

**AGENDA-SETTING ROLE OF NEPALI NEWSPAPERS DURING
ELECTION**

A Dissertation

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BY

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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

We certify that this dissertation entitled “Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during election” was prepared by Mr. Rishikesh Dahal under our supervision and guidance. This dissertation is hereby recommended for final evaluation.



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APPROVAL LETTER



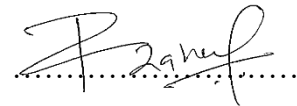
This dissertation entitled "Agenda Setting Role of Nepali Newspapers During Election" was submitted by Mr. Rishikesh Dahal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirements for the **Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Journalism and Mass Communication**. I hereby, certify that the Research Committee of the Faculty has found this dissertation satisfactory in scope and quality. Therefore, it has been accepted for the degree.

.....
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Dean and Chairperson
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Date: 2081/10/03

DECLARATION

In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, I hereby submit this thesis, “Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during election”, to Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Office of the Dean, Tribhuvan University. This is entirely my own original work. All sources used in this thesis have been acknowledged appropriately, and any external materials have been cited in accordance with academic standards.



Rishikesh Dahal

Date: April 2023

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ABSTRACT

The first multi-party general election in Nepal held in 1959, saw minimal involvement from the media. Newspapers, at the time, did not play an Agenda-setting role. The restoration of democracy in 1991 introduced liberal media policies, allowing for the growth of privately-owned newspapers. Over time, these newspapers gained prominence during elections. However, the role of Nepali newspapers in Agenda-setting, as defined by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, remains underexplored. This study analyzes the Agenda-setting function of Nepali newspapers during elections, focusing on their coverage of campaigns, voter engagement with election-related news, and the strategies employed by political actors to shape public opinion in the age of social media. The Agenda-setting theory posits that topics repeatedly highlighted in the news become established as agendas, shaping public discourse and laying the foundation for policy work.

Building on Dearing and Rogers' Agenda-setting theory, the study investigates the interplay among media, public, and policy agendas. It employs a qualitative-driven mixed-method research design, combining content analysis, surveys, and case studies. A total of 602 news articles were analyzed, alongside surveys with 338 voters, and manifesto reviews of the two major political parties—the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxist and Leninist (CPN-UML). A case study on social media influence during elections was conducted to contextualize traditional media's role within the evolving media ecosystem. Furthermore, the findings were triangulated through 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts, ensuring a comprehensive analysis.

The findings reveal that while Nepali newspapers emphasize democratic values in their election reporting, they often fail to address the public concern issues.

Coverage tends to be event-driven, with a primary focus on the Election Commission (EC) and government activities. Public trust in newspapers is moderate but declines significantly regarding perceptions of political impartiality. Policy agendas are rarely prioritized, and political manifestos frequently feature repetitive and unfulfilled promises. Moreover, media impartiality is often compromised, with private newspapers leaning toward opposition parties and government-run newspapers favoring the ruling coalition.

The study also identifies emerging challenges by social media as political parties increasingly shift their focus to virtual platforms for disseminating their agendas. This shift has diluted the legacy media's Agenda-setting role, particularly in shaping policy discourse. Nepali newspapers are found to lack follow-up on electoral promises and fail to address the everyday concerns of the public. News reporting remains centered on political elites, reflecting a skewed representation of voices and issues.

From a theoretical perspective, the study underscores the limited effectiveness of Agenda-setting theory in the Nepali context due to weak linkages among the media, the public, and political actors. While the media holds the potential to transform public concerns into actionable policy agendas, the disconnection among these elements restricts its impact on public opinion and policymaking. For Nepali newspapers to fulfill their Agenda-setting role effectively, balanced and inclusive reporting on public affairs is essential. The findings have significant implications for media practitioners, political parties, election authorities, and policymakers, offering a roadmap for improving media practices and strengthening Nepal's democratic system. By addressing gaps in electoral coverage and engaging more meaningfully with public concerns, the media can better contribute to a vibrant and accountable democracy.

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ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS

ABC	:	Audit Bureau of Circulations
AI	:	Artificial Intelligence
BFI	:	Bank and Financial Institution
CA	:	Constitutional Assembly
CMR	:	Center for Media Research Nepal
CPN (Maoist)	:	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
CPN	:	Communist Party of Nepal
CPN-ML	:	Communist Party of Nepal – Marxist and Leninist
CPN-UML	:	Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist and Leninist
ECN	:	Election Commission Nepal
FDI	:	Foreign Direct Investment
FPTP	:	First Past the Post
FY	:	Fiscal Year
GEOC	:	General Election Observation Committee, Nepal
GoN	:	Government of Nepal
HoR	:	House of Representatives
MIS	:	Management Information System
MJAF	:	Madheshi Jana Adhikra Forum
NC	:	Nepali Congress
NMKP	:	Nepal Majadur Kishan Party
NPC	:	National Planning Commission
NPI	:	Nepal Press Institute
NTA	:	Nepal Telecommunication Authority

PCI	:	Press Council of India
PCN	:	Press Council Nepal
PR	:	Proportional representation
RJP	:	Rastriya Janata Party
RPP	:	Rastriya Prajatantra Party
TMLP	:	Terai Madhesh Loktantric Party
UNDP	:	United Nations Development Program

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This chapter provides an overview of the study of the Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers, including the background of election and media, statement of problem, objectives, methodology, and limitations. Additionally, the chapter briefly explores the importance of independent journalism in democratic societies.

Journalism in Nepal has its roots in politics, whether it be the material published against the Rana regime from India or that which was published within the country after being influenced by a political party (Devkota, 1966). The initial general election, which marked a seminal moment in the nation's democratic history, is held on February 10, 1959, subsequent to the establishment of democratic governance in 1951 (ECN, 2017). During the 30-year Panchayat system, only a single National Referendum is conducted. Seven major elections have been conducted since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1991. Over the past five decades, the Nepali media have played a significant role in the electoral democratic process, becoming an integral component of election campaigns. Throughout this period, the Nepali media have set agendas based on their presence and capacity.

The modern democratic process in Nepal, in the form of elections, begins with the demand for a Constituent Assembly in 1950. The Delhi Agreement between King Tribhuvan, the Ranas, and the Nepali Congress (NC) marks a turning point that transformed the nation's political paradigm.

The dawn of democracy in Nepal began with the declaration and formation of an interim government by Rana and NC representatives, marking the end of 104 years of Rana autocracy. The people's participation in government was now possible

through the new state system. A new constitution was promised to be established through a Constituent Assembly elected by the people, as stated in the king's proclamation (Thapa, 2022, p. 87).

The election for the Constituent Assembly, held in 2008, was one of the demands that fulfilled only after the success of the 2006 "Jana Aandolan" [People's movement]. However, the country had to wait for nearly two decades for it to happen, and it was finally achieved after another major political change marked the end of the monarchy in Nepal and the beginning of Republicanism. Nepali society witnesses various political upheavals and changes during this period.

Democratic systems are established with the goal of creating a system of governance that is accountable to the will of the people, whereby the authority to govern is bestowed through regular, fair and free elections (ECN, 2017). In this regard, the media is expected to play a crucial role in democratic systems. It acts as a watchdog, ensuring that government actions are transparent and accountable to the public by providing critical and investigative reporting, and providing citizens with access to information necessary to make informed decisions. Muller (2014) explains that democratic media should supply societies with relevant political information, which should reach a considerable number of citizens with the media upholding the public watchdog role as it also provide a public platform reflecting the diversity of societies.

The significance of independent media in a democratic society is widely recognized. In this context, journalism is often referred to as the "Fourth Estate", after the executive, legislation, and judicial institutions of the state, due to its crucial role in upholding the integrity of democracy. Ghimire (2013), describing the Nepali context, notes that "the relationship between democracy and a free press is a complex one,

with the latter being dependent on the former for its survival and flourishing (p. 150)." It is widely accepted that a functional democracy cannot exist without a robust and independent media, as it acts as a watchdog, promoting accountability and transparency in government through its critical and investigative reporting. Additionally, the media is often viewed as the voice of marginalized and underrepresented groups, serving as a conduit between the public and those in power. According to McNair (1998), "Journalism has the power to make things visible to the public and thus to make them important (p. 49)," consequently influencing the policy agenda.

The role of media and political parties in democratic practice must be examined in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the two. It is important to consider how political parties perceive and utilize the presence of the media, as well as how media consumers engage with and respond to media content. As Dahl (2006) states, "The 'key prerequisites to political equality and popular sovereignty' are the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press (p. 59)." Examining these elements in conjunction with one another is crucial in understanding the impact of media representations, audience perspectives, and political party strategies pretending to the establishment of political agendas.

The 2022 election in Nepal, being the second periodic election to occur following the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, marked the ninth iteration of a general election since the first in 1959. As a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, all nine elections, inclusive of two Constituent Assembly (CA) elections (2008 & 2013) and one National Referendum (1980), have been of paramount significance. The number of political parties, constituencies, and eligible voters has fluctuated in each election.

Agenda-Setting and Campaign Communication

Agenda-setting theory posits that the media play a crucial role in shaping public perception and prioritizing issues through the selection and emphasis of news topics. McCombs and Shaw (1972) pioneered this theory, highlighting how the media's focus on certain issues influences what the public perceives as important.

In electoral contexts, various media channels, notably journalism, serve as primary vehicles for disseminating political agendas to the masses. In addition to journalism, there has been a growing trend of utilizing alternative communication methods to present agendas to the public. As described by Shrivastava (1992), elections are enjoyed by the masses as a popular festival in India, where leaflets, flags, and posters are distributed to supporters. All effective channels of communication are utilized, with public meetings serving as the climax of campaign activities and providing a significant boost to the overall campaign.

Pokharel and Rana (2013) describe the Nepali context as follows: “The political parties organized large rallies, cultural programs, street corner meetings and door-to-door canvassing. They even used motorcades, comprised of open vehicles with loudspeakers, banner paintings and posters (p. 146).” Furthermore, with the advent of social media, online groups and influencers have emerged as key stakeholders during election campaigns.

The practices of India and Nepal demonstrate that alternative media have a strong presence in elections even before and after the prevalence of mass media.

Newspapers in Elections

Before 1990, there were only a few regular daily and weekly newspapers, and most of them were based in Kathmandu (Kharel, 2013). This situation remains consistent, as Kharel noted. Aryal (2016) explains that like in any other parts of the

world, print is the earliest media in Nepal and it has put forth the agenda in every step during a national crisis. “Due to the lack of technology and democratic environment within the country, publications including the papers in the Nepali language were brought out from across the border before 1950 (Aryal, 2016, p. 26).” The commencement of democracy in Nepal marks 1951 as a significant milestone for Nepali journalism.

According to Norris (2002), the context of election campaigning is also influenced by the structure of the mass media within each country. The market and scope of media further expanded after the restoration of democracy in Nepal. The mass media plays a crucial role during all elections, particularly in terms of its impact, access, and the state of press freedom. During the initial election, the number of media outlets, media consumers, and political parties were relatively limited. The number of newspapers increased during the National Referendum (Nepal, 1998). National Referendums and Constituent Assembly elections are distinct events in comparison to traditional general elections.

Sapkota and Adhikari (2023) observe that the media has always been a strong supporter of election in Nepal. “Given our history of political instability, reluctance to go to poll and multiple election postponements, this support in favor of ensuring people get the opportunity to pick their representatives at regular intervals, as an exercise of their sovereignty, built pressure on political parties and helped maintain public morale (Sapkota & Adhikari, 2023, p. 19).” The proliferation of newspapers in Nepal becomes increasingly apparent following the restoration of democracy in 1990. This trend is particularly pronounced in the daily newspapers segment, which creates a significant market for itself. Subsequently, private FM radio and television stations also emerge. As literacy rates and reading habits among the general population

improve, the market and business for newspapers expand accordingly. Citing Acharya, Thapaliya (2022) states, “In Nepal, print media outlets seem to be dominating both the media industry by its numbers as well as its influence in the country’s sociopolitical Agenda-setting (Acharya, n.d.). But the gap between the number of registered and regularly published newspapers has been widening every year (p. 255).” In tandem with newspapers and electronic media, Internet-based platforms have emerged as pivotal players in shaping electoral landscapes.

Online and social media have seamlessly integrated into the fabric of traditional media in Nepal. It is interlinked with mainstream media and should be understood as part of a cross-media environment or a hybrid media ecology. That social media has not only carved out its own space but has also facilitated the expansion of newspaper content to a significantly larger audience. According to Sapkota and Adhikari (2023), while the use of social media was seen in the prior two elections, the 2022 elections saw an unprecedented rise in its use across multiple platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. It not only indicates the changing ecosystem of the communication but also the election campaign and the strategy of political parties.

The Emergence of Social Media

The evolving landscape of mass communication, including the emergence of social media, has been observed in the recent elections. There is a significant concern regarding the mis-use of social media during elections for information manipulation. Although a study, conducted during the 2022 election by CMR Nepal, shows a relatively low level of flow of manipulated information through social media by established political party leadership, a significant level of circulation of false information by political cadres is observed (CMR, 2022). As the emergence of

Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to advance, it can be projected that in the future, alongside the role of social media in information dissemination, there is also the potential for it to amplify and disrupt agendas of various parties during elections.

Despite the rapidly evolving media landscape, the enduring significance of newspapers remains evident. Radio stations, television networks, and online news sites often draw their content from daily newspapers, positioning them at the heart of the media ecosystem (Dahal, 2021). Embracing the digital age, newspapers have expanded their reach through online versions, integrating social media platforms into their online portals.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Extensive research focuses on media influence, particularly in Western developed countries, dating back to the 1920s. In 1922, Lippmann, in his seminal book *Public Opinion*, explores how media shapes human psychology, coining the concept of the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922). This idea continues to spark discussions over time. In the late 1960s, McCombs and Shaw study media influence through the lens of Agenda-setting theory. Their research among undecided voters demonstrates that repeated emphasis on specific topics by the media profoundly shapes public perception, underscoring the media's strong role in setting agendas (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Since McCombs and Shaw's groundbreaking work, numerous studies on Agenda-setting have been conducted globally, exploring its application not only in electoral contexts but also across various forms of media presentation. However, in the context of Nepal, this area of research appears to have been largely overlooked, receiving little scholarly attention.

The practice of media monitoring in the Nepali context is relatively nascent, which has contributed to an underexplored area of study. Furthermore, an evident gap exists in the analysis of how newspapers shape the Agenda-setting process,

particularly in the context of elections. This research gap underscores the need for a comprehensive investigation into the interplay between elections, media, and the dynamic process of Agenda-setting within the Nepali media landscape. The existing research landscape in Nepal concerning elections and media reveals a significant gap that demands attention. Humagain, Bhatta, and Adhikari (2007) observe that it is not possible for a person who wants to do research in the field of Nepali media to get enough information about such infrastructure and opportunities for their research. The situation still remains the same. The limited research on media and democratic practice in Nepal highlights the need for further investigation into the role of the media in shaping public opinion and influencing the democratic process. Despite the historical significance of newspapers as a means of communication, there is a lack of in-depth studies on the impact of Nepali newspapers on the public during elections. With reference to a century long history of media and more than 60 years of democratic practice in Nepal, it is important to examine the impact of newspapers and their role in shaping the democratic process. Therefore, in light of the aforementioned background, this study has been conducted. This study tries to fill some aspects of the gap by examining the influence of Nepali newspapers on the public's understanding and priorities of political issues during election campaigns. Additionally, there is a need to understand the effectiveness of the traditional campaign style adopted by political parties in the context where newspapers have faced competition by new media, including social media.

A rapid expansion of the internet and the subsequent proliferation of social networking sites, which appeared as a post-2000s phenomenon, has significantly altered the traditional approach and style of communication in Nepal. As compared to the timeframe when the Federal Elections were held in Nepal in 2017, the number of

active internet users doubled by 2022 (Dahal, 2022). In this context, concerning the pivotal role of media in shaping political discourse and influencing voter behavior, a notable gap exists in the literature regarding Agenda-setting in Nepal.

Research in this field aims to investigate the ways in which political parties use media to influence public opinion and voter behavior during election campaigns. Beyond the media usage by political parties during elections, newsrooms prioritize information through gatekeeping, managing the vast amount of data that flows during the democratic process. Additionally, social media has challenged traditional media in terms of editorial processes, reach, and access. Meanwhile, political parties continue to use traditional means of communication, including manifestos, to establish their agendas. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of media in shaping political discourse and voter behavior, the following research questions are examined:

1. Why are voters attentive to public agendas, and to what extent does it influence them?
2. What is the status of the policy agenda in election campaigns?
3. How do newsrooms prioritize agendas during elections?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This investigation seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of how various factors—including newspaper content, editorial competence, voter behavior, social media influence, and the agendas of political parties—interact to shape public discourse and opinion during election periods. As a strong source of information, media—especially newspapers—play a crucial role in the democratic process. In this regard, the primary objective of this thesis is to examine the Agenda-setting function of Nepali newspapers during elections. To accomplish this, the study has three specific objectives:

1. To assess voter perceptions regarding public agendas and media coverage.
2. To evaluate policy agendas established by political parties and the media.
3. To assess media representation in Nepali newspapers during elections.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in Agenda-setting theory as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). This theory highlights the media's role in shaping the public's priorities by selectively choosing which issues to focus on. The theory suggests that the media does not directly tell people what to think but instead tells them what to think about, thus guiding public attention to specific issues. The framework integrates Dearing and Rogers (1996)'s Agenda-setting process, which highlights three core components:

Media Agenda: Issues selected by the media.

Public Agenda: The set of issues the public sees as important, shaped by media coverage.

Policy Agenda: The issues that policymakers prioritize, which are influenced by both media and public agendas.

The inclusion of new media (social media) is noted, especially in the context of political parties using new media to bypass traditional media channels, potentially influencing public and policy agendas.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework takes the Agenda-setting theory from McCombs and Shaw (1972) and applies to the context of Nepali newspapers during elections.

It uses the Agenda-setting process outlined by Dearing and Rogers (1996) as the foundation.

The framework explores how media agendas (issues highlighted by newspapers), public agendas (issues considered important by the public), and policy agendas (issues that influence political decisions) interact, particularly in the context of elections.

Public agenda: Influenced by the media's framing and the trust the public places in media sources.

Policy agenda: Shaped by both public and media agendas, and influenced by political parties and their manifestos.

The study also considers the role of new media, including social media, in shaping these agendas.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Newspapers hold the longest legacy in journalism and have played a pivotal role in the development of journalism in Nepal. Despite their significance, there has been very limited research on their impact on the evolution of journalism in the country. The role of newspapers in setting the agenda remains an underexplored area, with no foundational studies evaluating their effectiveness. This study investigates the Agenda-setting role of Nepali media and explores how the emergence of new media is influencing political communication. When citing instances and data pertaining to current affairs, particularly political activities, most academics and researchers in South Asia refer to newspapers. Kharel (2010) states, "Politics is dominant theme of the Nepali news media in general, particularly the daily and weekly papers. But media content analyses are extremely rare in the country (p. 234)." By addressing this overlooked dimension of communication, the study contributes to a critical area of academic inquiry, highlighting its importance.

This study is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on the role of media in shaping public opinion and influencing voter behavior during elections. This is important as the media is a key source of information for the public, playing a crucial role in shaping public discourse and political decision-making.

Secondly, the study can provide an insight into the workings of the media and the political process in Nepal. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the Nepali political system and the role of media within it.

