

Who is a Journalist?

*Self-introspections by Working Journalists
on their Changing Profession*



A Proceedings Report

March 2012

Who is a Journalist? Self-introspections by Working Journalists on their Changing Profession.

March 2012

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WHO IS A JOURNALIST?

Self-introspections by Working Journalists on their Changing Profession

An Open Discussion Session with Working Journalists

Sunday, 11 March 2012
Media Foundation, Kathmandu



March 2012
Media Foundation, Kathmandu

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Introduction

The program was designed as an informal focus-group type open discussion session on self-introspections by working journalists on their changing profession, covering contemporary issues in the area of media practices, including professional capacity development opportunities. For the Media Foundation, it was an opportunity to host the session as well as a way to welcome and to get to know some of the most active, upcoming and mid-career journalists working for various news outlets.

Setting

The program was organized in a round-table setting at the Media Foundation office, Bhatbhateni. Journalist Deepak Adhikari, correspondent for the AFP, coordinated and moderated the session. Around 17 journalists and media workers joined in the discussion.

The program began with Mr. Adhikari's brief PowerPoint presentation intended as a warm-up to the extended interaction later. His presentation covered topics such as changing face of Nepali journalism, new technologies, the shrinking world, social media, blurring of facts and fiction, individual journalistic experiences, capacity building among journalists, media skills, and professional ethics (See Annex B). Adhikari emphasized that since journalists are always chasing deadlines, they don't have as much time to reflect on their own profession, their resourcefulness and on the need to develop journalistic capacities. Following the presentation, he laid out the themes for discussion, which mainly included capacity building experiences of participating journalists.

Who is a journalist?

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Participants

For an effective discussion, the number of participants was kept below twenty. The participants were like-minded professionals, working for some of the major media outlets, representing all channels- print, broadcast, and online. A few were media researchers, students, and interns.

MODERATOR

Deepak Adhikari

An open discussion session with working Journalists

Sunday, 11 March 2012

Media Foundation, Kathmandu



PARTICIPANTS

Bhadra Sharma, *The Kathmandu Post*

Bishnu Nepal, National News Agency

Deepak Adhikari, AFP

Dharma Adhikari, Media Foundation

Gerhard Schoenhofer, Media Foundation

Ghanashyam Khadka, *Kantipur*

John Nr Parajuli, BBC

Kosh R. Koirala, *República*

Nabin Jha, Himalmedia

Post Bahadur Basnet, *República*

Prakash Chandra Pariyar, *Kantipur TV*

Pratima Banskota, *Kantipur*

Ramesh P. Bhusal, *The Himalayan Times*

Rubina K. C., *Terai T V*

Tilak Pathak, *Nagarik*

Upendra Pokharel, *Nepal (magazine)*

Zeena Tamang, Media Foundation

Sharing & Discussion

Following the warm-up presentation by Deepak Adhikari, participants were encouraged to share their experiences and opinions on journalistic self-improvement, media ethics and capacity development opportunities, etc. The following are some key points expressed by individuals during the sharing session, presented here in the order they were expressed:

Kosh Raj Koirala, Republica

Mr. Koirala spoke about his recent experience as an East-West Center/Asia Pacific Leadership Fellow in Hawaii. It served him with an opportunity for capacity development. He said that the opportunity offered a process of networking, professional exchange (with many, diverse professionals) and it was useful in cultural sharing, inter-country experience, career development, meeting role models, etc.

Referring to Asian College of Journalism (Chennai, India) academic experience back in 2008. He said that ACJ is a fully-funded program and several Nepalis have attended it. Mentioned that Reuters fellowships (see company Website) also offer such opportunities, mainly focused on South Asia, terrorism, etc. Mr. Koirala said Nepali journalists should take advantage of such fellowships, for these offer opportunities for observation outside the country.

Mr Koirala said he is using the training and fellowship experiences in his works, but not in concrete terms. What is more important, he observed, is that the opportunities he got helped broaden his worldview, and his perspective on things have changed. He observed that as a professional he could only share his experiences in social and professional setting, but not in a policy or decision level. He encouraged everyone to pursue training and fellowship opportunities.

