violated[15].

Given this context, it is important to identify how, and to what extent, online journalists in Nepal are maintaining professional and public accountability. This research hopes to assist in providing insight into this issue by examining the accountability practices of the top-viewed Nepali online news portals, and it identifies present day trends in the exercise of professional standards in relation to McQuail's (2003) four frames of accountability.

Theoretical Framework

Over the years, scholars (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004; Dennis, Gillmor, and Glasser, 1989; McQuail, 2003) have attempted to concretize the abstract idea of "media accountability to various stakeholders" by introducing frames of accountability for news media. McQuail's four frames (political, market, audience, and professional) of accountability, because of their capacity to assist in analyzing the interest-driven focus of media institutions of specific stakeholders, can be useful tools for analyzing the status of online journalism in Nepal. They are particularly useful with regard to examining media accountability to various stakeholders.

Media accountability in the *political frame* is maintained through obedience to existing laws and regulations and through punishments for disobedience. Issues such as intellectual property rights, ownership and monopoly, free expression, claims of harm to individuals, and censorship have been discussed under this frame. The political or legal frame refers to "all public policies, laws and regulations that affect media structure and operation" in order to maintain free expression, to advance social betterment, and to limit potential harm (McQuail, 2005, p. 212).

The *market frame* denotes the system of supply and demand, in which the choices of the public are given free reign, and considerations of efficiency also play a role (McQuail, 2005, p. 213). Accountability to the market is crucial because media outlets' relationships to corporate agencies tend to generate revenues, sponsorship, and financial support. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) observe that most media promoters want their newsmakers to foster the former's interests and to be accountable to them, and that many journalists in the US are provided performance bonuses on that basis.

The audience, which includes advocates, media consumer organizations, public welfare councils, and marginalized or minority groups, becomes a part of media accountability. The *public frame* encourages audiences to interact and participate through direct questions, criticism, and expressions of concern. When a particular media outlet fails to maintain its professional obligations, critical

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[14]IFAMMN. (2012). *Safeguarding media rights and ending impunity in Nepal*; Media Foundation Nepal. (2012). *Media and Nepali public*.
[15]PCN. (2015). *Annual report of press council Nepal*.

feedback from the public can get the media outlet back on track (McQuail, 2005).

The fourth frame of media accountability is the *professional* (or *self-regulatory*) frame, which refers to the maintenance of journalistic autonomy, professional standards, and credibility through conformity to ethical codes and the fostering of public trust (McQuail, 2005). The professional frame strives to "maintain a balance between freedom to publish, the needs of media industries, the wider interests of society, and its constituent individuals and groups" (McQuail, 1997, p. 523). In this frame, journalists develop their own standards for professional excellence and aspire to uphold professional obligations voluntarily.

Scholars of media accountability (such as Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Hutchins, 1947; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003, 2005) have recommended the self-regulatory and public frames as the primary modalities to be employed in any news media. For them, digital platforms stimulate media accountability and transparency via interactive features that enable audiences to react, interact, engage in dialogue, and collaborate in the news-making process. The public and professional frames of media accountability are close and complementary, and the real spirit of socially responsible news media lies in these two frames (McQuail, 2003). Though some features overlap from one frame to another, no frame is perfect and complete, and strengths and weaknesses can be discerned in each frame (McQuail, 2003, 2005). These four frames are chosen as they resemble the imperfect situation of Nepal, citizens of which are seriously affected from the digital divide and low levels of media literacy[16].

Methodology

A case study approach with three different data collection methods was used for this research project including: a document review, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of archival records (Yin, 2009).

The document review was used to assess current accountability practices on digital media platforms and also to compare the data obtained from the interviews. *Semi-structured interviews* were essential for revealing ideas and perceptions on the research theme. The participants were interviewed about their practical experiences with regard to media accountability on digital platforms using various themes. These themes included, conceptual understanding of media accountability, ethical practices, challenges to maintaining accountability on digital platforms, and the role of audiences in making news media accountable to the general public. *Archival records* were used for assessing whether or not the interview participants employed accountability indicators consistently.