Thirdly, the study explores the effectiveness of media in setting the agenda during elections, offering insights that can identify areas for improvement in how media serves the public and enhances the democratic process. The significance of this study extends beyond the academic field of communication. It provides valuable insights for policy formulation aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of newsrooms. By identifying strategic measures that Nepali newsrooms can adopt to strengthen their Agenda-setting role, this study offers practical guidance for advancing the journalism sector in Nepal. It contributes to the literature on media and politics, providing a case study of the Agenda-setting role of newspapers.

As Quraishi (2019) explains, passive and uninformed citizens cannot foster a vibrant democracy or elect good governance, underscoring the pivotal role of media in democratic societies. Given the increasing impact of social media and the integration of AI in information dissemination, understanding Agenda-setting has become more crucial than ever.

1.7 Operational Definitions of the Keywords Used

Here are some frequently used keywords in this thesis. The operational definitions of these keywords for this study are as follows:

Accountability: In this study, accountability refers to the responsibility of political parties and leaders to deliver on their promises (agenda) and the role of the media in holding them accountable through reporting and follow-ups.

Agenda-Setting: A communication theory first established by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) that explains how media and political actors prioritize issues, thereby influencing public perception of what is important. In this study, Agenda-setting is viewed from the perspectives of the public, policy, and media.

Case Study: An in-depth examination of a particular instance or event, such as an election, to gather detailed insights and understand broader trends. This study also gives focus to the role of social media in elections.

Content: For this study it relies on the materials published in newspapers, including news articles, editorials, opinions, interviews, and features. For this study, all content is related to election news published in first and op-ed pages of newspapers.

Election Campaign: Organized efforts by political candidates and parties to influence voter decision-making and gain support during an election. This study analyzes campaign coverage in newspapers and on social media.

Follow-Up: Reporting on the outcomes or progress of previously covered news stories, especially concerning political promises and policy implementations, particularly manifestos.

Gatekeeping: A theory explaining how editors and journalists decide which news stories to publish and how to present them, shaping the information the public receives. For this study, 'news stories' refers exclusively to those related to the Election of 2017.

Media Agenda: Topics and issues that the media prioritizes and covers, influencing public and political agendas. In this study, the public and policy agenda align closely with the media agenda.

Media Ecosystem: The interconnected network of media outlets, platforms, and technologies through which information is produced, distributed, and consumed. The media ecosystem encompasses traditional media and new media.

Mission Journalism: A form of journalism that is driven by a specific purpose, often aligned with political goals. It aims to advocate for change. Journalists practicing mission journalism often have a clear agenda to influence public opinion, and their work is typically aligned with certain ideologies.

Opinion: Articles that reflect the personal views of authors and are published on op-ed pages. For this study, opinions are limited to election-related issues.

Party Manifestos: Documents released by political parties outlining their agenda, policies, and promises. In this study, these manifestos are considered the authentic agenda of political parties.

Policy Agenda: A set of issues and policies laid out by political parties or leaders that they intend to prioritize and implement if elected. Most policy agendas are endorsed by manifestos and some are derived from newspaper coverage.

Public Agenda: Issues that the general public perceives as important and requiring governmental action. For this study, these issues are those that directly relate to the daily lives of Nepali citizens.

Social Media Influencers: Individuals who have established credibility and a substantial following on social media platforms. They can affect the opinions and decisions of public. For this study, influencers are those who actively engage in news-related discussions and have more than five thousand followers.

Social Media: Online platforms used for sharing information and engaging with audiences, which have become vital tools for political communication and campaigning. For this study, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok are selected as social media platforms.

Tone of News: The attitude or approach that the media takes in its presentation, which can be positive, neutral, or negative. The use of words in headlines, leads, and the body of news, editorials, and opinion are the variables used to classify the tone.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This thesis is structured in eight chapters, with the first chapter introducing the research topic and outlining the problem statement, objective in the research, and subject matter of the study. The chapter contextualizes the study area and provides an overview of the overall research structure.

The second chapter explores the concept in detail through a literature review of the theory and its application to Nepali newspapers during elections. It provides a conceptual framework and theoretical basis for the role of Nepali newspapers during elections based on the Agenda-setting theory. It also dwells upon the political background of Nepal and elections.

The third chapter outlines the methodology used in the study, including the research framework, data collection method, data processing, and ethical considerations.

The fourth chapter submits a historical analysis of election and newspapers in Nepal. It presents an overview of the media situation during different election times. It also dwells the political context of elections in the country.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters cover the analysis of both primary and secondary data. The fifth chapter focuses on the public agenda, including media priority along with the public perceptions regarding it. The trust level of media is also explored. The sixth chapter concentrates on the policy agenda, based on manifestos and social media. The document analysis examines the political and other issues raised by political parties during elections.

The seventh chapter delves into the media agenda with special concentration on broadsheets. It examines the role of newspapers during election along with the public perception and trust level of the media. A case study of the uses of social media in election is also included. The conclusion and recommendations are presented in chapter eight. This chapter summarizes the data and analysis in the report and includes a list of references and appendix.

CHAPTER-II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background

In this chapter, Agenda-setting theory has been reviewed from different perspectives, including the historical origins and subsequent debates surrounding it. Also included are the utilization of multidimensional approaches to Agenda-setting, together with the Public-opinion to Framing. Through this examination, a comprehensive analysis of existing gaps in the literature on Agenda-setting theory is conducted.

2.2 Agenda-Setting, Election and Media

Agenda-setting refers to the theory of media effects that covers the editorial selection process, transmission to the audience, and the significance of political objects that affects the relative importance of these objects to the public. “It is one of the theories created by mass communication scholars and adopted subsequently by many other disciplines, including health communication, political communication, business and more (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009, p. 147).” The widespread adoption of Agenda-setting theory across various genres confirms its established significance.

It is acknowledged that the application of Agenda-setting theory may yield differing results in societies with dissimilar demographic characteristics, such as levels of literacy and media accessibility. Additionally, the research methodology and tradition, as well as the political system and attitudes towards democracy, may also play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of such studies. Democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that puts the individual in a position to decide and act autonomously (Meyer, 2002). Because of that in the present

day, the utilization of mass media in electoral campaigns is an integral aspect of political communication. Among the most influential and powerful tools of modern technology, social media has played a notable role in this regard (Dahal, 2022). The simultaneous advancement of modern electoral systems and printing technology has also transformed the nature of election campaigns, making them a more inclusive and widely participated affair. Because of that, it can be taken as the paradigmatic shift on Agenda-setting process.

The modern era of electoral democracy can be traced back to the election of Burgesses – the British colonies – in 1619, a time when the print media in western society was still in its nascent stage. The election of Burgesses take place soon after June 19, with the inhabitants, the whole population except for women and children, assembled and voiced their selection viva voce, or "by showing of hands" (Hatch, 1956). The recognition of the role of newspapers in promoting election campaigns during that period is far beyond anyone's imagination. It is only in the 18th century that the potential role of mass media in election campaigns and Agenda-setting became apparent. However, a systematic study of the role of media in the Agenda-setting process does not begin until the latter half of 20th century.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw are the first to conduct an empirical study of Agenda-setting in 1968. They find that the issues emphasized in the news media during the U.S. Presidential Election of the same year corresponded to the set of issues of greatest concern among undecided voters. A major finding of their study is that the wider coverage the issues received in the media, the more important they were perceived to be by the voters. The abstract of their study on the Agenda-setting power of the media states –

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staffs, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about

a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The world of politics may be regarded as a collection of political agendas, agenda-setters, and agenda-recipients. McCombs and Shaw’s Agenda-setting theory represents a back-to-the-basics approach to mass communication research that is the cause-and-effect relationship between media content and voter perception (Griffin, 2012). The term "Agenda-setting" explains the role of the mass media to establish and promote the public agenda. The study of media coverage and the survey among the undecided voters are the basic methodologies McCombs and Shaw applied to identify the agenda and the voting behavior.

According to McCombs and Ghanem (2001), Agenda-setting is a theory all about the transfer of salience from the mass media pictures of the world to those in our heads. To elaborate Walter Lippmann's perspective (1922), the prime idea is that the elements prominent in the media pictures become prominent in the audience's picture.

Framing as the Second Level of Agenda-Setting

McCombs and Ghanem have viewed framing as second level of Agenda-setting with the assumption that Lippmann's public opinion became the root of these theories. The credit for the Framing Theory goes to Goffman (1974). The Framing Theory deals with how the news is organized and presented, and the effect of this falls on the public interpretations of the news, which also relates to the frequency with which issues, positions, and other political objects are covered in the news. The theory is utilized by spin doctors for the tailoring of political issues in election campaigns for

specific segments of audience. According to Volkmer (2009), successful framers can control political discourse by repeatedly invoking the same frame, which sets the terms of engagement, the words, the vocabulary, and metaphors, by which a political object (e.g., issue, candidate) is formed and discussed.

Frame analysis is used to provide a systematic account on how we use expectations to make sense of everyday life situation and people in them. In this manner, media organizes and presents an issue to suggest to its audience about the social meanings attached to it (i.e., what to think about). Goffman (1974), described Frame as cognitive structures which unconsciously lead the individual to what is to be noticed and what defines that situation for the individual.

Public-Opinion and Picture in Our Head

Pre-paradigmatic work appears regarding the Agenda-setting in 1922. Robert E. Park's "The Immigrant Press and its Control" and Walter Lippmann's "Public Opinion" shed light on the issues without using the word 'Agenda-setting'. Dearing and Rogers (1996) explain, "Robert E. Park, a sociologist at the University of Chicago from 1915 to 1935, and perhaps the first scholar of mass communication, conceived of media gatekeeping and implied what is today called the Agenda-setting process (p. 10)." The gatekeepers are the editors, journalists, and other decision-makers who determine what content is deemed newsworthy and what is not.

Out of all the events that happened and are recorded every day by correspondents, reporters, and the news agencies, the editor chooses certain items for publication which he regards as more important or more interesting than others. The remainder he condemns to oblivion and the waste basket.

There is an enormous amount of news "killed" every day (Park, 1922, p. 328). Regardless of the strength of the evidence gathered and the facts established, if it is not published, it cannot be considered news. Pioneering early thinking about Agenda-

setting, Lippmann, a renowned scholar of propaganda and public opinion, is widely regarded among academics for his seminal work in the field. In his influential 1922 book, "Public Opinion," Lippmann expounded on the concept of "The World Outside and the Picture in Our Heads," positing that the mass media serves as the primary channel connecting events in the world to the images of these events in the minds of individuals. Additionally, Lippmann was a notable newspaper columnist and a long-time advisor to multiple presidents.

According to Lippmann's theory, individuals do not perceive facts as they truly are, but rather as a counterfeit of reality, or a "pseudo-environment." To clarify the socio-political reality, Lippmann introduces the concept of "The Picture Inside our Heads," positing that individuals do not first observe and then define, but rather define first and then observe. He further suggests that this internalized picture significantly shapes political behavior as it does not correspond to the external reality.

Men form their picture of the world outside from the unchallenged pictures in their heads. These pictures come to them, well stereotyped by their parents and teachers, and are little corrected by their own experience. Only a few men have affairs that took them across state lines. Even fewer have reason to go abroad. Most voters live their whole lives in one environment, and with nothing but a few feeble newspapers, some pamphlets, political speeches, their religious training, and rumor to go on, they have larger environment of commerce and finance, of war and peace. The number of public opinions based on any objective report is very small in proportion to those based on casual fancy (Lippmann, 1922, p. 273).

Lippmann's contributions to the study of political communication include his conceptualization of the media's ability to shape public thought and feeling. He has argued that the concept of freedom of thought and speech is presented in a new light and raises new problems due to the discovery that opinion can be manufactured.

His seminal work, "Public Opinion," is a cornerstone for further research on politics and media, with his descriptions of the selectivity process and its influence on the public serving as a clear precursor to later Agenda-setting theories (Sweetser & Kaid, 2008). He also criticizes institutional gatekeeping, such as the press, propaganda, and censorship, for blocking the road to reality.

“Media message have little impact on their political decision, who already have made up their mind, during the campaign; campaign deciders, on the other hand, are open to influence by media because they pay closer attention to media during the campaign (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, p. 343). They argue that in the absence of any interpersonal discussion, the media may emerge as the soul of political influence.

2.3 Agenda: Media, Public and Policy

Policy Agenda-setting examines how the priorities of elite policymakers may be influenced by media and public agendas. Media Agenda-setting looks at the impact of mass media on shaping the audience's priorities, while public Agenda-setting concentrates on the audience's own priorities. These three variables are interdependent, with each one being incomplete in the absence of the others.

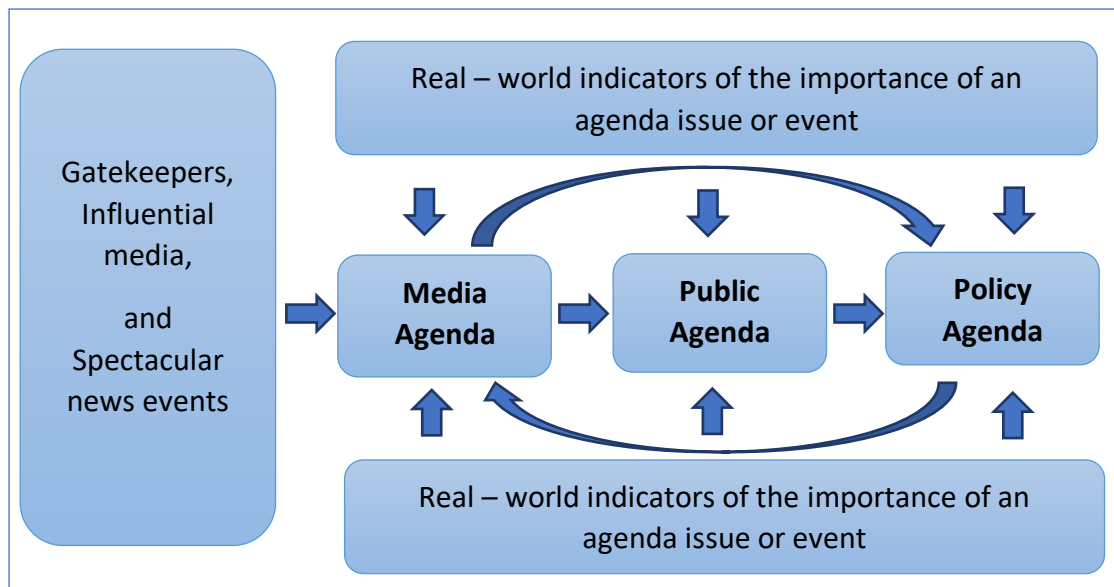
'During election campaigns the news media have a particular responsibility to help strengthen democracy by providing political coverage that will educate the public about the major issues, inform citizens about the contenders for office, and mobilize people to turn out (Norris, 2000). In a 2013 survey conducted by GEOC, “54.3 percent of participants expressed that they were encouraged to participate in the election because of media influence, compared to 34.5 percent in the 2008 election in Nepal (GEOC, 2013, p. 31).” Thus, media are the prominent source to establish any major public agenda. Because of the power, voters and politicians equally depend upon media to deliberate their opinion.

At the same time, election is a crucial time for the media to attract attention from both public and political parties. According to Kharel (2010), elections are major political events for the media. Broadcast channels, newspapers and weeklies are the major sources of political news.

In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues, that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This underscores the pivotal role of the newsroom in prioritizing the most salient issues.

No agenda can be prepared or set in a vacuum because it must have to stand upon some ground. A question arises as to who sets the agenda? Different scholars from different disciplines have placed their opinions and arguments in a bid to address this question. Although the Agenda-setting theory can be applied to every sector, it mostly covers political science and media studies. Citing Bartels (1996), researchers Walgrave and Aelst (2006) explain that scholars in political science and in communication seem to stick to their core business. "If media scholars are, by and large, much taken with the Agenda-setting power of the press, many scholars of traditional political institutions seem less impressed". Their argument suggests that the Agenda-setting traditions in communication and in political science have developed separately.

It is still difficult to answer the basic question as to whether the mass media determine the political agenda or, to put it more precisely, under what specific circumstances the mass media are able to boost political attention for issues (Walgrave & Aelst, 2006). However, there is no argument against the role of communication in setting political agenda.

Figure 2.1*Three Main Components of Agenda-Setting Process*

Source: Dearing and Rogers (1988)

The role of media during any campaign is vital because of its power to change the salience of issues, persons or topics. According to Lasorsa (2008), the news media's selection and presentation of news provide an indexing function that helps readers decide where to place their attention and how to respond to it through voting.

A media literate society becomes more selective and perceptive when receiving and processing information contents. Those without the benefit of media literacy will have great difficulty in distinguishing accuracy from inaccuracy, balance and distortion in the message they receive (Kharel, 2012). The extent to which media content can be analyzed in this manner remains a subject of study.

The major findings of the influential McCombs and Shaw study is that the issue hierarchy on the media agendas set the issue hierarchy of the public agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). As figure 2.1 developed by Dearing and Rogers (1988) illustrates, public opinions are the key factors to measure public agenda. Public agenda can be transformed from media agenda toward the policy agenda.

It is a common phenomenon that the leaders who covers the public agenda in any election as their own agenda are more likely to win. Also crucial to the success of a campaign is the ability to become an important and enduring part of the public agenda and to obtain first party entitlement for significant stakeholders (Rice & Atkin, 2002). As the basic human nature is such, voters always believe and stick to those candidates who address their agendas. Institutionalization of public agenda as political agenda is vital in any election. As Lau and Redlawsk (2006) explain, voting for leaders who best represent their views, and holding those leaders accountable for their performance in office at the next election, make democracy work.

According to Walgrave and Aelst (2006), the political perception of what is conveyed through the media depends solely on the context. They have elucidated how the political context's effectiveness varies based on the issue type, media outlet, and coverage type. And, during the political adaptation, it exhibits no effect; it may be fast symbolic, slow symbolic, slow substantial, fast substantial, or slow symbolic.

For a considerable period of time the media's political effects at election time were interpreted as being direct in nature – that is, making themselves felt in line with a simple stimulus–response model whereby citizens exposed to a medium whose partisan messages were at odds with their own voting preference were persuaded to change their preference to match that of the medium (Mughan and Gunther 2000, p. 53).

They explain that media theorizing has become more sophisticated, recognizing that effects can be both indirect and direct. The Agenda-setting hypothesis represents the first acknowledgment of the possibility of systematic indirect effects.

Influential Media and Effect

In a seminal 1948 chapter, Harold Lasswell, a prominent communication theorist, presents a narrative model for communication inquiry in the form of a five-part question: "Who says what to whom via which channels and with what effect?" According to the theory, two of the most significant functions that mass media serve in society are "surveillance" and "correlation." He refers to the media's role in monitoring and reporting on current events, and the latter refers to the media's ability to connect and make sense of these events for the public.

Lasswell believes that the media plays a critical role in directing public attention to issues. He suggests that the result is a correlation of attention on certain issues at the same time by the media, the public, and the policymakers. "This idea was seized upon by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as the Agenda-setting function of media (Dearing and Rogers, 1996, p. 12)." Later, Agenda-setting becomes one of the powerful effect-based theory regarding political communication.