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Prakash Chandra Pariyar, Kantipur TV

Mr. Pariyar shared his US experience. During an exchange visit to America, he visited several news outlets and got to observe first-hand their practices and values. Suggesting that Nepal journalists had a rather complicated and ambiguous sense of professional ethics, he said that the US journalists appeared precise in their ethical understanding. At one local television station he visited, he saw that they had their code of ethics explicit and simply as "Report the fact, respect the truth".

It was important, he observed, to know exactly what is required of a journalist in terms of ethical practices. But then it is also necessary that journalists have the needed skills and know how to practice those skills. Now there will be more people coming into the profession from academic backgrounds, with education. What is necessary today is reasoned and logical approach to doing things. Unfortunately, he suggested that Nepali journalism is too chaotic and the professional approach still remains largely idiosyncratic.

Mr Pariyar observed that journalism, once adopted, is a way of life; there is no former-journalist or a former professional. However, in Nepal there are many gaps in our learning of journalism and its applications. International exposure and fellowship opportunities would help bridge those gaps.

Mr. Pariyar said that in Nepal, there were few opportunities to hear from senior professionals or elders although journalism is all about listening to others. There is a disconnect between learning and practice, and even teachers have no working experience so they cannot meaningfully relate to the practical realities on the ground.

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Navin Jha, *Himalmedia*

Mr. Jha, a recent graduate of Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) shared his experience in studying development journalism. IIMC is a major institution in India that has trained many Nepali journalists over the years. Mr. Jha said that he had the opportunity to visit many parts of rural India and to observe local development efforts.

While the training and learning at IIMC helped hone his development reporting skills, he suggested that the demands of the newsroom sometimes lead to such circumstances in which managers and editors of news outlets fail to take enough advantage of the specialized training acquired by their reporters.

Today there are other prominent news agenda, such as the Madhesi issue, and there are still few people writing about it, he observed. Mr. Jha said that though he would like to do more development stories, he has not been able to focus on it. Perhaps he will be working on half a dozen stories from a development angle, even if he would be following the Madhesi issue.

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Managers and editors of news outlets fail to take enough advantage of the specialized training acquired by their reporters.
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Mr. Bhusal, a 2010 Climate Change Media Partnership fellow, said he entered journalism by accident, without prior training in the discipline. After obtaining an MSc he entered radio journalism, then into newspapers. Mr. Bhusal focused on environmental journalism.

Referring to his early efforts in environmental reporting, Mr. Bhusal spoke about his experience of attending a workshop in Nepal organized by the Earth Journalism Network. The workshop served him as a networking forum and with professional contacts. He had the opportunity later to participate in environmental reporting programs in Europe. At one event there, he saw around 5,000 journalists gathered on a single floor, each one armed with modern technological gadgets. If you are serious enough about your work, he suggested, you can achieve your career ends by means of professional efforts, you don't need to approach influential people, government officials or political party leaders like many professionals would do in Nepal. Mr. Bhusal emphasized on the need to develop self-esteem and self-worth in journalists.

However, he noted, Nepali journalists have attitudinal problems— they typically react first, show more than they know, unlike other professionals. Journalists need more humility and discard self-conceit, he said. He bemoaned that journalists tend to think that they are above the law, and there is the need to discard arrogance. He observed that with adherence to professional commitment, opportunities are not limited to ministers or Singha Durbar.

Unfortunately, the media leadership, too, is apathetic about professional growth of journalists. Employers have a certain degree of animosity or jealousy toward their employees. Citing his own experience, he said his boss would not be happy if he got an opportunity to train abroad or visit a foreign country.

The biggest thing I learned from my foreign exposure is attitudinal change, he said. Another was the huge networking opportunities such forums offer. Such opportunities had helped him in his self-empowerment and he had been able to obtain more such opportunities by his own personal efforts, applying for and attending more such learning opportunities.

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John Narayan Parajuli, BBC

Mr. Parajuli, a Masters in War and Conflict Reporting at Swansea University, UK, observed that Nepali news outlets relied too much on event-based journalism, there were few original reporting, and there was little context offered in the coverage.