On a randomly selected date, the researcher identified five of the most-viewed news portals (i.e. *onlinekhabar.com, ekantipur.com, nagariknews.com, setopati. com, and ujyaaloonline.com*) in Nepal using Alexa Internet—web-tracking software that analyzes the ranking of websites. On the same day, the researcher selected five news stories from each portal (for a total of 25) using convenience

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[16]Internet Live Stats. (2016). *Nepal internet users*; Statista. (2018). *Internet penetration rate in Nepal from 2005 to 2016.*

sampling (beginning from the top of the portals) because of its ease, rapidity, lower cost, and facility for finding readily available participants (Deacon, Murdock, Pickering, and Golding, 2007; Neuman and Robson, 2012). The researcher then contacted the chief (or his subordinate) of the editorial department and a reporter (among the contributors of the selected news reports) from each news portal via email, requesting them to participate in this research. Hence, the researcher selected 10 online journalists to obtain different perspectives on journalism in the field and in the newsroom. The researcher assumed that journalists representing editorial departments could answer specific queries because of their experience and authority. They were asked about the potential influence of different stakeholders during the news gatekeeping process. News reporters were asked about the practical realities of the field. Using the third data collection method (*archival record analysis*), the researcher collected one news story from each of the five news portals. They needed to be (a) at least six months prior to the data collection date, (b) contributed by interview participants, and (c) archived in the news portal.

First, the researcher analyzed the content of the selected 25 news stories based on the criteria developed (i.e. using clear news source and quotes, publishing readers' feedback on the news, archiving content on the portal's website, providing hyperlinks of related stories, among others), and compared it with external sources. The external sources selected, were among the "A" grade newspapers—as classified by the PCN for their professional performance—that reported on the same issues on similar dates. Second, data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed using a conventional content analysis method. Thematic codes were developed from the available data, patterns were detected, and linkages among the codes were identified in order to analyze the content (Neuman and Robson, 2012). Finally, news stories selected for the *archival records* were analyzed using the same process used for the *document review* to assess how consistent the interview participants were with regard to upholding ethical practices on the digital platforms. The interview participants were given codes in place of their real names (and were identified as Participant 1, 2, or 3 … in this article) to protect their identities. They were asked to comment not only about their work experiences, but also about organizational policies that may contradict institutional codes of conduct. Finally, data obtained from these three methods were triangulated to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, and to reduce potential biases resulting from particular methods of data collection (Baxter and Jack 2008; Yin, 2009).

Findings

Findings of the three data collection methods are presented as follows:

Review of the Online-Articles (Document Review)

When compared to two external sources, more than two-thirds (18) of the 25

news stories assessed as part of the document review were found to be similar in terms of the names, numbers, places, and incidents reported. Eleven of the 25 news stories incorporated quotes of the news source clearly and included direct quotes. Five of the news stories also mentioned news sources, but did not use direct quotes, and a news report used three anonymous sources to support a political rumour. Moreover, only 10 news stories included by-lines, while three others provided institutional credit lines, and the remaining stories did not identify who collected the stories from the field.

Among the 25 news stories, only 11 published audience comments, and most of these comments were short and non-critical. In addition, among the five top-viewed sites from which the stories were selected, only *ekantipur.com* had a briefly stated policy regarding the publication of audience feedback on published stories. It was also found that news stories shared through social media platforms received more comments on social media pages than they did in the original news portals themselves. Social media pages contained more critical comments than the original news portals, which were filled with positive, neutral, or less critical comments.

Scholars believe that information (as well as news stories) archived on the Internet is also an indicator of accountability (Beagrie, 2008; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Dirks, 2004). Archiving on digital platforms helps audiences find past stories as well as comments about them, and also allows for audiences to file complaints about past stories. When checked after six months of the data collection date, all the news stories were found archived in their respective news portals, though three of them were found in different locations than where they were first made available. However, most of the news portals did not provide links to related, updated, or follow-up stories in the same news portals. Even though the majority of the 25 news stories did not use photos at all, eight news stories used photos without credit. Only two news stories credited photos, as per the guidelines of the Press Council Nepal[17].