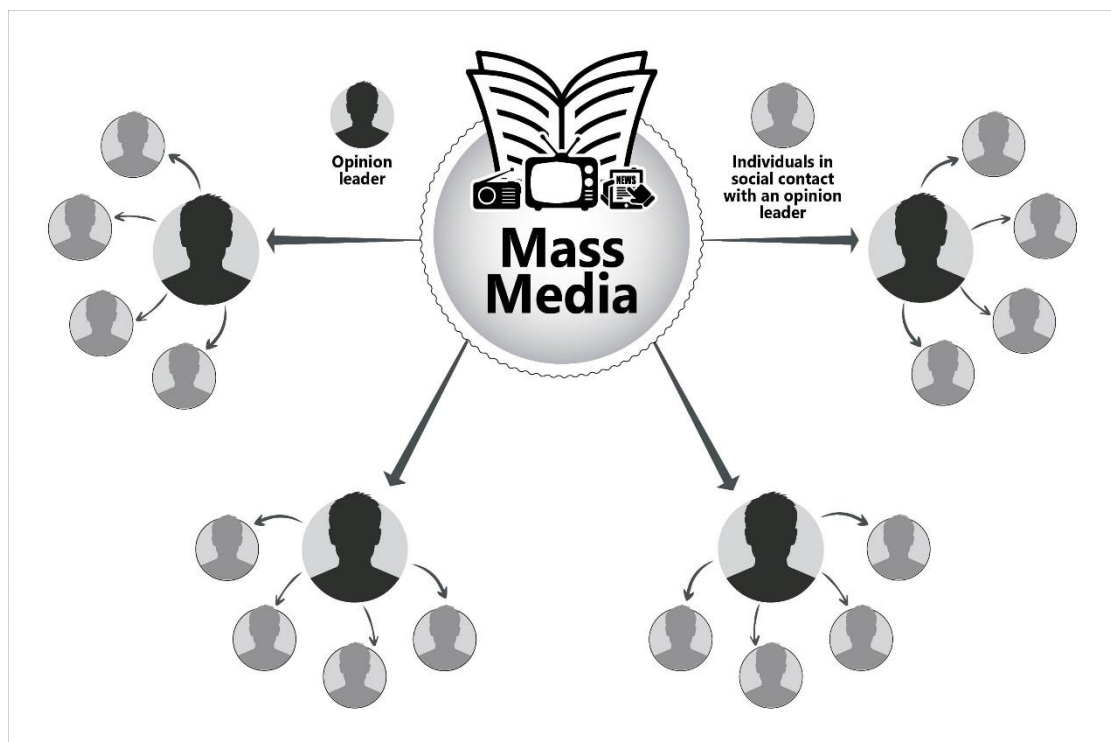
Herman and Chomsky (1988) have described the agenda from the standpoint of propaganda. They have established the multilevel effects on media interests and choices by linking them with inequality of wealth and power. Similarly, they have discussed about the gatekeeping structure of media arguing that agendas of media are controlled from and by various stages and actors involved in the same. As they describe ownership, income sources, multiple relations of the company, flak and anti-communisms are some of those control factors to set agenda.

Scholars (Lippmann, 1922; Lasswell, 1948; Goffman, 1974; Herman & Chomsky, 1988) have explained at length the role of the public and media in the Agenda-setting process. Their arguments on Agenda-setting process are different from one on others in many ways. However, all of their discourses thematically are very close to the argument of McCombs and Shaw.

Experts believe that the role of media extends beyond just the effectiveness of Agenda-setting. While communication is a significant aspect, it is not the sole determining factor. The effectiveness of Agenda-setting is also evaluated through theories related to media effects. Golding (1981), as cited by McQuail (2010), has classified the effects of media on Agenda-setting as planned and short-term effects. He posits that in the case of news, intended short-term effects may be considered as "bias," unintended short-term effects fall under the heading of "unwitting bias," intended long-term effects indicate "policy," and unintended long-term effects of news are "ideology". Within this grouping, various tactics and strategies, such as propaganda, individual response, media campaigns, news learning, framing, and Agenda-setting are incorporated.

The Agenda-setting process is often influenced by both public opinion and elite actors, who establish a set of salient issues for public discourse. These issues are carefully crafted for short-term effect, but the ultimate outcome is contingent upon the larger societal context, referred to as "real-world events" (McQuail, 2010). Various factors play a crucial role in determining the impact of Agenda-setting, including the credibility of media outlets, the consistency of content, loyalty to sources, alignment with existing public opinion, the appeal of the message and presentation, support from personal and professional networks, and the broader societal context.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) elaborate on the notion that media messages can undergo additional mediation by informal "opinion leaders." These individuals intercept, interpret, and disseminate what they perceive and hear to the personal networks within which they are intricately woven.

Figure 2.2*Two-Step Flow of Information*

Source: Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Illustration: Kiran Shrestha

Some critics argue that the Two-Step Flow model of communication, which suggests that media influence is mediated by opinion leaders, may be a more accurate representation of the media-public relationship.

As Littlejohn. S. W. and Foss. K. A (2009) state-

The label two step flow was adopted because the studies found that the mass-mediated message would, as a first step, reach individuals with above-average prominence in their community—so-called opinion leaders. If the message succeeded in passing these gatekeepers' filters of relevance and importance, they would then spread the message to more dependent individuals in their immediate surroundings (second step). This theory was supported by the fact that mass-mediated campaigns often were found to have minimal and indirect effects (p. 65).

Scholar Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explain that both consumers' choice of products and voters' choice of politicians depend more on their interpersonal relations to significant others in their networks of family and friends than on their direct exposure to mass-mediated commercial or political messages. Their study tries to establish the Two-Step Flow of information. According to their model of communication, a campaign is thus found to influence its audiences as a result of the complex interrelations between a mass-mediated endeavor and the subsequent interpersonal process in which the campaign message gets talked about in human networks. Similarly, Shaw (1997) explains the Agenda-setting approach aligns itself with the diffusion, or multiple-step flow model, which eventually supplanted the 1984 view of media impact.

That model emphasizes the role of personal influence in changing human behavior. Similar to the diffusion model, Agenda-setting recognizes the importance of interpersonal contacts in determining the ultimate impact of media content on people. It uses interpersonal factors to help explain the conditions under which Agenda-setting effects are more pronounced (Shaw, 1997, p. 97).

As Freeland (2012) explains, when examining Agenda-setting and the media's influence on an audience, one has to consider the audience's predisposition to certain beliefs. According to the audience effects model, the media's coverage of events and issues interact with the audience's pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issues and concerns. This means that an audience that is already highly sensitive to an issue will be most affected by an issue that is given increased news exposure while the same issue may have a limited effect on others.

Shaw (1979) notes, "Agenda-setting researchers recognize that psychological and social attributes of voters determine their political use of the media. Such use in turn is expected to lead to the appearance of the Agenda-setting effect regarding political issues (p. 99)." Based on their theoretical approach, it is understood that media products do not affect everyone in the same way.

Gatekeeping and Selection of News

Critics argue that Agenda-setting theory does not fully explain why certain issues become important, as it only focuses on the media's influence on the public's perception. Wilson and Gutierrez (1985) as cited by Kharel (2012) -

Performance of the gatekeeping function results in what some scholars have called 'Agenda-setting' for the society. The process of filtering out huge volume of information while allowing only a few items to reach the mass audience is an act that by itself adds credence and importance to the surviving events and issues (p. 128).

Political campaigns mean that messages are to maximize support and minimize negative perceptions and opinions. And it is here where gate-keeping is set in motion (Kharel, 2010). Through this exercise of editorial judgment, newspapers and newscasts make political objects stand out in relief from others. The media agenda directs the public attention to certain political objects. News media tell the public what is important.

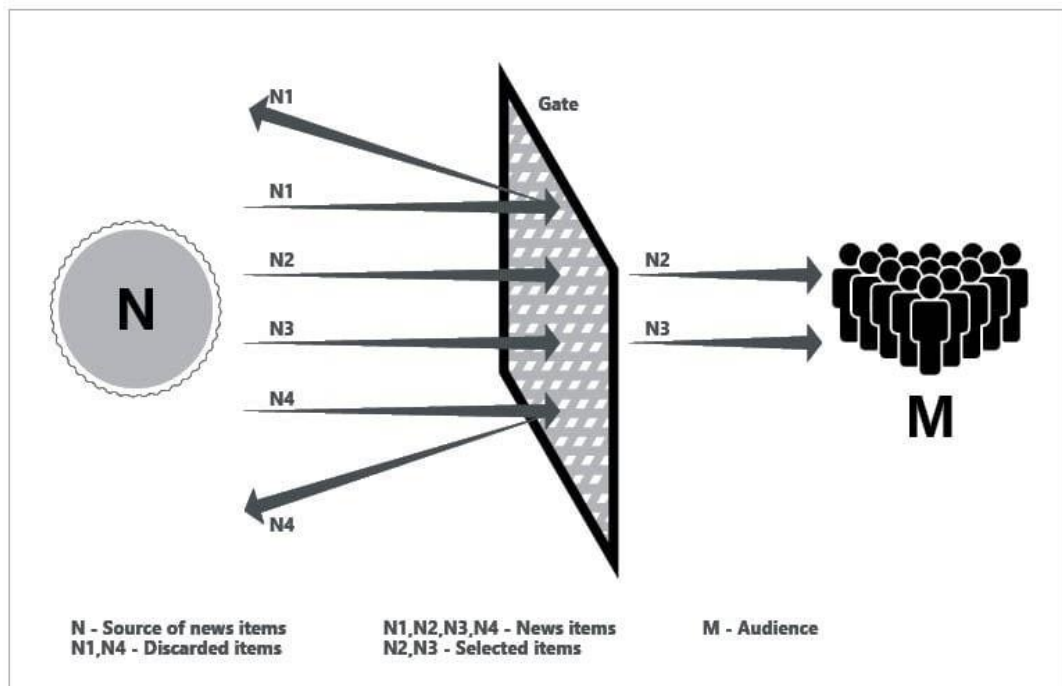
“Empirical research has shown that all mass communications pass through the same filtering systems in the way they select events and emphasize certain aspects of them. This holds true for both print and broadcast media and at whatever stage of reporting, from news agencies all the way to the editor's desk (Meyer, 2002, p. 28).”

According to the Adam and Clark (2006, p. 46), the first act of journalist is "news

judgment". It involves a form of vision, a way of knowing the here and now that leads reporters and editors to notice the events and things that they are likely to matter in a democratic society.

Figure 2.3

Gatekeeping Theory



Source: Kurt Lewin (1943), Illustration: Kiran Shrestha

The declaration on criteria for free and fair elections adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Council at its 154th session in Paris (26 March 1994) states, every candidate for election and every political party shall have an equal opportunity of access to the media, particularly the mass communications media, in order to put forward their political views (Goodwin-Gill, 2006).

Media and politics have been interrelated to each other since the beginning of the modern society. McQuail (2010) explains that there has always been an intimate connection between mass communication and the conduct of politics, in whatever kind of regime. The relationships between politics and mass media have to be

understood in terms of the institutions which manage the flow of power. They emphasize the nexus between mass communication and politics hinges on the institutions controlling the flow of power.

In pursuit of enhancing professionalism in journalism practice, Tribhuvan University, along with other educational institutions, has established faculties dedicated to mass communication and journalism. Moreover, the NPI's 10-month diploma course, initiated in 1984, has made substantial contributions to training journalists and aspiring professionals. As the 1990s unfolded, additional organizations started offering orientation programs, often focusing on specific areas through short-term courses. This collective endeavor has played a pivotal role in fortifying newsrooms, thus facilitating more effective gatekeeping.

Influential Role of Media

The effectiveness of any media outlet depends on the level of trust that it has established with its audience. This level of trust is determined by a variety of factors, including the quality and accuracy of the content being presented, as well as the way in which the media outlet presents that content. Quraishi (2019) explains that many ordinary voters become aware of facts on the what, when, where and how of elections through the media. Besides this, analyzing the agenda of political parties, providing profiles of candidates, etc., is an extremely important task performed by the media (p. 314). His argument reveals that media has multi task during election including the Agenda-setting. In the Agenda-setting process, influential media are those media outlets that have a significant impact on shaping the public's perception of which issues are most important and relevant.

These media outlets can include traditional news sources, such as newspapers, radio and television, as well as newer forms of media, such as social media platforms.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) find that the media's coverage of issues during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign influenced the public's perception of which issues were most important. Similarly, a more recent study by Guo and McCombs (2015) finds that the amount of attention that the media devoted to an issue was a significant predictor of its salience on the public agenda. Overall, influential media plays a crucial role in the Agenda-setting process by shaping the public's perception of which issues are most important and how they should be understood and addressed.

In his renowned article "A Hundred Years," Scott (1921), the progenitor of *The Guardian*, intriguingly illuminates the media's capacity to establish the agenda. In delineating the dual aspects of newspapers, both moral and material, Scott (1921) aptly articulates, "It exerts its influence over the thoughts and ethical convictions of individuals. It possesses the potential to educate, invigorate, aid, or conversely, undermine. Consequently, it possesses not only a material presence but also a moral one. The essence and impact it radiates hinge on the equilibrium between these two forces." He connects the context of discourse—whether in favor or against—within the newspaper with the commercial dynamics of the newsroom.

Some critics argue that media influence may not always be as strong as the Agenda-setting theory suggests, as individuals may not blindly accept the media's agenda, but instead critically evaluate information. A media literate society becomes more selective and perceptive when receiving and processing information contents. Those without the benefit of media literacy will have great difficulty in distinguishing between accuracy and inaccuracy, balance and distortion in the message they receive (Kharel, 2012). This suggests that a media-literate society can serve as a vital foundation for democracy.

Spectacular News Event

Spectacular news events, known as "Kanda" or "Prakaran" in Nepali language, are scandals that can have a significant impact on the Agenda-setting process during election campaigns. These events have the potential to capture the public's attention and shift the focus of the election away from previously established issues or priorities.

One example of a spectacular news event that had a significant impact on an election was the Watergate scandal during the 1972 U.S. presidential campaign. The scandal, which involved the Nixon administration's attempts to cover up illegal activities related to the 1972 election, dominated the news cycle and ultimately led to Nixon's resignation. As a result, the issue of political corruption and government ethics became a major focus of the 1976 presidential campaign (McCombs & Shaw 1972).

Another example is the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which the release of hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee and the subsequent investigation into Russian interference in the election dominated the news cycle for months. This news event shifted the focus of the election away from policy issues and towards questions of foreign interference and political corruption (Hopkins et al., 2018). It also indicates that agendas can change rapidly during the election campaign.

“During election periods, sensational news events tend to carry more weight in shaping public opinion than analytical news or opinion pieces, particularly if negative news is linked to a political leader and is accompanied by damaging images (R. Dahal, personal communication, February 4, 2023).” The impact of such news events can be substantial in shaping the public's perceptions of a candidate or political party.

An example of a spectacular news event in the political arena is the fear psychosis created by a political party during the 2008 elections. According to Nepal (2013), approximately one-third of the votes gained by the Maoists in the election can be attributed to this fear psychosis. Similarly, Pokharel and Rana write on their book 'Nepal vote for peace' that the Maoist message to rural voters was – "Previously we came to your house with a gun but now we have come here for your vote for peace. If you give us votes then we will take your issues to the parliament but if you don't then we will be forced to go back to the jungle." According to Pokharel and Rana (2013, p. 147), there were rumors that they [Maoist] told illiterate voters that they could use modern technologies to see from a distance who they had voted for, and that they would take physical action against those who did not vote for the Maoist. According to Pokharel, ECN had to conduct a voter education program from different media refuting those claims by the party.

The use of spectacular news events in the Agenda-setting process has been subject to criticism by scholars who argue that it can lead to a distortion of public opinion.

Scheufele (1999) suggests in his article "Framing as a theory of media effects" that the media's focus on sensational news events can result in a distorted view of reality. He argues that the media's tendency to cover dramatic events in a simplistic and sensationalistic manner can lead to the public perceiving these events as more common and significant than they actually are.

Similarly, John Zaller (1992) suggests that the media's emphasis on sensational news can lead to the public holding misinformed and distorted views. He finds this is particularly problematic when it comes to complex issues, where the media's coverage can be oversimplified, leading to a lack of understanding among the public.

Experience and Interpersonal Communication

While describing the main components of the Agenda-setting process, Dearing and Rogers (1988) emphasize on the personal experience and interpersonal communication among elites and other individuals. According to them, elites, defined as individuals or groups with significant political, economic, or social power, have the ability to influence the media agenda and shape public opinion through their personal experiences and communications with others.

As Weaver (2007) notes, elites have access to information and sources of influence that are not available to the general public. Through personal contacts and relationships, elites can shape an agenda by influencing which issues are covered by the media and how they are framed. Furthermore, elites may use their personal experiences and perspectives to shape public opinion and policy.

Interpersonal communication among non-elites can also play a role in Agenda-setting. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) note, "The communication process among individuals serves to focus their attention on the same issues and, in effect, construct the problems that will be defined as important (p. 176)." Scholars recognize it as a multi-step flow, wherein ideas are first transmitted from mass media to opinion leaders and then disseminated to a broader population. In other words, when individuals talk to each other about certain issues, they may collectively elevate those issues in importance and bring them to the attention of the media and policymakers.

Real World Indicators of Importance

According to Dahal (2023), the media does not solely set the agenda, but it does play a vital role in the process. This role is dependent on the issues that emerge within specific situations, the timing of those issues, and their perceived importance. In other words, the media's role in Agenda-setting is influenced by real-world

indicators of importance, such as public opinion, policymaker actions, and major events (R. Dahal, personal communication, February 4, 2023). He views that media plays a secondary role in any Agenda-setting process.

However, there are real-world indicators that can provide evidence of the importance of agenda issues beyond media coverage. One such indicator is public opinion. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) note, "The issues emphasized in the news media are those that the public considers important, rather than the reverse (p. 177)." In other words, the media tend to cover issues that are already on the public's agenda. If an issue is consistently prominent in public opinion or is the subject of widespread public discourse, it is likely to be considered important by the media as well.

According to Dearing and Rogers (1996), another real-world indicator of the importance of agenda issues is the actions of policymakers. If an issue is on the agenda of policymakers, it is likely to be considered important by the media as well. Policymakers may introduce legislation or take other actions to address issues that they perceive as important or urgent. Finally, events that capture public attention can also serve as indicators of the importance of agenda issues. While media coverage is, thus, an important factor in Agenda-setting, real-world indicators such as public opinion, policymaker actions, and major events can also provide evidence of the importance of agenda issues.

Demographic variables are important indicators of political behavior. The level of education among voters play a significant role. In the other hand, some studies suggest that media coverage affect and determine voters' preferences among presidential candidates as well as the entire electoral process in US (Chaudhari & Ashraf, 2012). It implies that the media is indispensable in any election.

Agenda-Setting Studies in South Asia

Recently, scholars from various countries have increasingly linked Agenda-setting research with studies on "priming" and "framing." These studies not only explore which issues receive emphasis from news media but also analyze how these issues are presented and, in some cases, the effects of this presentation on public opinion and concerns (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). However, studies available in the public domain indicate a scarcity of research on Agenda-setting in South Asian countries. Existing studies on Agenda-setting are predominantly lacking in political or electoral contexts. Nevertheless, they have explored diverse dimensions of Agenda-setting from both public and press perspectives. South Asian nations have also engaged in these concepts, although research specifically examining the Agenda-setting role of media in these countries, especially in the context of elections, remains limited.

As Mandav (2016) asserts in his PhD thesis titled "Agenda-setting by Media: A Study of Five Issues of National Importance," there is a dearth of research in this field. His analysis focused on content from leading Indian newspapers—The Hindu, The Times of India, Dainik Jagaran, and Dainik Bhaskar—regarding five national issues. His findings suggest that media often sets agendas not by highlighting issues or events but by neglecting them, a phenomenon termed as negative Agenda-setting. Mandav concludes-

If the media tells us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agenda or in our life space. One of the strongest examples of Agenda-setting is that the issues or events that are ignored by media do not register on the public agenda (Mandav, 2016, p. 127).