Suggesting that there was the real danger of journalists driven by sources, and them falling in the trap of special interests, he said journalists needed to be careful in their choice and use of words and phrases. For example, unqualified use of “peace process” or “down-sizing” or “right-sizing” of the army, are indicative of how Nepali journalists are being manipulated by their official sources. These terms are used by bureaucrats or officials and journalists were widely using them, uncritically.

Mr. Parajuli emphasized that journalists need to go beyond face value and look for the context. There is the need to standardize journalistic writing, and developing a style guide may help in this.

He also referred to the impact of new media on the users, for example, he said, new media infantilize our minds. Sometimes the emerging new environment can create conflict within the families and communities. Citing an example from a western country he said that a father shot his son’s computer to pieces, because his son had revealed in one of his social networks posts something like “my father sucks!”

Referring to his own professional growth opportunities here in Nepal, Mr. Parajuli said that his BA course in journalism was boring; they taught nothing about the craft, about writing. One assignment involved research in the area of media ethics; however, the class was not given the proper or adequate guidance on methodologies. There was little emphasis on writing practice within the academia, he observed, but you cannot be a journalist without writing skills.

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New media infantilize our minds. Sometimes the emerging new environment can create conflict within the families and communities.
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Bhadra Sharma, *The Kathmandu Post*

Mr. Sharma suggested that there is lack of entry-level training in journalism; many enter the profession without prior experience. He said that he developed an interest in the profession after having followed a local journalist in Dang. He came to Kathmandu and did a Masters, but have not done any formal study of journalism.

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Pratima Banskota, Kantipur

Ms Banskota wondered if there was unfair competition among news outlets, and if such tendency had forced outlets or journalists to pursue stories, even unsubstantiated ones, by any means. As an example, she said that news outlets seemed to be almost trying to frame the recent Babarmahal bomb explosion as the handiwork of monarchists, which turned out to be untrue. She concurred with others that Nepali journalists were not doing enough to verify facts.

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facts.**

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Tilak Pathak, Nagarik

Mr Pathak, a practicing journalist as well as a teacher of journalism, observed that he looks at the whole issue of journalism mainly from three perspectives, newsroom, classroom, and actual practice of the craft. The academic courses appear more theoretical, and there is very little opportunity for learners to practice reporting or writing. It's a matter of methods, he said, suggesting that preparing for journalism career requires mastering techniques of the trade; unfortunately there was very little room for that in the academia.

Mr. Pathak himself learned by way of reading newspapers. Although government colleges continue to produce a large number of graduates in journalism, these colleges still continue to maintain their old ways of teaching and their methods have not changed. Due to this, the disconnection between practice and learning remains there.

Many news outlets, specially the online sources of news, were lacking in their professional and ethical judgement. Although no news media in the world are 100 percent perfect in ABC (accuracy, balance and credibility), Nepali online media, he observed, failed miserably in these values. Most online newspapers copy verbatim from television news bulletins and newspapers, or the Rastriya Samachar Samittee newswire and that has only worsened the information dependency syndrome. If the original outlet carries unverified information, it gets widely circulated by other media that recycle it, adding further impetus and intensity to the process of misinformation. This becomes particularly worrisome if major newspapers carry such factually incorrect information, mainly because of their wider public reach and assumed impact on the public. In a bizarre example he cited from Pokhara, Mr. Pathak said that a daily newspaper that had cited a piece of information from a weekly newspaper became the target of a disgruntled and violent group, and all its efforts to explain that their original source was a weekly fell on deaf ear.

Mr. Pathak also cited some cases of misinformation and the general lack of a culture of verification by news outlets. For example, he said, reports of casualties or their numbers are often incorrect.

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”

Bishnu Nepal, RSS

Mr Nepal concurred with other participants in their assessment of information dependency and the unethical practice of lifting stories from other sources without any attribution or credit. He said that they experience such cases on a daily basis at Ratriya Samachar Samittee newswire. In fact, he informed that a recent publication by RSS commemorating its anniversary has compiled cases with examples of RSS stories lifted by FM radio stations and online news sites. In all those cases, the original source, the wire service, was not given any credit for the stories.