Semi-Structured Interview Content

Participants were asked nine semi-structured questions covering key themes, including their conceptual understanding of media accountability, the status of accountability of news media on digital platforms in Nepal, the major challenges for ensuring accountability on such media, and the role of audiences in making online news media accountable.

Interview participants expressed optimism regarding the potential for quality journalism in Nepal based on what they saw as strengths (such as the quantitative growth of the news media in Nepal, journalism education programs in various universities, community empowerment through local radios, and online news portals for connecting Nepali diasporas). In response to a question about the key factors that help ensure media accountable to professional and public stakeholders in Nepal, the majority of study participants attested that journalists' educational

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[17]PCN. (2016b). *Journalist Code of Ethics-2016.*

backgrounds and individual commitment to the profession are among the most important. For instance, Participant 6 expressed hope that educated and committed journalists in the newsroom would not compromise professional and ethical norms despite pressure from the market or from media owners themselves.

All the interview participants interpreted "media accountability" as the responsibility of media or journalists to society: for instance, media accountability is a form of social responsibility (Participant 3); it follows a code of ethics, international practice, and the law of the land (Participants 1 and 6); it encourages media outlets to take responsibility when there are factual errors (Participant 2); it encourages journalists to present media content in an appropriate manner (Participant 6); and it "is not an individual's responsibility; it is an outcome of teamwork. So, accountability is a shared responsibility in an institutional setting" (Participant 4). Even though participants expressed their inability or confusion when asked to define the term "accountability" in a theoretical way, each participant explained the term with a focus on different aspects of accountability.

Participant 7 believed that the professional performance of journalists should always be guided and monitored by their editorial supervisors. According to her, "if editorial supervisors are fully committed to journalistic values and guide reporters accordingly, the latter will demonstrate professional performance more seriously". In contrast, Participant 6 emphasized the role of the journalist him/herself, saying, "Professionalism begins with the journalists themselves". According to him, journalists should remain committed to journalistic values through their words and deeds; other factors should have only a secondary role.

In response to a query regarding whether or not online media are better than their traditional counterparts with regard to maintaining media accountability, the study participants expressed a variety of perspectives. A majority argued that traditional media outlets are better at maintaining accountability because they have a long history and possess better resources such as an established infrastructure and networks of qualified journalists (Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10). Participant 10 specifically referred to print media as the most accountable and ethical form of news media, particularly the broadsheet daily newspapers with national circulation:

> Mainstream daily newspapers seem more ethical than other news media, including online. The reasons behind this can include a decades-long work tradition, a nationwide network of human resources, and large-scale investment. In Nepal, local radio stations came into existence 15 years before, private television channels were introduced around 10 years or more, and online media outlets are newer than any other news media.

The interview participants agreed theoretically on various indicators of media accountability to public and professional stakeholders. However, their everyday practices were different. For instance, despite theoretical emphasis of interview participants, complaints from the public were not valued equally and answered well by the newsrooms.

Interview participants found that their media institutions did not handle public

complaints properly, but had suggestions on how they could improve. Participant 4 suggested, "In case of the difficult situation of handling complaints from the public, I have to face the public, interact with them, and convince them of the good intentions of the newsroom". Likewise, Participant 8 suggested listening to the audience and being honest:

> This is very simple. You have to listen to them with the humility that you might have made a mistake. You have to admit that you cannot be 100 percent accurate in your information, and the news you send cannot be 100 percent true because we do not work in a perfect world. Your editorial team is not perfect, nor is your editor. So, you have to admit everyday that you are liable to make mistakes.

However, a couple of the interview participants indicated that not all complaints that come from the audience are legitimate. Participant 1 said, "We usually do not ignore or delete public complaints unless they are deceitful, obscene, or defamatory, deliberately targeting any person or institution". For his part, Participant 3 pointed out that handling complaints should not undermine journalistic values:

> Many people say that audience interest is the principal motive for a working journalist or a particular media house. However, for me, audience interests or complaints should be handled within the scope of journalistic values and the code of ethics. Audiences are not experts on all issues, so they should not be always decisive.