Similarly, Mahapatra and Suresh (2015) explored the evolving media landscape and the role of Agenda-setting, particularly in the context of social media. In their article titled "Agenda-setting in Social Media: A Study of Its Application," they argue –

Unlike the traditional news media, the use of social media has given freedom to the users to set the agenda for the public through their faster feedback response. The same has been experimented in many countries including the recent experimentation of Nirbhaya and Lok Pal case in India (p. 37).

Comparing the McCombs and Shaw (1972) study, they explain that the agendas were decided and selected by the gatekeepers which were subsequently responded to by the masses. With the advent of new media and its technology, these principles and practices have become restricted, and people have started exercising their priorities and agendas through social media.

A study of newspaper priority by Anita and Krishna (2018) identifies that, newspapers continue to emphasize political, governmental, and crime-related news, while subjects such as development, science, technology, and sports receive less coverage (p. 564). Their study, titled "Agenda-setting and Newspapers: A Content Analysis of First Pages in Telugu States," is based on content analysis of the first page of English newspapers The Hindu, The Times of India, and two Telugu newspapers Eenadu and Andhra Jyothi. They reviewed 18,159 items published in four newspapers.

Saqib Riaz (2009) studies the Agenda-setting role of print media in Pakistan, focusing on the relationship between public agendas and those presented by print media. Riaz's findings indicate-

A strong relationship is found between the public and the print media agenda on four out of six issues studied. These issues are terrorism, judicial crisis,

Indo-Pak relations, and Lal Masjid. There is no relationship between the two agendas regarding the issues of food and energy crises. Both of these issues receive higher priority in the public agenda compared to the media agenda (Saqib, 2009, p. 90).

The study employs content analysis of English and Urdu newspapers over the course of a year, examining six significant issues: Terrorism, Indo-Pak relations, Energy crisis, Food crisis, judicial crisis, and Lal Masjid (Red Mosque). Additionally, public agendas are measured through surveys conducted among readers of the same newspapers.

Manzoor, Safdar, and Khan (2019) examine the news production process through the lens of Agenda-setting theory, framing, and propaganda. Their study, titled "Application of Agenda-setting, Framing and Propaganda during News Production Process," concludes that all three approaches play roles at various stages of news production. Their meta-analysis concludes, "When people receive information from these news organizations, they heavily rely on and trust this information. However, they are unaware that news does not reach them as a firsthand account of information; rather, it is influenced by multiple factors at multiple levels (p. 222)." They analyze how raw news is received by news organizations and how factors such as organizational pressures, journalistic routines, ideologies, and other influences shape the processing of news.

Shafi (2011) observes that Agenda-setting theory remains insufficiently explored in developing nations. The complex social and political landscape of these countries warrants focused attention on this topic. In his study titled "Agenda-setting Effect of the Media in Bangladesh," he concludes, "There was no evidence of the Agenda-setting effect on audience groups based on different demographics, levels of media usage, interpersonal communication, and media credibility (p. 76)." Shafi elaborates-

This study did not find any evidence of Agenda-setting effect among the audience, nor did it find any Agenda-setting effect among audiences with different demographics and different levels of media usage and communication behavior. However, the study discovered that some aspects of Bangladeshi audiences' communication behavior are different from those common in the Western world. (p. 76).

His research involves content analysis of Bengali newspapers and surveys among readers.

Cognition Role of Media

As Kharel (2012) states, "Nepal offers an interesting example, given its media landscape, most of whose news outlets are known to be affiliated to one political party or the other (p. 127)". He explains, media contents are censored also without government censorship but by business interest groups and others.

Aryal (2016) notes, it is evident that in the era of commercialism, the role of editor and reporter has been compromised in the privately owned broadsheet dailies in Nepal.

It is the proprietor's decision that prevails in setting news priority and the agenda of the day. Editors sing the tune in accordance with the stance of the investor. Commercial interest is the dominant trend in the privately owned daily newspapers and many a time such commercial or corporate interests have resulted in political maneuvering in newspaper reports (Aryal, 2016, p. 283).

The situation of media effect in Nepal is not what it is in Western societies. Due to the various socio-cultural and economic dynamics, Nepali media are in a position to influence people if compared to the media in the West. According to Kharel (2012), it has been again and again demonstrated in Nepal as to how the media has consistently failed to reflect the general public mood in the run up to elections.

According to Aryal (2016), "Newspapers, editors and journalists stand for business people and their agendas. Newspapers have become information managers and lobbyists and have not moved towards professionalism (p. 84)." He adds that commercial journalism becoming business-oriented is a risky proposition.

The Agenda-setting theory explains that if the issues related to any political forces continuously occupy media, its impact will reflect on the voting patron. Campaigns have specific and overt aims, and a limited time span. The population targeted to influence is usually large and dispersed (McQuail, 2010). Similarly, the horizons of mass media along with new and spherical media have created opportunities as well as challenges for any kind of campaigning. The most vivid reality is that no agenda can be established as an agenda until it is not accepted by the voters and for it the reach and accessibility of the medium is obligatory. Owing to this very dynamic reality, the election campaigning is becoming expensive day by day.

Another aspect of the reality is also that the time and space offered by any media do not alone determine the power of agenda. The presence of media, including the socio-cultural, economic and educational influence, determines the impact of Agenda-setting, especially in the third world countries, including Nepal.

Nepal is a multi-cultural country. The levels of education and per capita income are diverse not only in cultural but also in geographical settings. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the wider Gini-Coefficient (0.328) in 2022/2023 shows the wider income inequalities in Nepal. Media consumption depends upon the purchasing capacity of the people of the nation. Thus, the majority of media in Nepal are mostly centered in the cities, especially the capital Kathmandu. According to Kharel (2012) front page news items were predominantly Kathmandu centric, with about 80 percent of such items being Kathmandu datelined. "Most of the

news from outside Kathmandu valley were consigned to the inside-pages, with the result that less than 35 percent of the news on the inside pages were Kathmandu datelined (P. 267).”

Table 2.1

Number of Registered Newspapers in Nepal (FY: 2022/23)

S. No	Newspaper	Kathmandu valley	Out of Kathmandu	Total
1	Daily	196	521	717
2	Weekly	1,214	1,665	2,879
3	Fortnight	247	153	400

Source: PCN, 2022

Table 2.1 presents the scenario outlined by Kharel. It shows that of the 717 registered daily newspapers in Nepal, 196 are in the Kathmandu Valley. Additionally, 1,214 of the 2,879 registered weeklies are based in the valley.

According to Kharel it is estimated that more than 70 percent of the advertisements are transacted within Kathmandu valley which clearly indicates as to why the capital city has such a magnificent media presence.

As Kharel states (2012)-

The 2008 election for Nepal's constituent assembly was a glaring example that had shown the news media given less than 50 seats to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) which, however went to win significantly more seats than the combined strength of the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist – Leninist) (CPN-UML) in the 601-member constituent assembly. The NC and the UML have significantly large number of news outlets in their favor than do the Maoist (p. 284).

Despite being labeled as independent, the political color can be easily discerned in the private sector media of Nepal.

"As the media holds the important responsibility of informing the public, it must ensure that all parties are given equal representation and coverage in their news transmission. The exclusion of any one political party physically and during news transmission is unacceptable (Ghimire, 2013, p. 155)". As he argues, the credibility and image of the press can be severely undermined if professional neutrality is disregarded by aligning with political parties.

Another reality is that neither national nor local or regional newspapers have their reach in rural and remotest parts of the country. However, FM radio services are equally powerful medium in urban as well as rural areas. There are more than eight hundred FM radios in operation across the nation. Dahal (2023), explains that whatever news media operated in Nepal is based on newspapers. Early in the morning most of the FM radio and Television channels read news from the newspapers. In other words, newspaper items are read on radio in Nepal (R. Dahal, personal communication, February 4, 2023). Internet, the latest medium, is somehow accessible all over Nepal.

Social Media and Monitoring in Nepal

The use of social media in Nepal's elections has increased since the 2008 Constituent Assembly poll, albeit with a lower number of users. Media monitoring in Nepal also began during the same election, with international media organizations like Al Jazeera, BBC World, Fox News, ABC News, All Peace, NPR News, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and Breaking News, among others, tweeting about it with the hashtag #Nepalelection (ECN, 2014). According to Pokharel (2023), although Facebook had been gaining popularity, the monitoring team deployed only

Twitter, a microblogging site popular among the elites (Pokharel, J. personal communication, February 16, 2023). The influence of social media was not that widespread, with the number of internet users recorded at less than 10 percent of Nepal's total population.

As Sapkota and Adhikari (2023) describes, candidates and political parties use social media teams to not only reach out to their constituencies but also to navigate general sentiments. Due to the magical influence and ability to shape public opinion during election times, there was a need to monitor social media sites. In countries with a flourishing media environment, they are mobilized with importance in elections, especially in the role of Agenda-setting (PCN, 2008).

Throughout November 2013, short texts about Nepal's need to elect the Constituent Assembly regularly appeared on the wall of a popular microblogging site, Twitter, fostering social discourses on the crucial vote. It finds that a few authors dominated the conversation by sending assorted election messages, from witty, funny, or silly comments, for example, to interesting and important pieces of news, views, and ideas. Others chipped in with just a tweet or two making their participation audible in the digital echo-chamber. Those discourses generally featured different aspects of fact, doubt, fear, and hope that might be faced during the different phases of the election (EC, 2014). They observe trends at the time, although they do not analyze the contents flowed from the Twitter.

According to the EC, monitoring of information disseminated on social media began from the 2017 election. The prospective influence of social media upon its users forced the Commission to formulate the 'Policy on the Use of Social Media in Election Management-2020'. The policy envisioned making the use of social media safe, orderly, reliable, dignified, and accessible for free and fair elections. During the Local-level Elections-2022, the Commission issued warnings against posting or

uploading false information, propaganda, and hateful expressions on any social media sites (DRCN, 2022). The ECN had also made it mandatory for political parties and candidates to submit information of their social media accounts to the Commission if they used social media to spread their messages.

Despite the initiation of social media monitoring during elections, there appears to be a lack of emphasis on identifying the sources and mechanisms behind misinformation propagation. ECN has issued communication guidelines for elections, aiming to all kind of media platforms. Its stance is that social media will be regulated akin to traditional media even during campaign periods and the electoral silence phase.

Nevertheless, monitoring social media content is challenging, unlike the relative ease of overseeing registered and established media outlets. This is primarily due to the user-generated nature of social media content. Consequently, the potential for misinformation dissemination through social media remains pronounced during elections.

Agenda-Setting after the Emergence of Social Media

The beginning of 2020 brings about a major jolt to the mainstream journalism of Nepal. The lockdown introduced by the Nepal Government to help contain the spread of Covid-19 makes it harder for TV and FM stations to produce content that they used to do in normal times and also disrupts the circulation chain of print media (CMR, 2022). The situation gives a lucrative opportunity to the virtual medium and social media platforms.

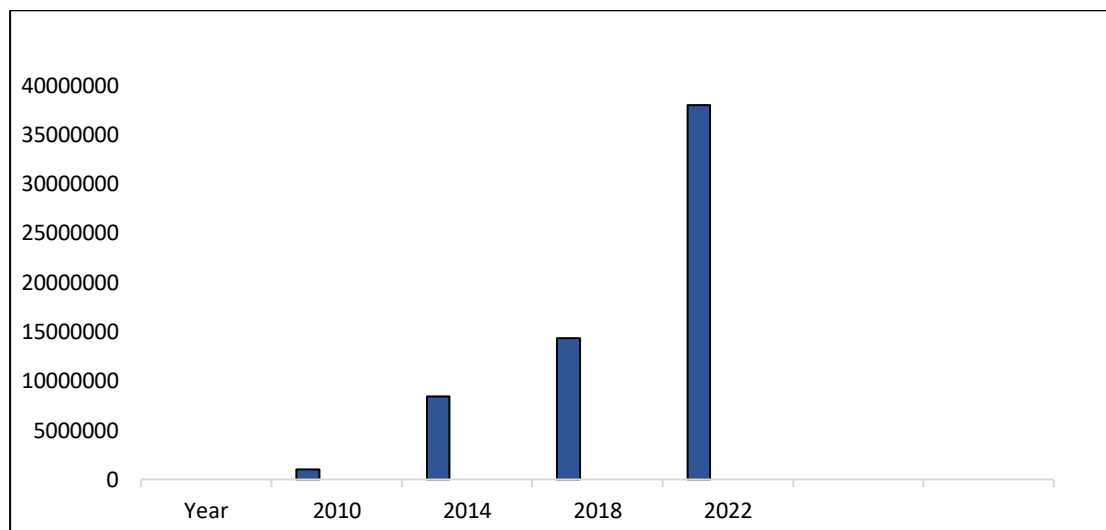
The number of internet subscribers is recorded at less than 10 percent of Nepal's total population until 2010. However, by 2014, the figure makes a significant leap while by 2018, the expansion of internet access witnessed even higher record. The number of the internet subscribers at the present have exceeded the total number

of the country's population, on account of subscribers with multiple internet connections. Interestingly, the number of internet users during the 2022 elections witnessed double fold compared with the number of users during the elections of 2017, according to the data availed from Nepal Telecommunication Authority.

According to news reports, bandwidth consumption excessively increases during the lockdown. While the use of TikTok increases by a whopping 75 percent, the consumption of Netflix grows by 52 percent, followed by Google by 37 percent, and Facebook by 47 percent.

Figure 2.4

Internet Subscriptions in Nepal



Source: NTA MIS Reports (2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022)

The increment of social media users not only skyrocketed the quantity of social media content but also helped in spreading out those contents due to the unique feature of the algorithm. As Thapaliya (2022) notes, “Today, newspapers are actively using cross-media platforms for news distribution, which often leads to the scattering of shared content on multi-networked media such as Facebook (p. 264).” It has blurred the distinction between offline and online content. The outpouring of content on Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube also becomes a powerful medium in establishing

an agenda as well as creating public opinion. Figure 2.4 illustrates the increase in active internet users in Nepal, showing a twofold rise from the 2017 election to the 2022 election.

Internet service, as in the past, is no more considered luxury these days. More than half of the global population are connected to social networking sites or applications. A majority of them use social media as a primary source of information (Walsh, 2022). According to the Digital 2022 April Global Statshot Report, Facebook alone has more than 2.9 billion users worldwide. YouTube, the second most preferred social site boasts 2.2 billion users followed by 2 billion users of WhatsApp and same number of Instagram users. Similarly, TikTok has one billion active users.

The study of CMR Nepal discovers that more than 2 out of 5 users spend one to two hours on social media everyday whereas 39 percent spend between three to six hours on daily basis. About 5.7 percent use it for less than one hour a day whereas 13.1 percent said they are on social media for more than six hours a day. Almost 2 in 5 users engage in social media outside office hours, during morning and/or evening and/or night whereas 3.7 percent use social media only during office hours (Acharya, 2022). The consumption behavior of social media further elucidates the contrasting consumption patterns of traditional media.

Monitoring Media in Nepali Election

In each election cycle in Nepal, a multitude of agendas emerge, mirroring the concurrent shifts within the media landscape. As media presence fluctuates, so does the number of newspaper readers: a decrease in media presence corresponds to a decrease in readership, while an increase in media consumption leads to an expansion in media outlets. Amid the diverse media forms, newspapers maintain a consistent presence in every election. However, the manner in which media is utilized varies with each election. This distinction is evident in the process of media monitoring.

Monitoring media during election is new phenomenon till 2008 in Nepal.

Although, some initial practices have been witnessed before. In 1999 political analyst Dev Raj Dahal make a suggestion to ECN for monitoring the media. “The ECN tries to ensure impartiality of the official media. Yet it is desirable to have a committee of independent experts to monitor, assess, and govern the media in cooperation with the ECN (Dahal, 1999, p. 75).” According to former election commissioner Ila Sharma, the 1999 election in Nepal marked for the first time that newspapers were monitored during an election. However, the monitoring process was unstructured and lacked a clear methodology (I. Sharma, personal communication, February 6, 2023). Similarly, for the first time in Nepal poll survey had a significant impact during the election campaign. The most significant survey carried by ORG-MARG in association with Himal Magazine, predicted the outcome correctly (Keeling, 2000, p. 39). The poll itself is a milestone step in Nepali elections and media.

The study "Nirbachan 2056 [Election 1999]" is conducted by Medialine, a non-government organization, with support from the Department for International Development (DFID). The purpose of the study was to monitor media coverage during the election. It also analyzed the alignment of Nepali newspapers with different political parties. Despite its lack of structured methodology, the report provides insights into the political orientation of prominent newspapers, such as *Gorkhapatra* and *Kantipur*, which were classified as having government and independent allegiance, respectively. Additionally, other Nepali language publications, including daily and weekly newspapers, were also classified on the basis of political allegiance.

Certain media-related aspects have been endorsed by election observers since independent election observation began in Nepal. For instance, the General Election Observation Committee, Nepal (GEOC, 2008) reports, “Mass media should publish

news with a higher degree of objectivity and impartiality. They should help empower and uplift deprived classes, such as the Madheshi, aboriginal people, ethnic groups, and untouchable castes, by highlighting their voices (p. 104).” As per their suggestion, the media should prioritize addressing the causes of disparity and grievances among citizens during both pre- and post-election periods. A comprehensive report on the media monitoring of the 2008 election serves as a crucial cornerstone for content analysis in the media landscape. As stated by former Chief Election Commissioner Bhojraj Pokharel, the 2008 election was widely regarded as a pivotal moment in promoting political stability. He highlights that the election marked a significant milestone due to the extensive monitoring and regulation of the media (B. Pokharel, personal communication, February 10, 2023).

PCN (2008) explains it as a descriptive report based on the quantitative data which only map the larger trends in coverage. It explains that most newspapers have given priority to voters' education, highlighting the agendas of major political parties, their policies and their leaders' speeches (p. 80). Whereas, according to the report, the broadcast media focus remained on unfolding political developments. Their coverage of electoral issues and agendas was not comprehensive and in-depth.

The study, which adopts a content analysis approach, covers various media forms such as newspapers (Daily, Weekly, and Bi-weekly magazines), as well as electronic media (Radio and Television). The analysis encompasses eight broadsheets, including *Gorkhapatra*, *Kantipur*, and *Annapurna Post*.

Some of the major finding (p. 64) of the quantitative analysis of media content –

- Only a few political parties got most of the air and print space
- Most news media gave prominent total space coverage to Nepali Congress, followed by CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist). These three parties collectively got about three quarters of the total space in coverage.

- In print, the three parties received 73.52 percent of the coverage.
- Newspapers tended to give more positive than negative coverage in some of their content whereas the tone was largely neutral for the rest.
- NC, UML, Maoist and RPP, in that order, got most of the print space in the coverage of main news
- CPN (Maoist)'s Pushpa Kamal Dahal gained the highest coverage among all candidates
- The tone of coverage was largely neutral for all parties.

Similarly, the following election in 2013 continues with media monitoring. EC Nepal observed the content of media including online news sites and social media, especially the Twitter (X), on this election. The study found that four main political parties, the NC, CPN-UML, United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and RPP dominated the public discourse and the media coverage. The study clearly states that the tone of coverage used by journalists when politicians are not found to be neutral in the audiovisual media as well as in print media (ECN, 2014, p.156).

Some of the major findings of the media monitoring—

The media demonstrated bias in their coverage of elections favoring the four main parties.

Journalists appear to have been closely managed and censored during the election campaign period in a process that stifles their journalistic freedom and has resulted in a highly distorted and unfair balance in media coverage of the election campaign

Nepali media failed to effectively serve public interest during elections.