As an example, he said, a RSS story on West Seti hydro project, based on a briefing by the Ministry of Water Resources, was republished by online sources verbatim without any credit to the original source. He observed that journalists at those outlets did not even bother to follow-up on the stories, or make phone calls to obtain information or verify facts. There is zero percent follow up and no verification, he said. According to him, training and specialized reporting are necessary to help address such problems.

Referring to his trip to Africa (Congo, included), Mr. Nepal said that he got the opportunity to see how journalists were uncritically accepting official terminologies and jargons. They could be prone to manipulation by such sources. For example, The UN term “peace process” was being used by journalists uncritically.

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There is zero percent follow up and no verification. Training and specialized reporting are necessary to help address issues of information dependency and the unethical practice of lifting stories from other sources.

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Rubina KC, *Terai TV*

Ms KC, who entered journalism after completing her Plus-2, said she learned journalism by actually practicing it. She has been in the profession since two years. She said whatever one learns in our schools or colleges does not apply to the work of a journalist, and she feels that perhaps there is very little motivation among journalists to do better. Since there are only a few journalists from her generation, she does not have that many working peers from her age group. Resource constraints and routines also affect her work. As she observed, there are pressure of reporting, and she has to cover more than one beat.

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Cross-discussion

Throughout the session, participants shared their views, made comments and observations on various themes that emerged during the extended interaction.

Academic resourcefulness: Several participants observed that journalism teachers lack practical skills, they only teach but cannot help students in enhancing their reporting and writing skills.

In-house learning: Hardly any internal refresher or training held in media houses; still largely idiosyncratic and tradition-bound in the way newsrooms do their businesses

Official sources/information: Government officials often release info without verification (example, Budhigandaki, 600 MW confused with another project)

Verification: Contradictory statistics on the same story common; however, given their extended deadlines, Nepali language newspapers are more likely than English-language newspapers to verify and print the correct facts or figures

Competition & strategizing online updates: Given the competition among outlets, sometimes journalists are forced to chase rumors. Newspapers are reluctant to publish even genuine scoops for fear that rival outlets could copy their stories and republish without credit. Some newspapers, like *Kantipur*, have stopped publishing scoops in its online platform to avoid unfair competition due to the rampant culture of copy-and-paste

Participants shared their views, made comments and observations on various themes that emerged during the extended interaction.

Minority coverage: It was important that the Dalits were covered by Dalit journalists, some opined, while others said it was an issue of fairness and objectivity no matter who covered them. Some maintained that ethnicity may positively relate to access to sources/story subject, framing of questions, and assumptions of a reporter. And positive discrimination accorded some degree of fairness in the news process. However, one participant cited a case in which a Muslim journalist was criticized for the way he covered a Muslim issue. Similarly, there was also the possibility skewed sourcing, as seen in stories on Maoists covered by reporters close to the Maoists. Participants called for newsroom diversity, and more objective and yet engaged reporting of minority issues.

Specialization: Needed in Nepali journalism. One example is court reporting. Without the knowledge of law, journalists cannot cover the court adequately and properly. Advanced training was necessary to cover similar and other emerging beats or topics.

Quality and regulation: Since there are many problems facing journalism today, some observed, perhaps some criteria in the form of regulation was needed for journalists. One of the participant observed that all professions have licensing system as means to ensure quality control; however, journalists lacked anything like that.

Key Issues

Lack of academic resourcefulness, in-house training, problems with official sources, verification, minority coverage, and unhealthy competition as well as lack of specialization and the need for quality

Wrap up

The secretary of Media Foundation, Dr. Dharma Adhikari, observed that since Nepal is in the process of change, many of the ideas about journalism are being re-examined. The traditional ideals of journalism, characterized by details, reason, and special skills of reporting and writing are becoming universally accessible today to everyone mainly because of new technologies, increasing media access and improved education system in schools.

And yet, he said, little is being done to explore opportunities that enhance journalists' capacities. While Nepali journalists were increasingly becoming well-informed, there remains much to be desired in terms of actually practicing what they already know. It was also important to bridge the gulf of mistrust between practitioners and academicians. Above all, journalists' prestige as professionals is not possible today without the wider public appreciating their work. Hence, media education and literacy should be a public agenda today.