Another unethical trend of several news portals of Nepal is to hide contact details from the audience. According to Participants 5 and 6, a number of small-scaled news portals hid detailed contact information (such as, office addresses, postal codes, telephone/fax numbers, and e-mails) from web pages to avoid criticism and direct confrontation with the public. Participants 1 and 6 argued that this practice makes online journalists non-interactive, and allows for the spreading of unprofessional practices, such as the publication of disputed content and defamatory materials.

Most of the interview participants agreed that responding to audience feedback in an appropriate manner is an indicator of media accountability. Participants 1, 5 and 9 asserted that media organizations have been unfair when responding to or publishing audience comments, despite their feedback-receiving policies. These participants argued that media outlets usually publish supportive or less critical comments and ignore opinions that displease media promoters and advertisers. Participant 6 asked, "Have you ever seen any media criticism against the *Chaudhari Group* [an industrial group in Nepal]? Of course, not. It is because of advertisements".

All participants in the study claimed that their respective media organizations had policies (written or unwritten) for receiving and editing feedback in order to foster media accountability. Participants 1, 3, 5, and 7 maintained that media

institutions can promote quality journalism by employing a feedback-receiving policy that guides journalists to filter obscene language, defamatory content, and biased allegations before publishing audience feedback. Participant 3 further speculated, "Online media can have more feedback responses because they are interactive and immediate, and they can, therefore, be expected to be more accountable to the public". However, Participant 9 warned that, "In traditional media, audience feedback is in editorial control, but online it is just the opposite". Overall, participants indicated that their media organizations lack specific policies for handling complaints, and noted a trend of avoiding critical feedback in different ways.

Most of the interview participants agreed that all other stakeholders of accountability have a potential influence on media accountability practices, but that the market is the dominant source of influence on media outlets because of sustainability. Participants put forward a number of reasons to support this argument, such as "the market directly benefits media outlets" (Participant 1), "market domination is a global phenomenon"; (Participant 6), and "media owners are more interested in revenue collection than content quality" (Participant 7). Participants 1, 5, and 7 stated that media owners constantly think of potential sources of revenue, and that journalists are thereby bound to compromise professional values to ensure the organization's sustainability. Regarding the interest of media owners, Participant 5 observed:

> As a working journalist, if I do not respect the interests of the media owners, I will be immediately kicked out of the job, and the next job is not easily available. Because of this limitation, I am bound to compromise journalistic integrity and ethical values to safeguard owners' interests, as well as market interests.

Moreover, according to Participant 6, advertisements and sponsorships are used as weapons to restrict media criticism. Participant 1 further observed that when news stories are selected or rejected based on market interests, the market frame becomes dominant. Participant 5 maintained, "A corporate institution does not invest a huge sum of money [on media infrastructure and regular operation] just to serve the social responsibility theory of the press, but to make more money". Furthermore, according to participant 7, the market can delay, distort, or even kill news that runs against the interests of market stakeholders, such as advertisers, sponsors, or donors.

A majority of interview participants considered that political stakeholders are the second most dominant stakeholders of accountability, after market stakeholders. Participants 1, 3, 6, 8, and 9 interpreted the concept of political stakeholders (i.e. political parties and their sister institutions) as something different than the legal stakeholders (i.e. existing legal provisions) in Nepal's context. Participant 1 observed that even the existing rules and regulations to be followed by news media, including online news portals, have been violated by political stakeholders, resulting in hate speech, defamation, and media propaganda. Participants 7 and 8 contended that political polarization in Nepali media has

increased the influence of politics in content selection and presentation. For his part, Participant 10 observed a transition in political influence from traditional media to online media, arguing that "Newspapers were published as political mouthpieces in the past, but today, online news portals have replaced them".