The range of information communicated was narrow and unbalanced both in tone and space devoted to the candidates and parties (p. 156).

Table 2.2*Tone of News Coverage of Different Parties in Print Media*

Party	Category	Tone		
		Positive	Neutral	Negative
NC	Online	370	160	295
	Radio	46	108	26
	Print	220	151	134
	TV	48	74	6
CPN (UML)	Online	42	25	48
	Radio	49	71	27
	Print	188	132	99
	TV	17	32	6
CPN (Maoist)	Online	37	15	41
	Radio	53	164	135
	Print	36	48	95
	TV	47	81	27
RPP (Nepal)	Online	5	2	6
	Radio	5	10	2
	Print	27	25	29
	TV	6	15	3
Others	Online	84	42	95
	Radio	315	930	152
	Print	2022	1756	1134
	TV	285	704	53

Source: EC, 2014

Table 2.2 shows the tone of news media during the election campaign. It is seen that NC has more negative online news and UML more negative news in print media. Similarly, UCPN (Maoist) has more negative tone in radio and RPP (Nepal) has more negative tone in print than in other media categories. The data reveals an imbalance in news media coverage during elections, indicating a potentially unfair gatekeeping process in Agenda-setting within newsrooms.

Cost of Campaigning

The global trend of increasing election campaign expenses due to intense competition among political parties is also prevalent in Nepal. The ECN has been regularly adjusting the ceiling of election expenses, starting from a limit of Rs. 75,000

in 1991, which was raised to 100,000 in 1994 and further increased to 150,000 for the 1999 general elections, based on the district category set by the Commission (Mishra, 2007). For the Constituent Assembly elections, the expenditure limit is further raised to one million rupees for the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system and 75,000 for the proportional representation (PR) system. In the 2022 election, the maximum amount allowed for a candidate's election expenses is set at 3,300,000. Despite the expenditure limits set by the EC, the actual cost of conducting elections is reported to be significantly higher than the established limits, as per informal reports. However, political parties are required to submit their election costs within the established limits. The real cost of Agenda-setting in elections remains an area in need of further study.

Political advertising has always been serious issues for democracy. According to Kharel (2010), the credibility and professionalism of mass media get compromised if they seek to serve only a particular individual, group, political party or interest group.

Dahal (2010) claims, Nepali media organizations are run by government, political parties, foreigners and business groups to cater to their particular interest than the collective good. As he asserts within the context of Nepal, such a scenario persists on a global scale since the 17th century. From the very beginning of modern society, economy has been a powerful arm to win elections. Armstrong (2005) has expressed it as the 'dirty dancing'. By the mid-1800s, lobbyists representing powerful political interests would deliver bags full of money to members of the United States Congress in exchange for political favors. South Asian media have not been lagging behind when it comes to this "dirty dancing".

In the run-up to the Assembly Polls 2012 in the Indian state of Gujarat, at least 444 suspected cases of paid news were reported, leading the Election Commission to

issue notices in 224 of the cases. Gujarat's Chief Electoral Officer Anita Karwal, soon after conclusion of second phase of polling on December 17, 2012, stated that 126 confirmed cases of paid news were identified, with 61 candidates in the poll fray admitting to have paid for such news in electronic and print media (PCI, 2013). In Indian elections, not only is paid news prevalent, but media investment and content are also dominated by the establishment side.

Political parties always try different options for publicity. Indian elections serve appropriate example for it. Nepali media are being used for the Indian election campaigning. FM radio stations operated in the Tarai of Nepal are used for the Indian election campaigns. Current affairs and news on FM radio are not allowed in India (Kharel, 2010). Nepali radios in the border areas continue to be established as a means of setting the election agenda.

The situation of paid news on election in Nepal is yet to be studied nor have any cases of them been reported so far. In 1973, Press Council Nepal began to publish annual reports, with sections on media behavior. However, it is an institutional response to a complaint-based system. It had not focused on election coverage in the past (PCN, 2008). It cannot be argued that paid news does not run during elections in Nepal based on the absence of studies.

According to the then president of Press Council of India G N Roy, the newspapers are not expected to indulge in unhealthy election campaigns, exaggerated reports about any candidate/party or incident during the elections. In practice, two or three closely contesting candidates attract all the media attention (Roy, 2009).

When we examine the media in South Asian countries, it appears that a significant portion of the content revolves around a limited number of individuals. In the context of Nepal, the top leaders of major parties are found to be at the center of media attention.

The malpractice of paid news has become widespread and now cuts across newspapers and television channels, small and large, in different language and location in various parts of India. Alarming, these illegal operations have become "organized" and involved advertising agencies and public relation firms, besides journalist, managers and owners of media companies. So-called "rate cares" or "packages" include "rates" for publishing "news" items in a predetermined manner, not merely praising particular candidates but also criticizing their political opponents (Quraishi, 2019, p. 326).

The presence of such pollution in politics and media weakens journalism. While there is extensive research on the bullish trend of election expenditure globally, Nepal lags far behind.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite political instability, elections have become a crucial aspect of democratic practices in Nepal. The country's political landscape is undergoing significant changes, and the media has played an active role in shaping this transformation. The media has been engaged in various forms of involvement in election campaigns.

A comprehensive study of the media's role in Nepal's 2008 Constituent Assembly election is conducted using an objective approach. Similarly, the content of the media during the 2013 election is also analyzed. During the 2017 election campaign, the media is closely monitored. These observations are grounded in journalistic codes of conduct. However, to date, no study has confirmed the theoretical concept of the media in the Nepali context. Notwithstanding the century long-standing history of the public opinion theory (1922) and the over 50-year-old

concept of Agenda-setting theory (1972), these theories have not been studied in the context of the Nepali media. The literature shows that the situation remains similar in developing nations, including South Asian countries.

As minimal study and research are conducted on democratic practices in Nepal, the media remains no exception. Although multifaceted studies on the agenda exist in Western countries, in the context of Nepal, such studies are found to be meager. Despite the common use of media during elections, there is a pressing need for adequate study on how it is utilized. Specifically, even the minimum information about what kind of priority issues is raised by the media cannot be found in the context of Nepal. The ECN updates the list of vote results, and the Press Council updates media registration details. However, the issue of how the election agenda is decided in the media remains largely unexplored.

Many studies conducted outside the Agenda-setting perspective have explored the type of media dependence voters have on electoral matters. These studies confirm that increased media coverage attracts more voters. However, in the context of Nepal, the perspective of voters or readers regarding media usage and content during the election period is not considered.

Political leadership has been preparing the manifesto since the first election. However, it is observed that the manifesto and how the media's role is utilized to convey it to the people are beyond the scope of the study. The question of how the agenda of a political party is communicated, in what style, and how it is received by the media is also not addressed in the study. It appears that everyone attempts to use the media in elections, but there is a lack of interest in studying and researching it. Overall, the three major dimensions of elections - political parties, voters, and the media bridging the two - have not been studied in Nepal through a holistic approach.

CHAPTER-III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Background

This unit provides a detailed explanation of the research methodology used in the study, including the research structure, sampling technique, data collection method, and processing style. The scope and limitations of the research are also discussed

3.2 Philosophy of Research

The research philosophy underlying this study is discussed through its three key components: epistemology, ontology, and axiology.

3.2.1 Epistemology

This study follows a constructivist approach, one of the five foundational beliefs of alternative inquiry paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory inquiry (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Positivism emphasizes objective reality and empirical observation; post-positivism acknowledges the possibility of error in knowledge while emphasizing critical realism; critical theory focuses on uncovering power dynamics and advocating for social change; and participatory paradigms prioritize collaboration and co-creation of knowledge with those directly involved in the study. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes understanding phenomena through the perspectives of those experiencing them. As such, the study relies on methods such as participant observation and interviews to capture the nuances of lived experiences (Creswell, 2018). Unlike paradigms such as pragmatism, which aim to propose advocacy or practical implications, this research is grounded in an interpretivist worldview. This approach focuses on "understanding, multiple stakeholder meanings, and social and historical

constructions" (Creswell, 2007). The goal is to delve deeply into the Agenda-setting function of Nepali newspapers, exploring how their roles are shaped during elections through complex interactions between the media, political actors, and the public at the emerging stage of social media.

This study adopts the perspective that reality is not fixed but co-constructed through the production, dissemination, and interpretation of media messages. Drawing on qualitative insights, including expert interviews and content analysis, it seeks to illuminate how Nepali newspapers influence public discourse and political communication.

3.2.2 Ontology

The study adopts a primarily exploratory and descriptive approach, grounded in a relativist ontological stance. It recognizes reality as subjective and co-constructed through the interactions of various stakeholders, including journalists, political actors, social media influencers, and the public. This perspective aligns with the constructivist paradigm in qualitative research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding socially constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2018). The Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during elections is not a fixed phenomenon but varies across contexts, shaped by socio-political dynamics, editorial priorities, audience perceptions, and the evolving media landscape, particularly with the rise of new media.

It seeks to describe how newspapers prioritize and present issues during elections while also explaining the factors that influence these practices. This approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of reality, emphasizing that the Agenda-setting role is influenced by context-dependent interactions between media practices and political communication.

3.2.3 Axiology

The axiological foundation of this research acknowledges the value-laden nature of inquiry, as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994). It is rooted in a commitment to understanding and enhancing journalism's role in fostering democratic processes, particularly during elections. The study seeks to contribute to the ethical and practical discourse on media effectiveness by advocating for a stronger alignment between media practices and the public interest. By addressing an overlooked dimension of Nepali media, it emphasizes the importance of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in political communication, aligning with insights from Kharel (2010).

3.3 Research Design

This study has adopted the qualitatively driven mixed methods. As Creswell (2017) explains in his book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* emphasis on the qualitative approach, using quantitative methods in a supplementary role to enhance or extend the qualitative findings. “A qualitatively driven mixed methods study places emphasis on the qualitative approach, using quantitative methods in a supplementary role to enhance or extend the qualitative findings” (Creswell, 2017).

An explanatory sequential design is applied, where quantitative data is collected and analyzed in the first phase. Based on these results, key findings are identified for follow-up. In the second phase, qualitative data is collected and analyzed to provide deeper insights. Finally, the results from both phases are interpreted together (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

An explanatory sequential design is applied, where quantitative data is collected and analyzed in the first phase. Based on these results, key findings are identified for follow-up. In the second phase, qualitative data is collected and

analyzed to provide deeper insights. Finally, the results from both phases are interpreted together. This multi-method design allows for a more robust examination of the issue and provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied (Morse, 2003).

3.4 Nature and Sources of Data

The data for this study is primarily qualitative, supplemented by quantitative insights from a voter/reader survey. This mixed-method approach enables a holistic understanding of the Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during elections.

The study incorporates descriptive data to document how newspapers select, prioritize, and present issues during elections. Explanatory data to explore the factors influencing the Agenda-setting process, including socio-political dynamics, editorial decisions, and audience perceptions. Perceptual data, insights from readers to understand how newspaper content influence's public opinion and aligns with audience priorities.

1. Primary Sources

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Interviews with current and former editors, journalists, election commissioners, political advisors, and other stakeholders provide firsthand perspectives on media practices.

Newspaper Content Analysis: Systematic examination of newspaper content during electoral periods to identify patterns, themes, and framing strategies.

Reader Survey: A survey conducted among newspaper readers to understand their perceptions of media coverage, issue salience, and the alignment of media content with their concerns during elections.

2. Secondary Sources

Archival Materials: Historical records of newspapers, editorials, and reports to contextualize the Agenda-setting role over time.

Literature Review: Previous studies on Agenda-setting theory, media influence, and political communication.

Policy Documents: Election commission guidelines, political party manifestos, and media policy documents to understand the institutional framework surrounding elections and media.

By integrating qualitative insights, quantitative data, and secondary resources, the study ensures a comprehensive and triangulated approach to addressing the research objectives.

Table 3.1

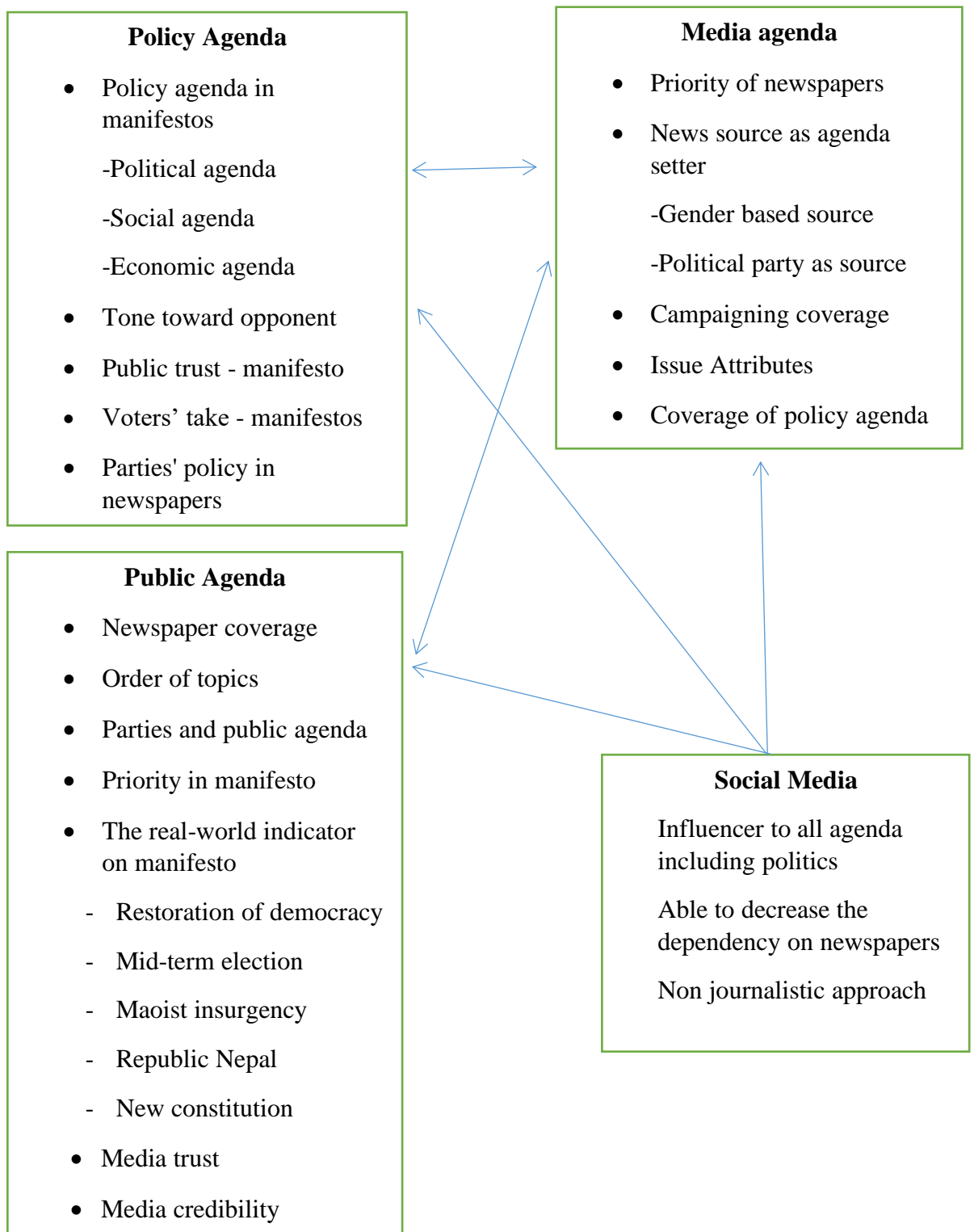
Nature of Data and Source

Aspect	Nature of Data	Sources of Data
Empirical	Primary Data: Firsthand information from respondents Qualitative Data: Descriptive	Content analysis, survey among newspaper readers, Intensive Interviews (Key informants), Case study Document Analysis: Manifesto analysis, government reports
Theoretical	Secondary Data: Published information Conceptual Frameworks	Literature Review: Existing research, academic publications, theoretical frameworks Books and Reports: Case studies, historical instances, theoretical perspectives Government Documents: Policy documents, legal frameworks Academic Publications: Articles and papers on newsroom gatekeeping.

3.5 Major Variables and their Operationalization

The dependent variable in this study is media agenda, while the independent variables are public agenda and policy agenda. The framework proposes that public agenda and policy agenda have an impact on the media agenda, and that social media is a potential factor influencing the public, policy, and media agendas.

The study uses various supporting variables to measure the independent variables and their relationship with the media agenda. Public agenda is measured using variables such as newspaper coverage, order of topics, party and public agenda, priority in manifesto, real-world indicators on manifesto, media trust, and media credibility. Policy agenda is measured using variables such as political agenda in manifesto, social agenda, economic agenda, parties and policy agenda, Tone toward opponents, public trust on manifesto, and voters' take on manifestos. Media agenda is measured using variables such as priority of newspapers, news source as agenda setter, campaigning coverage, issues attributes, coverage of policy agenda, manifestos, follow-up, and influence on decision-making.

Figure 3.1*Variables of the Study*

3.6 Sampling Design

The sampling design of this study follows a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both purposive sampling and random sampling strategies to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. The sampling design is tailored to the specific needs of the data collection method, aiming to capture both qualitative insights and quantitative data effectively. Below is a detailed description of the sampling design employed for each component of the study:

1. Content Analysis (Newspaper Sampling)

Sampling Design: Purposive Sampling

Rationale: The study specifically targets newspapers that have a significant influence on public opinion, particularly in the context of elections. Four major newspapers—*Gorkhapatra*, *Kantipur*, *Annapurna Post*, and *Nagarik*—are selected, based on their circulations and impact in Nepal. Among these, *Gorkhapatra* is a state-owned newspaper, while the other three are privately owned. This selection allows the study to examine the role of both government-controlled and privately owned media in shaping political discourse. The content analyzed includes front-page news, editorials, and opinion articles published between November 7 and December 7, 2017, totaling 602 election-related items across the selected newspapers.

2. Document Analysis (Manifesto Sampling)

Sampling Design: Purposive Sampling

Rationale: The study focuses on the manifestos of the two major political parties, Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN-UML, both of which have played a dominant role in Nepali politics from 1959 to 2017. Given their historical influence on the country's political landscape, these parties' manifestos are purposively selected to analyze how their agendas are framed and prioritized, particularly in the context of elections. This sampling strategy helps capture the political discourse shaped by the major political forces in Nepal.

3. Survey Among Newspaper Readers

Sampling Design: Purposive sampling followed by Random Sampling

Rationale: A survey was conducted among 338 newspaper readers, consisting of 218 newspaper subscribers and 120 social media influencers (See demography of participants- Appendix 4). Newspaper subscribers are approached for the survey by the distributors of the selected newspapers. Social media influencers with over 5,000 followers who actively share and discuss news-based information are contacted through social media. Social media influencers are randomly selected. The sample is first narrowed down through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who have a direct engagement with newspapers and/or social media, as these groups are assumed to be more aware of media's role in elections.

4. Case Study of Social Media in Election Campaigns

Sampling Design: Purposive Sampling

Rationale: The study specifically focuses on three major social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok), which are widely used in Nepal during election campaigns. The study examines the official social media accounts of the CPN-UML, CPN-Maoist Center, and Nepali Congress (NC), selected purposively for their high political relevance. By analyzing content from these platforms, the study assesses how social media contributes to Agenda-setting and interacts with traditional media. This targeted approach allows the research to explore the evolving influence of social media in political communication.