These and other related issues like newsroom practices, ethics, capacity development, etc. had emerged during the open-discussion, Dr. Adhikari observed. He thanked everyone for taking the time to attend the session, and the moderator Deepak Adhikari for his presentation and coordinating role.

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It is important to bridge the gulf of mistrust between practitioners and academicians. Above all, journalists' prestige as professionals is not possible today without the wider public appreciating their work. Hence, media education and literacy should be a public agenda today.
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ANNEXES

A. Program invitation flyer

WHO IS A JOURNALIST? ARE YOU ONE?

Redefining journalism in these changing times

15-minute presentation &
moderation of open discussion
by journalist **Deepak Adhikari**

Share your thoughts and ideas

Topics to be tentatively covered

- Redefining journalism in the Nepali context
- New technologies, a shrinking world, social media, social values
- Blurring of facts and fiction
- Individual experience
- Opportunities for journalists
- Media skills
- Professional ethics

Date: March 11, Sunday 11 am

Venue: Media Foundation office, 40 Shanti Marg, Bhatbhateni, Kathmandu

Location map online: <http://bit.ly/t2oNIS>

Web: <http://media-foundation.org>

Parking available near Malpi Primary School.

Rsvp: 9851043762 (Deepak), 4415137 (Media Foundation)

Lunch will be served at the end of the session.



media FOUNDATION

40 Shanti Marg, Bhatbhateni, Kathmandu

Web: <http://media-foundation.org>

Email: info@media-foundation.org

B. Presentation by Deepak Adhikari

Who is a journalist? Are you one?

DEEPAK ADHIKARI

Twitter: deepakadk

Website: www.deepakadhikari.net

We are so busy chasing our deadlines that we hardly talk about journalism

So, let's recall the basic tenets of journalism (source: *The Elements of Journalism*)

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth

Its first loyalty is to citizens

Its essence is a discipline of verification

Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover

It must serve as an independent monitor of power

It must provide a forum for public criticism and

Compromise

A new era of journalism

A delivery boy in Bangkok was the first to take pictures of the bomb blast

Everyone with a digital camera and Net access can post news through twitter, facebook, blogs, tumblr etc

But context is important

How and why it happened

How does it affect me

Making sense of it: what does it mean?

Professional ethics

The easy access to Internet has contributed to the proliferation of plagiarism

But even before that, Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass surfaced in American journalism

Case of Johan Hari, a columnist with *The Independent*

Conflict of interests

Paid news phenomenon

Protecting your sources and maintaining distance with the subject

Good reporting requires hard work:

4 months of research, 40+ interviews and 13,000 words: profile of Manmohan Singh

Blurring of facts and fiction

- Controversy surrounding *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson
- Several books by legendary Polish author Ryszard Kapusinski, who was compared with Joseph Conrad, the author of *Heart of Darkness*

Capacity building

Websites like Poynter, News University offer free online classes and discussion on media related topics

Fellowships: Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship, Nieman Fellowship, Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, Knight Fellowship

Useful websites

Jim Romenesko: <http://www.jimromenesko.com>

American Journalism Review: <http://www.ajr.org>

Columbia Journalism Review: <http://www.cjr.org>

Media Bistro: <http://www.mediabistro.com>

Sans Serrif: <http://www.wearethebest.wordpress.com>

International Journalism Net: <http://www.ijnet.org>

Nieman Lab: <http://www.niemanlab.org>

Poynter Media Studies: <http://www.poynter.org>

The Hoot (India): <http://www.thehoot.org>

Media Helping Media:

<http://www.mediahelpingmedia.org>

News University: <http://www.news-u.org>

South Asian Journalist Association: <http://www.saja.org>

**C. Some photographs
from the discussion
session**



**Some images from the open
discussion session with mid-
career working journalists on
Sunday, 11 March 2012
Media Foundation, Kathmandu**

A proceedings report based on the open discussion session entitled "Who is a journalist?", participated in by mid-career, working journalists, on Sunday, 11 March 2012 at Media Foundation, Kathmandu.