Even though market stakeholders are viewed as the most influential group of media accountability indicators, six of the participants pointed toward the audience as the most important stakeholder of media accountability. These participants presented theoretical reasons to support why they thought online media ought to be more accountable to their audiences. Interview participants, however, stated that this emphasis on accountability to the audience has not been achieved. Focusing on the audience does not directly benefit media outlets compared to focusing on the market and political stakeholders. Four of the study participants asserted that professional and audience accountability stakeholders should be considered together, with professional standards guiding the practice of accountability toward audiences. For instance, Participant 4 observed that the "audience is important", but emphasized that "a professional journalist cannot fulfill audience demands that are in conflict with ethical values". Likewise, Participant 3 stressed that professional accountability should be dominant in all types of media, including online:

> The professional frame should prevail over other frames of accountability. For me, other factors have a secondary role only. Those who compromise professional integrity and ethical values cannot be professional journalists. Journalists need to use their conscience and their expertise of journalistic values and the code of ethics to decide what sort of content is socially digestible, and how much can be served for a healthy society.

Hence, a majority of the interview participants thought that traditional media and the news portals associated with them were performing better than online news portals in terms of professional practices and media accountability. Similarly, participants argued that most of the news media outlets, including their online news portals, have been dominated by market interests because sustainability concerns are fundamental.

Archival Records Review

In order to assess whether or not accountability practices in the selected news portals are consistent with the findings of the aforementioned 25 news stories and the claims by the interview participants, the contents of five news stories (published six months before or earlier from the date of data collection), taken from the archives of the selected news portals, were analyzed, using the same accountability criteria used for *the document review* method. All news stories were found archived for future reference and no advertisements were found to be presented as news stories. However, various issues such as factual errors in the news stories, lack of news source, lack of critical feedback, use of anonymous quotes, and use of photos without credits were noted. Hence, the findings of

archival records largely equated and were closely consistent to the findings of the *document review*, and the observations made by the interview participants with regard to accountability practices of the selected news portals.

In this section, data obtained from the three different methods were presented. The findings from each method were consistent with one another. Several issues relating to unethical practices of news media and journalists were not only identified in the selected news stories, but also revealed through practice, as a majority of the interview participants admitted to their existence. The patterns of the findings obtained through the triangulation of the data are discussed in the next section.

Discussion and Conclusion

For over a decade, there has been an ongoing debate among scholars about whether or not media on digital platforms are more credible and accountable than traditional media like television and newspapers. Scholars such as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) and Friend and Singer (2007) argue that online media can afford to be more accountable because digital platforms have unique capabilities, such as interactivity and transparency through hyperlinks. However, some scholars, such as El Semary and Al Khaja (2013), contend that traditional media are better than online media because "the credibility of traditional journalism stems from experience of highly skilled correspondents and editors as well as the depth of news coverage offered through analyses on the events" (p. 53).

A majority of the participants in this study remarked that online news portals in Nepal are performing less adequately than their traditional counterparts in maintaining accountability towards the public. Similarly, these participants perceived that associated online media (news portals parented by traditional media) were performing better than online-only news portals with regard to public and professional stakeholders of media accountability. They argued that associated online portals could benefit from the available resources (such as infrastructure, a wide network of journalists, and systematic gatekeeping mechanisms) and the continuous professional practices of traditional media.

However, there are always risk factors with both types of news portals. For instance, associated online news portals may merely "shovel" (or reproduce) traditional media content onto digital platforms, and the online-only news portals (i.e. *onlinekhabar.com* and *setopati.com*) may depend heavily on secondary sources for a significant portion of their news content. Moreover, most of the interview participants believed that particular media platforms themselves are not adequate to uphold media accountability to public and professional stakeholders, and that resource availability, as well as the professional commitments of journalists and media leadership can make any media (traditional or online) accountable to public and professional stakeholders. This is consistent with the argument made by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) who maintain that regardless of the medium, journalists and media institutions must demonstrate their primary loyalty to citizens.