5. Key Informant Interviews (KII Sampling)

Sampling Design: Purposive Sampling

Rationale: The key informant interviews (KII) involve 14 experts in the field of media and politics, including current and former newspaper editors, political advisors, and election commissioners. These experts are selected purposively based

on their professional expertise and experience in media practices and political communication. The interviews provide valuable qualitative insights into how media outlets set the agenda during elections, the role of editorial judgments, and the impact of new media technologies on political communication.

3.7 Methods of Data Collection

This study adopts the explanatory method, aiming to elucidate the relationship among variables like public agenda, policy agenda, and media agenda. Creswell (2014) notes that explanatory research "seeks to identify cause-and-effect relationships among variables (p. 182)." The primary method employed is content analysis. It is supplemented by document analysis, including the review of election manifestos. Based on the content analysis results, a survey is conducted among newspaper readers/voters.

To address the evolving landscape of communication and election strategy, a case study on the use of social media during election time has been included. KIIs are conducted to triangulate and interpret the findings. As Wimmer and Dominick (2003) note, "When it comes to research, we live in a world of small sample statistics." In this study, all methods have been carefully designed with rigorous attention to sampling to ensure validity.

3.7.1 Content Analysis

Analyzing published content is the most reliable method to understand the media's perspective, particularly newspapers, on various issues including elections. As Wimmer and Dominick (2003) explain, several techniques are used to establish the media agenda, with the most common method involving grouping of coverage topics into broad categories and measuring the amount of time or space devoted to each category (p. 409).

This study analyzes the front-page news and their jumps, editorials, and articles in the selected newspapers from November 7 to December 7, 2017. A total of 602 election-related items published over 31 days by these four newspapers are examined. Table 3.1 presents the number of analyzed items per newspaper.

Table 3.2

Classification of Content Analysis

Newspaper	News	Editorial	Article	Total
Gorkhapatra	97	11	52	160
Kantipur	73	11	55	139
Annapurna Post	88	17	49	154
Nagarik	73	18	58	149
Total	331	57	214	602

Source: Field Study, 2022

3.7.2 Document Analysis

Manifestos are generally considered the official statements of intended policy issued by political parties at the beginning of election campaigns (Robertson, 2004, p. 295). Political parties present their plans to the public by setting their agendas within these documents. Since the first general election in 1959, political parties in Nepal have been introducing their electoral agendas through manifestos. As political parties submit these documents as policy issues, manifestos are also regarded as instruments of policy Agenda-setting, incorporating public and media agendas with their stances on various issues.

Under the document analysis, the study focuses on the manifestos issued by political parties during elections. As a result, the data is gathered using secondary sources. All manifestos of the two major parties from the 1959 to 2017 elections are included in this study. The study looks into the prioritization of issues that concern the lives of ordinary people as public agenda.

3.7.3 Questionnaire

In their study of Agenda-setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972) not only analyze media content but also gather voters' opinions regarding their priorities. This study also employs a survey of 338 voters/news consumers to assess the influence of newspapers, manifestos, and social media during the elections.

A set of questionnaires is developed (See Appendix II) and the survey among all the respondents is conducted on the eve of the 2022 election, as the electoral atmosphere makes the subject matter of the survey more timely and sharply relevant. The survey is conducted among those residing in Kathmandu but belonging to different geographical parts of the country and cast their votes from their respective places of origin (See survey participants based on voter list- Appendix 5). In this sense, the survey done in Kathmandu gives a national picture.

3.7.4 Case Study of Social Media in Election Campaign

Social media is playing an increasing role in Agenda-setting and is an unavoidable component for traditional media like newspapers. A case study examines how social media is used to fulfill Agenda-setting roles and assesses its impact on similar roles played by newspapers. Social media contents of three major political parties have also been analyzed.

The local level election held in 2022 serves as a case study for examining the access to and impact of social media. Data is collected by observing the contents disseminated over the course of a month from the official social media accounts of political parties and major leaders. The subject matter of agenda-related contents on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are analyzed from qualitative perspective.

3.7.5 Key Informant Interview (KII)

This study examines the role of newspapers in setting agendas using a mix approach. To support the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data from

content analysis, key informant interviews have been conducted. The structured questions for the KIIs are developed based on the findings from the content analysis, survey, and social media case study. These interviews address topics such as the Agenda-setting roles of newspapers, issues covered in manifestos, voter perceptions of manifestos, and challenges posed by the rise of social media. Interviews have been conducted with the editors to understand the role of newsrooms in Agenda-setting and the reasoning behind it. Additionally, election experts have also been interviewed (See the list of KIIs- Appendix 6). The names of participant in the KIIs have been coded as P1, P2, P3, etc., to maintain confidentiality and reduce bias.

3.8 Data Analysis, Presentation, and Interpretation

Content Analysis

The 2017 election has been chosen for the study as a representative case to assess the newsroom's Agenda-setting practices in elections. A range of variables, including news format, dateline, use of sources, quotations, gender perspective, and political party prioritization, tone of content, issue prioritization, objectivity, negativity, and policy-related issues, among others are analyzed. These variables are studied through single or multiple research questions. In the analysis, multiple answers are included in cases where multiple sources or issues are present in a single news report. The policy-related variables are analyzed qualitatively rather than quantitatively. The data of content analysis are processed by Google sheets (Sheets.google.com) and data are refined from VLOOKUP.

The data are presented using a combination of tables and narrative descriptions. Key quantitative findings are organized into tables for clarity and ease of comparison, while qualitative insights are elaborated upon in the descriptive text to provide context and a deeper understanding of the data.

Document Analysis

For the document analysis in this study, the manifestos of two major political parties in Nepal, the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML), were systematically reviewed, covering elections from 1959 to 2022. A thorough examination of these documents is conducted to identify and classify the major agendas presented during each election cycle. The study aims to understand how political priorities were articulated over time and how they reflect the evolving socio-political context of Nepal.

The manifestos are manually analyzed to extract key themes and policy proposals, which are then categorized into broad agenda areas such as economic development, social justice, governance, and foreign policy. It has been presented in a separate table. A historical approach is employed to track changes in the prioritization of issues across different elections.

Survey

The survey employs the Likert Scale, a widely used tool in mass media research, as described by Wimmer and Dominick (2003). In this scale, respondents indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements, ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." During data processing, in this study, the variables are divided into two segments: responses such as "Completely Agree," "Partially Agree," and "Agree" are grouped under agreement, while "Partially Disagree," "Completely Disagree," and "Don't Know" are categorized as disagreement. Each response option is weighted, and the responses are summed to produce a single score on the topic for each subject. Some data are presented on table and some in descriptions. The data of are processed by Google sheets ([Sheets.google.com](https://sheets.google.com)) and data are refined from VLOOKUP.

Case Study

A case study of social media use during the 2022 election is conducted to identify the evolving dynamics of communication. This analysis is based on data collected from the official social media accounts of major political parties, including the Nepali Congress (NC), CPN-UML, and CPN-Maoist Center, over the month preceding election day. The study closely monitors platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, which were selected due to their prominence in the Nepali digital landscape and their official integration as plug-ins on the parties' websites. This approach provides insights into the strategies and content used by political parties to engage voters and shape public discourse in a rapidly changing media environment.

KIIs

Data on editorial judgment are collected through structured questionnaires designed for Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Additionally, interviews are conducted with officials of the Election Commission (EC) to gain insights into their perspectives on the media's role in shaping public opinion during elections. The qualitative data gathered from these interviews are analyzed thematically, focusing on recurring patterns, divergent viewpoints, and underlying narratives to interpret the Agenda-setting practices of Nepali newspapers.

Interpretation of the Data

The accumulated data is categorized and analyzed through thematic and comparative methods. Content from newspapers is examined to identify patterns, themes, and trends in how issues are framed and prioritized. This involves coding content for variables such as tone of news, political party prioritization, gender perspective, and issue salience. The qualitative aspect focuses on understanding the underlying narratives and editorial judgments, while the quantitative aspect measures the frequency and prominence of specific themes and categories.

Survey data collected from readers and social media influencers is analyzed both descriptively and inferentially. Likert-scale responses are quantified to evaluate levels of agreement with various statements, while open-ended responses provide qualitative depth, offering a nuanced view of how readers perceive media coverage and its alignment with their concerns.

Political party manifestos are systematically studied to classify and trace the evolution of agendas across elections. Comparative analysis is employed to highlight shifts in policy priorities and to assess their alignment with public discourse as reflected in media coverage.

Social media content of different political parties during elections is analysed to assess the changing media landscape. It is done to understand of the dynamic and evolving nature of media platforms and their role in communication, aligning with the study's comprehensive approach.

Similarly, key informant interviews (KIIs) are analyzed qualitatively to extract expert insights into newsroom practices, policy influences, and socio-political dynamics affecting Agenda-setting.

Data from all sources—content analysis, surveys, case study, document analysis, and KIIs—is triangulated.

3.9 Reliability and Validity of Data

The study utilized various methodologies and tools to ensure its reliability and validity. Coding was developed to maintain consistency in the content analysis, and a pre-test was conducted to address potential issues. To ensure a valid response, the survey was conducted among broadsheet subscribers and voters, with four daily newspapers selected for the study. All survey questions were mandatory, and

incomplete responses were disqualified, thereby improving the scientific rigor and reliability of the study. Furthermore, to support the quantitative data, key informant interviews were conducted with 14 experts. Audio recordings of these interviews were retained for future reference and potential re-testing, thus reinforcing the study's reliability. The writing process-maintained objectivity, and the literature review included adequate citations and document analysis to support the study's validity.

3.10 Ethical Consideration

This study has complied with ethical values at all stages, with commitments regarding copyright, privacy, and the confidentiality of "off the record" information being strictly applied. The selected newspapers for content analysis are treated equally and impartially. An audience survey following the data of content analysis, case study, and manifesto analysis has been conducted. In addition, the document analysis is approached with objectivity as an essential priority. Participants in the survey are assured of the confidentiality of their responses, which is mentioned at the top of the questionnaire.

The study includes key informant interviews, where consent is taken from the experts before recording their voices. The report excluded any "off the record" references, ensuring that the findings are based solely on the information provided with informed consent. A case study approach has used to examine the role of Agenda-setting in the influence of new media. The study has adopted a holistic approach, analyzing data from multiple sources and angles to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. To ensure the reliability and validity along with the triangulation of the findings, the study has utilized data that could be re-examined for future research purposes.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several theoretical, methodological, and empirical limitations that may influence the interpretation of its findings.

From a theoretical perspective, the study adopts a journalistic lens, which may provide a partial view of the Agenda-setting role of newspapers and might not capture all dimensions of the topic. While grounded in Agenda-setting theory, it does not fully explore its related theoretical extensions, such as framing and priming, which have evolved since the theory's inception. Additionally, the study does not delve into the political economy of the media, including the influence of investors, political affiliations of journalists, and powerful stakeholders on newsroom decisions, even though these factors are widely recognized as shaping media agendas.

From a methodological standpoint, the study focuses on analyzing the media output rather than the internal dynamics of newsroom activities, such as the processes and influences behind content production. As a result, it does not address other influences within the newsroom that could significantly shape the Agenda-setting process. The absence of a baseline study on Agenda-setting theory in the Nepali context further limited the development of methods to measure media effects on voters comprehensively.

Empirically, the study has several constraints in its scope. The content analysis is restricted to four broadsheet newspapers published in Kathmandu, despite there being 717 registered daily newspapers in Nepal as of FY 2022/23. Similarly, the study analyzes the election manifestos of only two political parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN-UML, while over 100 political parties are registered with the Election Commission of Nepal. The survey includes 338 participants selected through purposive sampling, which may not fully represent the broader population of newspaper readers in Nepal.

Additionally, the study's primary focus on daily newspapers limits its examination of the broader media landscape, such as the role of social media, television, radio, and online news platforms in shaping public opinion. Although social media content from select political parties is analyzed, this area receives limited attention compared to newspapers.

Similarly, the study does not cover critical areas beyond its scope, such as the electoral system, the social and political implications of elections, and voter psychology. These aspects are essential to understanding elections comprehensively but fall outside the objectives of this research. By acknowledging these limitations, the study remains focused on its core objective: understanding the Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during elections.

CHAPTER-IV

ELECTIONS AND MEDIA IN NEPAL

4.1 Background

This chapter explores elections, political agendas, and the role of newspapers in Nepal. Each election in Nepal possesses unique characteristics, and the presence of media in such situations holds significance. The primary aim of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between political parties and news media. This chapter primarily relies on document analysis.

4.2 Political Partition and Mission Journalism

According to Aryal (2016), "Political communication also examines media contribution to setting the agenda and framing political issues. Nepali newspapers started to contribute a wider range of political communication after 1990. Thereafter, Nepal witnessed a great amount of flow of information and other contents in the modified form of newspapers (p. 280)." Until this period, the private sector was unable to operate radio and television channels similar to newspapers.

If the history of Nepali print media were to be explored, it is not difficult to uncover the political partition and its impact on media. In the Panchayat system, newspapers are divided into the pro- and anti-Panchayat system. Especially the political weeklies are published to fulfill several political missions. Such practices are still prevalent, especially in the tabloid weeklies. A genuine, free and independent news outlet in Nepal is a rare and suspected phenomenon (Kharel, 2010). Pathak's study (2013) highlights the significant role of weekly newspapers in shaping the political system. He notes that these newspapers have significantly contributed to political awareness, especially after 1950 or following the political changes in 1960.

According to Onta (2004), weekly newspapers published in Kathmandu during the Panchayat served as a platform for banned multiparty political parties to voice their views. He states, "They played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, by advocating against the Panchayat system and promoting the idea of multiparty democracy (p. 586)." Despite the risk of losing registration, these newspapers continued to operate under different registered names, making their publication a form of democratic activism.

A remarkable political partition is viewed widely during the election of National Referendum of 1979. Political parties, though banned at the time, were free to campaign for multiparty policy or a reformed Panchayat (Nepal, 1998). Journalists affiliated with Nepali Congress took democratic line while state funded newspapers were used to promote the ongoing system. As Kharel (2010) states, political leaders in Nepal have found the value of the media in appealing to public opinion. During the party-less Panchayat days, a significant chunk of newspapers was won over by the banned parties to do "mission journalism", i.e., play up news and views in any way as long as the cause of political pluralism seemed to be served.

The partition scenario remains unchanged after the restoration of democracy in 1990, but the political shift has led to a freer and more independent media environment. Some Nepali weeklies became affiliated with political parties, such as *Deshantar* and *Ghatana ra Bichar* with NC, and *Chhalphal*, *Bhudhabar*, and *Drishti* with UML. Others, such as *Janadesh*, and *Janadisha*, have aligned with Maoist ideology. These tabloids generally reflect the agendas of the parties they aligned with. Pathak's study (2013) raises several questions about the purpose and direction of weekly newspapers. It is crucial to determine whether these newspapers should have served as mouthpieces for political parties or asserted their independence as

professional media outlets. Additionally, the study highlights the need to consider the goals of a newspaper – whether it should prioritize commercialism or adhere to the principles of mission journalism. The tendency of weekly newspapers to only criticize parties not aligned with them raises concerns about balance and fairness in news reporting. Hence, it is imperative for these newspapers to avoid bias and present news in an impartial and unbiased manner (Pathak, 2013, p. 70). According to Kharel (2012), “Partisan media and mouthpieces of political parties have less influence than do the fair media (p. 284).” With the democratization of the media and the practice of pluralism, this trend has developed.

The credit for starting *Gorkhapatra*, the country's first newspaper in 1901, goes to Dev Shumsher Rana. According to Dixit, cited by Dahal (2013), the newspaper struggled in its early days due to the poor economic conditions of the country. Despite publishing serial novels to attract readers, the number of subscribers and circulation failed to grow. The newspaper's survival can be attributed to its government funding. It was published three days a week during the political change in the 1950s.

Before 1950, a number of periodicals were published in different parts of India by Nepali individuals living or studying there. They included both political newspapers and literary publications, but many of them contribute to the political revolution in Nepal. According to Devkota (1966), the first political weekly of the country, “*Jagaran*”, began publication on February 15, 1951, just three days before the country was declared a democracy. The emergence of print media in Nepal was a gradual process that launched the first daily newspaper, “*Aawaj*”, on February 19, 1951, just two days after the declaration of democracy in the country. However, due to the political transition that was taking place, the number of publications increased, but many of them quickly closed down.

At the time, different political parties began to establish their own newspapers as their mouthpieces and to promote their interests. Additionally, intra-party alliances also began to publish their own newspapers. This led to the rapid proliferation of newspapers, but many of them were banned after the Royal Takeover of 1960.

The Nepali National Congress bulletin, costing only 2 paisa, is the most sought-after publication at the time. With more than 10,000 copies sold, it is issued 2 to 3 times a week as needed. Its popularity is driven by its opposition to the government and the Rana, as well as its distinctive language style.

Shankar Prasad Sharma plays a significant role in its success (Shah, 2014, p. 96).

According to a report by the Press Commission of 1959, there were 11 dailies, two bi-weeklies, and nine weeklies in Nepal at the time (Devkota, 1966). However, their circulation was very limited, with the most popular newspaper having a circulation of only 1,500 copies per issue.

Another interesting aspect of the print media emerged after the political change, in the form of political bulletins. These were not subject to the same government rules and regulations as newspapers and did not require registration or adherence to any specific rules. They also did not have any editorial content and do not include the names of editors. These bulletins were often used as a powerful medium to establish political statements and agenda and are often more effective than traditional newspapers (Devkota, 1983). Political parties and their affiliated organizations utilized this unstructured medium for publicity.

4.3 The First General Election and Access to News

In the first parliamentary election in Nepal on February 18, 1959, the NC party secured a two-thirds majority, winning 74 out of 109 seats (Devkota, 1966). The leaders of the NC party had a broader political exposure than those of other

political parties, and some had even participated in India's freedom movement. This gave them an advantage in communicating their election agendas to mass voters. Despite the low literacy rate in the country, the NC party published their manifesto in three languages – Nepali, Hindi, and English. This multi-phase election marked a significant turning point in the political history of Nepal.

On the other hand, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) secured only four seats, with 47 candidates competing in the election. According to Rawal (2007), the CPN's defeat is attributed to their lack of experience in electoral campaigns and a lack of understanding of capitalist tactics.

An interesting feature from the 1959 election is that none of the competing political parties began their campaign before two months of the election. According to Gautam (2015), political forces were not convinced that the electoral process would unfold as it eventually did. Furthermore, most of the parties failed to publish their election manifestos on time, as they believed that the election would not take place as scheduled. This lack of preparation and readiness on the part of political parties highlighted the uncertainty surrounding the first democratic election in Nepal's history.

Additionally, citizens were not adequately informed about the voting process. As a result, only 1.7 million voters cast their ballots in the first democratic election, despite a total of 4.2 million voters being registered. This low voter turnout can be attributed to a variety of factors, including a lack of information and accessibility to the voting process, as well as the limited infrastructure and connectivity in the country at the time.

In 1956, the population of Nepal was recorded at 8.4 million, with 90 percent of them engaged in traditional agriculture (GoN, 1986). The lack of infrastructure and connectivity between different parts of the country limited communication to postal

service, wireless communication, and the telephone. Until 1988, as the National Planning Commission record, postal service was limited to few areas, and wireless communication was primarily used in Kathmandu and Biratnagar through the use of petrol generators. Telecommunication was also extremely limited, with less than 500 telephone lines in Kathmandu.

4.4 National Referendum and Presence of Press

The royal takeover of December 16, 1960 in Nepal led to widespread dissatisfaction among political leaders and citizens. Political parties were banned, and the voices of the media were suppressed through various policies. The Panchayat system, introduced as a result of the royal takeover, was inherently authoritarian in nature.