Regarding complaint handling strategies in online news portals, interview participants suggested different steps for journalists and media organizations to follow when handling public complaints: (a) journalists or media organizations should listen to audiences or the concerned public in order to understand the issue, (b) journalists should acknowledge errors quickly and admit mistakes publicly, (c) information should be updated transparently as soon as possible, and (d) media outlets should provide a place where audiences can express their concerns. The substance of these complaint-handling steps has already been included in the journalistic codes of ethics prepared by different professional organizations such as CAJ[18], PCN[19] and SPJ[20]. Interview participants suggested that when such steps are not followed properly, a third party, such as a press council or ombudsman should get involved in order to settle public complaints.

This research study found that there are several obstacles for online news portals in Nepal to properly handle complaints. For instance, many Nepali news portals, according to the interview participants, were found withholding detailed contact information or only providing a feedback receiving template to audience members in order to shield themselves from legal or social challenges resulting from the news reporting. Hence, when media portals use such one-way communication tools, audiences cannot enjoy interactivity, expect responsible replies to their complaints, participate in the news making process, or make online media accountable, despite the non-traditional features of the digital platform (such as global accessibility, transparency through hyperlinks, and interactivity). The trend of withholding contact information on digital platforms is not only in Nepal nor is it unique to developed countries. In North America, most news outlets provide feedback forms or general newsroom numbers rather than making specific journalist information available (see for example: *Canadian Broadcast Corporation's* (CBC) official website for commenting on news or contacting journalists[21].

This research study also found that comments from audience members about news stories are often removed on various grounds such as obscenity, defamation, deliberate criticism or bias. This is just another unprofessional trend that impedes accountability on digital platforms. The researcher suspects this finding to be linked to news media on digital platforms voluntarily choosing not to adopt the aforementioned unique features to uphold accountability, but rather participating in face saving activities through post-deletion or content removal. This is not all that different than practices found in other parts of the world. In Canada, for example, the national public broadcaster sometimes prevents online readers' from commenting on news stories they feel are controversial. A story entitled "3 UK schoolgirls suspected of joining ISIS in Syria", published on February 21, 2015,

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[18]CAJ. (2011). *Ethics guidelines*.
[19]PCN. (2016b). *Journalist Code of Ethics-2016*.
[20]SPJ. (2014). *SPJ code of ethics*.
[21]CBC Policies. (2017). CBC/radio-Canada content submission guidelines for CBC/radio-Canada owned or controlled platforms. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2E5bYG5. [Accessed: 27 September 2017]

was closed within 24 hours on the *CBC*'s official website[22].

Market domination or substantial influence of market on media content is a global tendency (McQuail, 2003), and Nepal is no exception. However, because of market domination, corporate media with large-scale investments (such as television channels, national or regional radio stations, and broadsheet daily newspapers) are highly loyal to market interests in order to maintain regular operating costs and, hopefully, generate profits (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). McQuail (2003) explains that a variety of issues, such as profitability, competition, technological development, and quality of service, may influence media to be accountable to the market. Five of the interview participants of this study argued that the major focus of media owners in Nepal is profitability, and that, as a consequence, the quality of media content may be compromised. Moreover, participants also found that advertisement and sponsorship of content are occasionally employed as preventive measures to curb media criticism from market actors.

Some media scholars argue that advertising has a significant influence in North America and Europe. Bob Franklin (2005) argues that news media most often prepare news agendas to strategically target a particular segment of the audience for advertisers. For him, "a relationship between a niche publisher and advertisers can be so financially symbiotic that self-censorship is likely to dilute journalistic principles" (Franklin, 2005, p. 9). Similarly, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) refer to an example of the *Times Mirror Company*, whose management promoted market interests without letting the newsroom know.

After market influence, political influence is observed as the most pervasive in the selected online news portals, as well as in Nepali media in general, due to political polarization among journalists and the increased influence of politics in content selection. Major political parties have their own media, or media under their influence, in order to support their actions or promote favourable propaganda[23]. Similarly, the Government of Nepal operates a number of media outlets, which tend to be loyal to the ruling powers and remain subject to extensive government control[24]. In addition, media with small-scale investments (such as weekly newspapers and online-only news portals) are, as some interview participants observed, more influenced by partisan interests because the market seldom trusts them, and they need financial support from a variety of sources in order to be sustainable.