As Nepal (1998) notes, on April 4, 1979, the execution of former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by a military-led government sparked a student movement in Nepal. Student unions organized rallies in Kathmandu to protest the death penalty and attempt to reach the Pakistani Embassy to express their dissatisfaction. When Nepal police attempted to stop them, the situation escalated, leading to clashes and the deaths of 11 demonstrators.

In response, King Birendra addressed the nation, announcing that a National Referendum with secret voting would be held to determine the future of the Panchayat system. According to ECN (2017), the historic National Referendum was held on May 2, 1980, in which 4.8 million people (66.9% of total eligible voter) participated. About 55 percent (54.9%) of the votes were in favor of retaining the Panchayat system with suitable reforms.

Despite restrictions, the Nepali press managed to carve out some space for freedom within the revised system. As noted by Dahal (2013), even the government-controlled newspaper, *Gorkhapatra*, was able to benefit from this newfound freedom.

As described by Nepal (1998) and Kharel (2010), the announcement of the National Referendum, in which the public voted on the continuation of the Panchayat system or the reintroduction of multiparty democracy, also had a significant impact on the state of the press. The number of registered newspapers increased dramatically, with a rise in both pro-state and pro-democracy journalism. "*Nepal Times*," "*Nabin Khabar*," "*The Motherland*," "*The Commoner*," "*Dainik Nepal*," "*Samaj*," "*Swotantra Samachar*," "*Samikshya*," "*RastraPukar*," and "*Matribhumi*," were some of the newspapers that openly lobbied against the Panchayat regime. The growth in the number of literate population also played a role in the development of the reading culture during this time. As reported by Baral (2004), in 1951 there were only 250 higher-level students, but by 1971 this number had risen to 17,200. This suggests that the educational development during this period had a far-reaching impact on various aspects of national life.

In addition to print media, electronic media also played a role in shaping public opinion. According to the National Planning Commission (GoN, 1986), physical infrastructure to support communication was also developed during this period. Before the restoration of multiparty democracy, there were two broadsheet dailies operated by the state, 66 independent dailies, and 345 weeklies registered (GoN, 1986). Radio Nepal and Nepal Television, the only two electronic media in operation, were both owned by the government.

The April 1990 movement, also known as "Jana Aandolan," was a multiparty movement that succeeded in re-establishing multiparty democracy in Nepal. This movement was led by various political forces that came together to eliminate the Panchayat system. As a result of the movement, King Birendra lifts the 30-year ban on political parties on April 8, 1990. The restoration of democracy in Nepal had a profound impact on the media industry. The newly drafted 1990 Constitution of Nepal

provided a wider space for freedom of press and publications. Article 13 (2) of the Constitution stated that, "No press shall be closed or seized for printing any news item, article or other reading material," and Article 13 (3) stated that, "The registration of a newspaper shall not be canceled merely for publishing any news item, article or other reading material."

The development of physical infrastructure and access to education are key factors that contribute to the growth of the media industry in Nepal. These two sectors were established during the Panchayat system and expand greatly following the restoration of democracy. The expansion of infrastructure provided the necessary means to disseminate information and expand reach, while increased access to education helps to develop the receptive capacity of the general audience.

4.5 Elections After Restoration of Democracy to the Mid-Term

The first general election after the restoration of democracy in 1990, held on May 12, 1991, was participated in by a total of 44 political parties. A total of 1,345 candidates contested for a 205 seat House of Representatives. According to EC, eleven million people were eligible to vote, but only 65.15 percent of them turned up. NC secured a majority, with 110 seats out of 205 in the Parliament. The mass movement of people was still a powerful force in determining the outcome of the election. NC emerged victorious and forms the first government through voting after the People's Movement of 1990.

It was worth noting that the 1991 election differed from the election of 1959 in several ways. One notable difference was that while anyone above the age of 21 was allowed to vote in the 1959 election, the age bar was lowered to 18 in the 1991 election, which was also the trend worldwide. Additionally, a total of 20 political parties contested the 1991 election, as opposed to the nine parties that vie for the election race in the 1959 election (Siwakoti, 2005).

Table 4.1*Result of First General Election after Restoration of Democracy (1991)*

S.N	Party	No. of Candidates	Win
1	NC	204	110
2	CPN UML	177	69
3	SamyuktaJanamorcha	69	9
4	Nepal Sadvabana Party	75	6
5	RPP (Chand)	154	3
6	RPP Thapa	170	1
7	CPN (Democratic)	N A	2
8	NMKP	N A	2
9	Independent	N A	3

Source: ECN, 2017

The general elections of 1991 bring an absolute majority for the NC. Nevertheless, the government of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala failed in mid-1994, mainly due to constant party infighting (Kramer, 2004 p. 623). The Koirala government struggled to navigate the competing political agendas put forward by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). Issues such as the civil servants' movement, the Tanakpur Treaty, and the Dasdhunga case, in which the General Secretary of CPN-UML, Madan Bhandari, and his party comrade, Jeevraj Aasrit, died, were among the major challenges faced by the government. The government was criticized for its inability to solve these issues in a timely and effective manner (Poudyal, 1995). These agendas were the reasons for calling mid-term elections and.

Table 4.2*The Final Result of the Political Forces (1994)*

S.N	Party	No of Candidates	Win
1	CPN UML	196	88
2	NC	205	83
3	RPP	202	20
4	Nepal Majdur Kisan Party	27	4
5	Nepal Sadvabana Party	86	3
6	Independent	NA	7

Source: ECN, 2017

The 1994 mid-term general election in Nepal marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape. As reported by Baral (2004), for the first time in South Asian history, a communist government emerged as the largest party in the House of Representatives, as a result of the NC accepting defeat and not forming a coalition government. The campaign slogans and appeals put forwarded by both the NC and CPN-UML during the next election of 1999, as well as the subsequent formation of a communist government, also reflected the ongoing political and ideological struggles within the country at that time. Additionally, the communist government led by Manamohan Adhikari faced a vote of no confidence in parliament after just nine months in power, which demonstrated the challenges and instability faced by the government in this period.

It appears that the growth of media in Nepal was gaining momentum alongside the progression of electoral democracy following the change of 1990. Particularly noteworthy was the significance of broadsheet newspapers in the subsequent elections.

The remarkable presence of newspapers operated by private business houses were witnessed at the time. Two major newspapers, Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post, were registered in June 1993, opening up ways for the media to develop as an industry in Nepal (See Appendix 8). It broke the monopoly of two broadsheets – *Gorkhapatra* and The Rising Nepal – operated under state patronage. The number of daily broadsheets raised to about a dozen in number in the 1990s (Bhattarai, 2006). According to the PCN, there were 140 dailies, 699 weeklies, and six bi-weeklies registered till June 1994.

As the private sector entered newspapers with substantial investments, chipping away at the dominant presence of government-controlled media, it broadened the scope of news content. The issue of opposition was also finding a place in the agenda of broadsheet daily. In a way, private sector newspapers were initiating the role of the opposition capturing the power of Agenda-setting.

4.6 Legislative Election 1999

The 1999 House of Representatives election in Nepal, held in two phases in May was participated in by a total of 44 political parties. A total of 1,345 candidates contested for the 205 seats in the HoR. According to ECN (2017), out of a total of 11 million eligible voters, 65.15 percent turned out. The NC secured a majority of 110 seats out of 205, enabling it to form the new government.

The political landscape of Nepal underwent a significant shift after the election, as the CPN-UML experienced a power struggle within the party. A faction led by Bamdev Gautam broke away to form the CPN-ML (Mishra, 2007). This internal conflict within the party was a major contributor to the CPN-UML's subsequent defeat and the NC's victory.

The NC formed a government under the leadership of K P Bhattarai; however, the government, plagued by intra-party conflicts and is unable to last more than nine months. The press during this period focused on issues such as corruption, commission, politicization, bureaucratization, frustration, mass alienation, nepotism, favoritism, and inflation, among others (Poudyal, 1995). Amidst political instability, the significance of the newspaper's role during that period could not be understated.

Table 4.3

Result of the Legislative Election 1999

S. N	Party	Win
1	NC	111
2	CPN UML	71
3	RPP	11
4	Nepal Sadvabana	5
5	Rastrya Jana Morcha	5
6	Nepal Majur Kisan Party	1
6	SamyuktaJanmorcha	1

Source: ECN, 2017

The landscape of media in Nepal expands extensively by the time of the third general election after the 1990 restoration of democracy. According to Bhattarai (2006), there were 219 dailies, 1,088 weeklies, and 10 bi-weeklies registered by the time of the third general election, totaling 1,536 registered newspapers. The decade of the 1990s also saw the growth of professional journalism with popular weeklies shifting from their survival phase to professional journalism. Additionally, big media houses expanded media as a profitable business. By 1999, the Kantipur Group had assets valued at more than 50 million rupees, with a circulation of 75,000 for *Kantipur* and 20,000 for *The Kathmandu Post*. New ventures such as *The Himalaya Times*, a

Nepali-language newspaper that began publishing in 1995, and *Ajako Samacharpatra* by Kamana Publications, which hit the stands in 1996, also contributed to the pluralistic presence of big media. This made it easier for politicians and parties to establish and disseminate their agendas through various platforms. Furthermore, private broadcasters were allowed to operate Frequency Modulation (FM) radios, leading to the establishment of community and private radio stations. Private radio news bulletins quickly gained popularity within a short period of operation – a unique feature in the whole of South Asia even in 2024.

Emergence of Maoists and Deadlock in Democratic Process

In 1996, a political faction from the “Samyukta Janamorcha” party, which won nine seats in the first parliamentary election, declared a civil war in Nepal, commonly referred to as the “Jana Yuddha” [People's War]. The Maoist movement escalated fiercely at a time when the restored democracy was still far from functioning properly. The newly formed Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched the People's War on February 13, 1996, refusing to participate in the national election. The main objectives behind the People's War were to overthrow the monarchy, eliminate caste discrimination and favoritism, eradicate corruption and unwarranted entitlements, and establish a People's Republic in Nepal (Sharma, 2003). Within six years of launching the armed insurgency, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) established itself as a formidable and major alternative political force through an effective two-pronged strategy comprising both political and military programs (Sharma, 2003).

The Maoist revolution reached its peak, resulting in the emergence of two parallel governments in urban and rural Nepal. The conflict between the Maoists and the government resulted in over 13,000 deaths, internal displacement of an additional 150,000 people, and disruption of major development projects, among other

consequences (Sharma, 2003). The data highlighted the significant cost the country suffered due to the guerrilla war waged by the dissatisfied Maoists. After a decade-long conflict and incalculable losses, a Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed on November 21, 2006, based on a 12-point political agreement between traditional political forces, the NC, the Communist Party of Nepal-UML, and CPN-Maoist in New Delhi, marking the end of the war and the integration of the Maoists into mainstream democratic politics.

The politics of Nepal in the early 21st century is characterized by a complex and dynamic interplay of various forces, including the traditional parliamentary parties, the Maoist insurgency, and the political ambitions of the monarchy. The power struggles and internal divisions within these different groups have a significant impact on the democratic process in the country, hindering the ability of citizens to achieve their aspirations. The NC party, which won a clear majority in the 1999 parliamentary election, formed the government under the leadership of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai. As Kramer explains (2004), “The electoral data indicates that the NCP (UML) would have won a majority of votes and an absolute majority of seats had the party not split in 1998 (p. 623).” However, this government was short-lived, as it was soon replaced by GP Koirala, who in turn was replaced by Sher Bahadur Deuba, leading to a division within the party. This political instability further eroded the popularity of the parliamentary parties among the general population.

On the other hand, the royal massacre of 2001 was a turning point in Nepal's political history, as it led to increased political instability and a loss of legitimacy for the monarchy. The newly appointed King Gyanendra Bikram Shah was seen as an obstacle to democratic processes and ultimately became a catalyst for the eventual abolition of the monarchy in Nepal.

4.7 Election of the Constituent Assembly 2008 and 2013

The first election for the Constituent Assembly of Nepal was held on April 10, 2008, in which the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) emerged as the dominant party among traditional political forces. However, despite being the largest party, the Constituent Assembly was unable to draft a new constitution. This led to a second election in 2013, in which traditional political forces, such as the NC and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), gained a wider margin of victory over the UCPN Maoists.

Table 4.4

Result of the Election of Constituent Assembly 2008.

S. N.	Political Party	FPTP	Prop	Nominated	Total
1	UCPN Maoist	120	100	9	229
2	NC	37	73	5	115
3	CPN UML	33	70	5	108
4	MJAF Nepal	30	22	2	54
5	TMLP	9	11	1	21

Source: ECN, 2009

Nepal adopted a mixed electoral system for the Constituent Assembly, which consisted of 601 members. Of these, 240 are elected through the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system, 335 are elected through Proportional Representation (PR), and the remaining 26 are nominated. The PR system is a novel practice in Nepal's electoral history.

Table 4.5*Result of the Election of Constituent Assembly 2013*

S. N.	Political Party	FPTP	Prop	Nominated	Total
1	NC	105	91	5	196
2	CPN UML	91	84	5	175
3	UCPN Maoist	26	54	5	80
4	RPP Nepal	0	24	2	54
5	MJAF Loktrantrik	4	10	2	21

Source: ECN, 2014

The use of traditional and new media, including social media, played a significant role in shaping the agenda of political parties during the Constituent Assembly elections in Nepal in 2008 and 2013. Since the change of 2006, political events like the conclusion of the Maoist conflict and the establishment of the republic take precedence in the parties' agendas. At that time, both political parties and newspapers shared a common agenda of constitution drafting from the Constituent Assembly. The media actively created pressure. Alongside the constitution, the political parties prioritized the agenda of identity and its inclusion in both of these elections. This emphasis on the political parties' agenda led to the emergence of regional political forces. The ability of citizens to express their opinions and preferences through these platforms contributed to the formation of political agendas. Additionally, the widespread presence of private and community FM radio stations, as well as the allocation of significant airtime by the state-run Radio Nepal for political parties to disseminate their messages underscored the impact of media on the electoral process. As highlighted by several studies, these elections represent a crucial turning point in the utilization of media in Nepal, showcasing its potential to influence various aspects of the democratic process, from the demand for elections to the dissemination of information on the importance of democratic practices.

4.8 Elections after the Promulgation of New Constitution

The 2017 Nepali general election was held on November 26 and December 7, 2017, to elect members of the House of Representatives and the National Assembly, the lower and upper houses of the Federal Parliament of Nepal. This was the first election held under the new Constitution of Nepal, adopted in 2015, and it marked the final step in the country's transition from a parliamentary monarchy to a federal democratic republic.

The election was significant as it is the first election held under the new Constitution, which established a federal system of government in Nepal for the first time. It also marked the end of the transitional period after the end of the Nepali Civil War in 2006 and the end of the monarchy in 2008.

According to the EC Nepal, a total of 12,994,822 voters were eligible to vote in the election, with 7,846,848 voters in the first phase and 5,147,974 voters in the second phase. A total of 1,663 candidates contested the election, representing 121 political parties. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) emerged as the largest party, winning 121 of the 165 seats in the House of Representatives, while the NC came second with 63 seats.

Table 4.6

Result of the Election of HoR 2017

S. N.	Political Party	FPTP	Prop	Total
1	NC	23	40	63
2	CPN UML	80	41	121
3	UCPN Maoist	36	17	53
4	Rastriya Janata Party	11	6	17
5	RPP Nepal	1	-	1
6	MJAF	10	6	16
7	Jana Shakti Party	1	-	1
8	NMKP	1	-	1
9	Rastriya Janamorcha	1	-	1
10	Independent	1	-	1

Source: ECN, 2017

Widely seen as a peaceful and successful transition of power in Nepal, with a relatively high voter turnout of around 70 percent, the election was praised for its high level of transparency and fairness by domestic and international observers, and it was seen as a positive step in the consolidation of democracy in Nepal (EC, 2017). In general, the 2017 Nepali general election considered as an important milestone in Nepal's democratic transition; it was a successful and peaceful transition of power.

In the second election held on November 20, 2022, for the 275 members of HoR, the electoral system employed in this election was a combination of first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR) while 165 members were elected from single-member constituencies through the FPTP method, the remaining 110 members were elected from a single nation-wide constituency through the party-list proportional representation method (EC, 2022).

The NC emerged as the largest party, securing 89 seats. The Nepal Communist Party (UML) followed closely behind with 78 seats, while the CPN Maoist Center secured 32 seats. A new party, Rastriya Swatantra Party, made a strong debut by winning 20 seats. Rastriya Prajatantra Party secured 14 seats.

Table 4.7

Result of the Election of HoR 2022

S. N.	Political Party	FPTP	Prop	Total
1	NC	57	32	89
2	CPN UML	44	34	78
3	UCPN Maoist	18	14	32
4	Rastriya Swatantra Party	7	13	20
5	RPP Nepal	7	7	14
6	SanghyaSamjibai Party	7	5	12
7	Janamat Party	1	5	6
8	CPN (EkikritSamajbadi)	10	-	10
9	Nagarik Unmukti	3	-	3
	MajdurKisna Party	1	-	1

Source: ECN, 2022

The election results indicate a shift in the political landscape, with traditional dominant forces showing a decline in support while new parties, such as the Rastriya Swatantra Party, emerge as significant players in the political arena.

In the 2017 election, the electoral unity and party integration between the two major parties, the CPN-UML and the CPN-Maoist Center, play a significant role in the political landscape of Nepal. The two parties form a Left Alliance and campaign jointly under a shared manifesto, ultimately securing a victory with almost two-thirds of the seats in the HoR. However, despite initial unity, the politics of separatism soon reemerge within the alliance, leading to the eventual split of the parties. During this time, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli attempts to dissolve the HoR twice, but both attempts were rejected by the Supreme Court. As a result, the CPN-UML, CPN-Maoist Center, and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) break away from the Left Alliance and become separate entities. In this political climate, the main opposition NC party forms a government in coordination with the Maoist Center and the Unified Socialists. This government goes on to hold elections in 2022, in which the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) secures 10 seats through direct representation but fails to gain the necessary 3 percent of votes for proportional representation (EC, 2022).

Table 4.8*Election and Voters*

Nepal Elections				
Year	Voter Turnout	Total vote	Voter Registration	Voting-age population
2022	61.35 %	11,126,226	18,136,482	20,665,380
2017	68.67 %	10,594,044	15,428,159	18,591,336
2013	78.34 %	9,516,724	12,147,865	16,589,839
2008	63.29 %	11,146,540	17,611,832	14,978,158
1999	65.79 %	8,894,566	13,518,839	11,738,680
1994	86.74 %	5,562,920	6,413,172	6,721,260
1991	88.13 %	5,725,246	6,496,365	6,848,400
1959	42.19 %	1,791,381	4,246,468	4,341,120

Source: ECN, 2022

4.9 Newspaper in Panchyat

Baral (1975) states, “King Mahendra's overthrow of the parliamentary government, with the NC in power on December 15, 1960, and the restrictions imposed on freedom, put the press in an awkward situation, as was the case in other aspects of national life (p. 173).” Following the ban on political parties on January 22, 1961, the publication of newspapers that served as mouthpieces for these organizations ceases. A complete prohibition on publications motivated by party affiliations is implemented (Nepal, 1998). As a result of the ongoing political turmoil and disagreements among political parties, King Mahendra instituted the Panchayat system, effectively dismantling multiparty democracy. As Devkota (1966) notes, the primary reason for the restriction on newspapers is their association with political parties.