As many scholars (such as Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; McQuail, 2005) emphasized the role of audiences in making news media accountable to public and professional self-regulation, journalists participating in this research also prioritized the audiences as the main stakeholders. According to these participants, audience's feedback on news and features, and their involvement in contributing relevant information to the news-making process are important in order to improve

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[22]CBC News. (2015, February 21). *3 UK schoolgirls suspected of joining ISIS in Syria*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2QzjqdU. [Accessed: 27 September 2017]
[23]UNESCO. (2013). *Assessment of media development in Nepal*.
[24]IMMN. (2008). *An overview of Nepal's media and recommendations for development priorities: Building for the future*; Media Foundation Nepal. (2012). *Media and Nepali public*.

the quality of news content. Since the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal (i.e. 1990), the social responsibility theory of news media has always been a matter of public discussion from the street to parliament[25]. For instance, the code of journalistic ethics for Nepali journalists has clearly mentioned the responsibility and accountability of journalists and media institutions to the public. According to interview participants, audiences, however, were mostly ignored or strategically sidelined when audiences commented against the interests of media institutions, sponsors and journalists.

Among the four frames of accountability discussed by media scholars (such as Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004; McQuail, 2003, 2005), interview participants emphasized the importance of audience frame to make online news portals accountable to the general public. The market frame, however, dominates media accountability in the selected news portals for this study in practical terms because media owners, according to the most of the interview participants, are interested in covering operational costs and making profits. Interview participants argued that small-scale media (such as online-only news portals) largely depend on political sources to seek financial supports because the market has not trusted them as reliable media for advertising their services and products. There is a noticeable gap between the theory and everyday practice of journalism in making journalists and media accountable to the general public. Such a gap can be eliminated or narrowed, as argued by the interview participants, when journalists and media promoters are educated and trained in journalistic values and ethics that encourage media and journalists to be accountable to the public.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that a modification to the theoretical frame of media accountability would be warranted to clearly analyze the different scenarios of political and legal accountability. The frame synonymously uses "political" and "legal" terms to denote the legislative obligations of media institutions and journalists. Scholars, such as Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004), Krogh (2012), McQuail (2003) state that all public policies, laws, and regulations related to media are within the political (or legal) frame, and the implementation of the frame can be coercive, confrontational, and non-negotiable. However, this theoretical frame fails to assume the realities of a developing country like Nepal where legal and political scenarios are considerably different. On the one hand, there are constitutional and legal provisions to regulate news media, which can be equally applied to all media institutions and journalists[26]. On the other hand, there is a strong political hold on media and journalists, such as government controlled state-funded media (such as *Gorkhapatra, Radio Nepal, Nepal Television,* and *National News Agency*), political parties directly or indirectly run media outlets (from print to online) to promote partisan interests, and most of the journalists and media institutions in Nepal have been polarized into different political parties.

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[25]IFAMMN. (2012). *Safeguarding media rights and ending impunity in Nepal*; Media Foundation Nepal. (2012). *Media and Nepali public*; UNESCO. (2013). *Assessment of media development in Nepal*.

[26]IFAMMN. (2012). *Safeguarding media rights and ending impunity in Nepal*; IMMN. (2008). *An overview of Nepal's media and recommendations for development priorities: Building for the future*; UNESCO. (2013). *Assessment of media development in Nepal*.

Consequently, these media and journalists can be more accountable to political institutions and promote partisan interests in the hope of getting political opportunities. Therefore, the media accountability frame can be modified and expanded into five different stakeholder groups: legal, political, market, professional, and public, so that the media accountability scenario in a developing country can be better interpreted.

Contrasting to the findings of Western studies that media and journalists are likely to be more accountable to the general public on digital platforms (McQuail, 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Friend and Singer, 2007), this research study finds that online news portals in Nepal are less accountable to their professional and public stakeholders. Further research is warranted to assess the status of media accountability on digital platforms in other developing countries to determine if the same factors may be applied and to determine to what extent developing countries differ each other's media environment.

Acknowledgement

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