As noted by Upadhyay (Dahal, 2013), during the Panchayat era, newspapers are either aligned with supporters of the Panchayat system or with political parties. Both sides attempt to push forth their respective agendas.

In 1979, King Birendra announces a National Referendum, which leads to a degree of freedom being granted to print journalism within the previously autocratic Panchayat system (Kharel, 2013). While political parties face restrictions, their aligned newspapers are free to advocate for their respective agendas. This includes the government newspaper, *Gorkhapatra*, which is allowed to operate independently once the decision is made to hold elections between the reformed Panchayat system and a multiparty democratic system.

The National Referendum held on 2 May 1980, which referendum results in a defeat for the multiparty system, which in turn creates a crisis for the Nepali journalism industry. In response to this, the Freedom of Speech and Publication Ordinance is introduced in the same year, aimed at providing legal protections to journalists. Additionally, the Royal Press Commission is established and it submits a report in 1981 (Nepal, 1998). The establishment of the Royal Press Commission is considered a turning point for the Nepali press, particularly for newspapers.

Dahal (2013) states that the journalism during the Panchayat period can be divided into two distinct sections. The situation before 1979 can be considered as one section, and the changes that occur from 1979 to 1990 can be considered as another section. “Prior to 1979, independent journalism was stifled by the oppressive political system of the Panchayat regime. Newspapers that were open to partisan Panchayat and press that come out for political purposes faced their own challenges (Dahal, 2013, p. 40).” The practice of pluralism in print began in the last decade of the Panchayat system. A nationwide network of correspondents began to be established. During the last decade of the Panchayat regime, private media played a crucial role in setting the agenda for the democracy movement.

4.10 Press after the Restoration of Democracy in 1990

Nepal's print media significantly enriched the country's journalistic landscape in the 1990s by widening its scope of news coverage with emphasis on social, policy, and economic issues (Acharya, 2022). After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1991 guaranteed the freedom of the press and the protection of private investment.

“Nepal’s media had become free for the first time after political change in April 1990 when a constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy replaced 30 years of rule by the monarchy (Bhattarai & Mainali, 2014, p. 3).” Consequently, the Nepali journalism industry experienced growth, giving rise to commercial journalism. Additionally, the adoption of an open economic policy led to an expansion of the media business market, with private sector investors entering the industry with large investments. In the era of an open economy, newspapers operating in the private sector gained prominence in shaping agendas. The growth of media power, particularly in the private sector, contributed significantly to this development.

The newspaper market in Nepal experiences significance growth after the launch of Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post on February 18, 1993, with large investments. This is followed by other broadsheet dailies entering the market, creating competition in the industry (Acharya, 2013). As investments in newspapers grew, newsrooms experienced a corresponding boost in strength. This phenomenon paralleled the rise of a multifaceted agenda within the media landscape.

Parajuli (2000) argues that post-1990 journalism in Nepal makes significant advancements, both quantitatively and qualitatively. He attributes the progress to factors like: sustained competition through numerical growth, expansion of the academic sector, capacity building of journalists, and citizens and other sectors monitoring the media, and widespread use of new technologies. The argument is

supported by the example given by Rajendra Dahal, a former president of the Press Council Nepal (PCN), who refers to the Maoist conflict in Nepal and the competition among newspapers to deliver information early to readers. He notes that newspapers such as Kantipur and Spacetime started to charter helicopters to bring news from remote areas, and that this competition among newspapers to gather news was a positive development for Nepali journalism (Dahal, 2002, p. 30). But the competition in investing in content has been observed to slow down over time.

“The "People's War", in Maoist parlance, cost over 17,000 lives, leaving thousands of casualties, and hundreds of thousands of people internally displaced. It affect the whole socioeconomic fabric of Nepali society (Bhandari, 2022, p. 117).” During this time, Nepali media also covers the internal conflicts between democratic political forces. According to Thapa (2013), in the early stages of the Maoist war, media outlets approach the coverage of the conflict with a sensationalist perspective, prioritizing the creation of sensational headlines and stories over the dissemination of accurate and informative information (p. 172). The agendas are less serious and can be seen as market-oriented and circulation-based.

Bhandari (2022) states, even the political parties fail to develop a consensus and recognize the Maoist insurgency as a common national security problem. The party in opposition tries instead to use the issue to their advantage against the government in power (p. 115). Similar seems to have when the case in the media. Thapa (2013) explains –

Conflict is a prevalent agenda in media coverage, as it is often seen as a selling point for news outlets. The phrase "bad news is good news" highlights this phenomenon, where stories of conflict and turmoil tend to garner higher viewership and readership. In certain instances, the media and the war or conflict they are reporting on are interconnected (p. 170).

It has been observed that, in many contexts, individuals with political affiliations have worked as journalists in Nepal.

The year 1990 marks a significant shift in the media landscape of Nepal, with the introduction of private sector FM radio broadcasting and a rapid increase in the number of television stations. Prior to the democratization of Nepal, the government, as is still the case in the rest of South Asia, holds a monopoly on radio and television broadcasting. Despite the explosion in the number of outlets and the liberalization of the landscape, the content, scope, and general approach of most programming rarely cover marginal voices but instead fall into repetitive patterns (Onta, 2008). It shows that the media places less priority on the public agenda. However, the emergence of private radio and television, along with newspapers, these media outlets also assume a prominent Agenda-setting role in shaping public discourse and opinion.

The internal conflicts within the democratic parties and the tragic Palace Massacre (1 June 2001), in which the entire royal family of King Birendra was killed, served as a catalyst for the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Bhandari (2022) describes the royal takeover of 1 February 2005 as a catalyst to bring Maoist and other political parties together. The protesting political parties and Maoists in the underground movement jointly launched a second mass movement called "Jana Aandolan 2" of 2006. The role of the media as an Agenda-setter is evident during the Jana Aandolan movement.

As the movement gains momentum, the King ultimately succumbs and reinstates the dissolved Parliament on April 24, 2006, through an address to the nation, ending the political stalemate. The uprising, the Jana Andolan 2 of 2006, brings about a paradigm shift in Nepal's political landscape and changes the whole political system (Bhandari, 2022, p. 125).

The country is twice declared to be in a state of emergency, first under the leadership of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for nine months and then under King Gyanendra for three months. Both declarations are made in accordance with constitutional provisions. During these crises, the communication and journalism sectors are greatly impacted. Censorship of newspapers and a ban on radio news broadcasts are implemented by the government. In response, media outlets unite in protest against these actions and are met with support from the public. Civil society organizations and political parties also campaign against censorship of newspapers.

The digital transformation of newspapers has also begun in the context of the aforementioned political and social developments in Nepal. The tradition of uploading news on online sites is first established by newspapers, with Kantipur Publication emerging as a leader in this regard. Likewise, nepalnews.com operated by Mercantile, a pioneering technology-based company of Nepal, used to upload news contents from various newspapers. *The Kathmandu Post*, an English broadsheet published by Kantipur Publication, became the first newspaper to be made available online. Subsequently, the *Kantipur* daily also begins to be uploaded online.

Table 4.9

Registered Newspapers in Elections

S. N.	Year	Daily	Bi-weekly	Weekly	Fortnight	Total
1.	1959	31	N A	63	24	118
2.	1979	23	N A	59	2	84
3.	1991	96	3	506	51	565
4.	1994	120	5	608	68	801
5.	1999	219	10	1088	219	1536
6.	2008	386	23	1871	321	2601
7.	2013	581	30	2584	385	3580
8.	2017	655	30	2778	400	3863
9.	2022	717	30	2879	400	4026

Source: PCN, 2022 and Prakashan ko Digdarshan (2003)

Maharjan (2022) states that the hope-driven and uncertainty-driven innovations can account for the overall digital transition of Nepali daily newspapers in general and Kantipur Publications in particular (p. 243). The transition from traditional print newspapers to digital versions initially leads to the expansion of online news in a format that closely resembles print newspapers.

However, as internet access in Nepal began to increase after 2010, online journalism becomes more prevalent and diversified, evolving into an independent form of news dissemination. The increased availability of the internet in Nepal also leads to a surge in the usage of social media, which further impacts the traditional Agenda-setting role of newspapers and other traditional media outlets such as radio and television. Social media platforms, in addition to news websites, have become an important source of information and have gained a prominent role in shaping public discourse and opinion.

4.11 Summary of the Chapter

Nepali newspapers, have always encountered challenges and setbacks in their development due to political turbulence. While the media played a catalytic role in political changes, its effectiveness in mainstreaming the agendas of the most prominent classes appears limited. In its early stages, the media struggled with sustainability issues exacerbated by low literacy rates hindering newspaper subscriptions. Additionally, political instability persisted cyclically, posing further hurdles. Despite these challenges, newspapers consistently challenge dictatorial regimes and autocracy. They actively support key agendas advocated by political parties and prominently feature elections as significant events. Even in challenging times, Nepali newspapers consistently set the agenda for elections based on its capacity. In every situation, Nepali newspapers in general have demonstrated a strong commitment to democratic values and processes.

CHAPTER-V

PUBLIC AGENDA IN ELECTIONS

5.1 Background

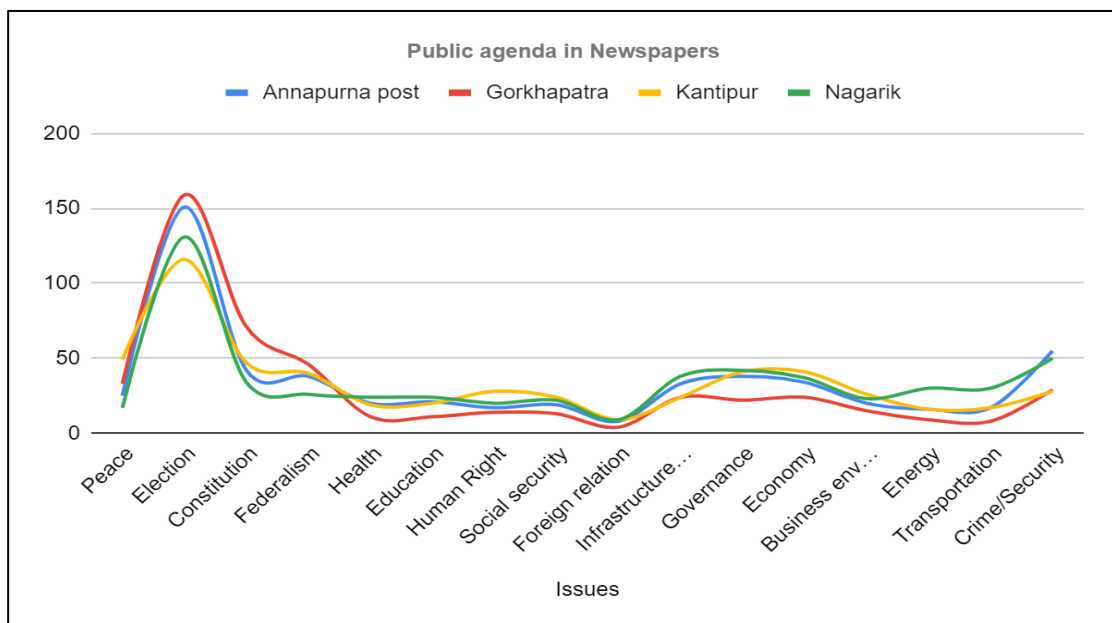
This chapter explores the intricate relationship between public agendas and elections, examining various aspects from the perspectives of newsrooms and political parties. It also examines the influence of the media, and the level of public trust in news during an election cycle. This chapter aims to illuminate the complex interplay between the public agenda and the electoral process.

5.2 Public Agenda in Newspapers

In democratic practice, citizens are at the center, and therefore, the public should be the primary beneficiary of both policy and media agendas. As Dearing and Rogers (1996) argue, the issue hierarchy on the media agenda sets the issue hierarchy of the public agenda.

Figure 5.1

Public Issues in Four Newspapers



Source: Field Study, 2022

However, an analysis of the media coverage of public issues, particularly those connected to people's daily lives, during the study period, suggests that these issues were not given adequate attention. Figure 5.1 indicates that election-related formal activities receive maximum coverage, little attention is given to issues directly associated with the public, such as education, health, social security, transportation, etc. This suggests a significant gap between the media coverage and the public agenda. The analysis draws from 602 pieces of content published in the 31 days leading up to the 2017 election.

Figure 5.1 indicates that all newsrooms have similar priorities during election. It also elaborates that while private media are often criticized for being profit-oriented, government media, which receive government patronage, are less connected with public issues despite being expected to prioritize them. *Gorkhapatra* has focused largely on election-related formal activities and pro-government statements.

The survey data triangulate the reflection of the content analysis. Based on their observations of newspapers, 86.35 percent of respondents concurred with the statement, "Newsrooms are dependent largely on press briefings and formal activities," suggesting a prevalent belief that newsrooms rely excessively on official sources rather than engaging in independent investigations. The data aligns closely with that of the Election 2013. The report states, "Nepali media failed to effectively serve public interest during elections. (ECN, 2014, p. 156)".

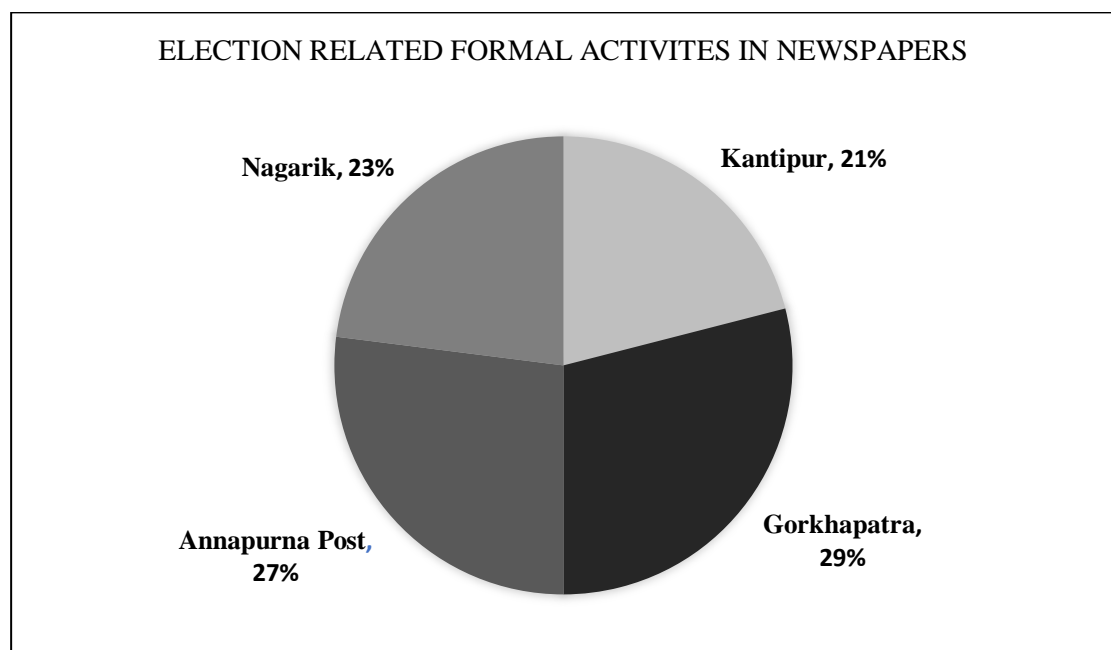
The study finds that a single content (news, editorial, or article) raised one or multiple issues, and major agendas in newspaper contents are identified. The peace process remains unresolved following the Extensive Peace Accord (2006), which neither the first nor the second Constituent Assembly could conclude. The study examines the weightage given to peace process-related works in the election agenda

in 2017. Of the 124 contents deliberating on this issue, Kantipur publishes 40 percent of the total printed materials, follow by *Gorkhapatra* and *Annapurna Post*, with 27 percent and 20 percent of the total materials, respectively. *Nagarik* provides the least space, with only 14 percent.

During elections, it is common for election-related activities to dominate newspapers, and since the studied newspapers are national print media, and a majority of election-related activities are Kathmandu-centric. According to the data the coverage of formal programs of the ECN and works regarding election management received the highest share of publication, followed by activities conducted by political parties. Such activities have placements in 557 printed materials in one way or the other. The coverage of election-related activities is 29 percent in *Gorkhapatra*, followed by Kantipur with 21 percent, and *Annapurna Post* and *Nagarik* daily, which have 27 percent and 23 percent coverage, respectively.

Figure 5.2

Coverage of Formal Activities



Source: Field Study, 2022

The much-awaited constitution of Nepal was promulgated after two rounds of Constituent Assembly polls (2008 and 2013). However, Madhesh-centric parties oppose the new constitution issues in 2015. They organize sit-in protest along the Indian border. In response to this, the neighboring south imposes a blockade. As Madhesh-centric parties have grievances against some of the provisions of the constitution, the issues keep on being surfaced in their election manifestos. The demand for the amendment of the constitution had greater scope in those electoral documents. Hence, the issue of the constitution becomes a significant election agenda. The claim for constitutional amendment and issues revolving it have been reflected in a total of 194 printed materials, the largest number of which is credited to *Gorkhapatra* (37%). Whereas, *Annapurna Post* has 22 percent of those contents, Kantipur gives space to 24 percent of the total news with issues relating to the amendment of the constitution. *Nagarik* gives the least coverage with only 17 percent of the news with the similar theme.

Federalism that came into being in the country following the second People's Movement of 2006 emerged as another important election agenda. The Constituent Assembly in 2015 introduced new state structure providing for seven provinces in Nepal. Recognizing the validity of the same, the federal as well as provincial polls were conducted simultaneously during the 2017 election. Contents relating to the federalism appear in newspapers in huge quantities during the election.

Of the total 150 contents published in relation to this issue, *Gorkhapatra* has given the utmost space as it published 33 percent of the total materials on this agenda. Similarly, *Nagarik* features the least at 15 percent and Kantipur presents 27 percent of the total contents on this subject. *Annapurna Post* gives coverage to 25 percent of the total news contents. The issue of international relations also seems to be treated as a less important election agenda. The newspapers present 30 contents collectively on this subject matter.

Table 5.1*Major Three Issues in Newspapers*

Newspaper/Issue	Federalism	Constitutional	Peace Process
Gorkhapatra	33%	37%	40%
Kantipur	27%	24%	27%
Annapurna Post	25%	22%	20%
Nagarik	15%	17%	14%

Source: Field Study/202

Most of the KII participants agree on those issues regarding diplomacy having been given little priority both by newspapers and politicians. In the wake of the promulgation of the new constitution, the portrayal of lingering peace process matters as focal points within newspapers is a regular feature. Given the imminent implementation of federalism, the natural emphasis on this aspect is to be expected. Concurrently, political parties have integrated such matters into their political agendas, thereby utilizing newspapers as conduits for their objectives. The considerable coverage of these subjects in *Gorkhapatra* suggest a prioritization of governmental agendas. However, private newspapers have been observed to engage with issues more pertinent to the public domain.

The participants in the Key Informant Interviews (P1, P2, P4, P6, P9, P10) partially agree that the media covers public issues during elections. Editors of some newspapers claim that they strive to provide coverage of public issues as much as possible. According to P10, during elections, the district correspondents and journalists are instructed to bring people's issues from the field. They work to bring the demands and views of the people to the mainstream platform, with both the political and social bureaus working to ensure public issues were addressed. Similarly, P5 and P7 claim that their newspapers raised public agendas during

elections by providing people's voices from ground zero. Former editors of broadsheets have conflicting opinions on media coverage. But, some (P1, P2, P14, P6, P9) agree that media organizations do not invest enough in content production, making it difficult to highlight public issues. This observation underscores the prevalent trend where substantive news finds prominence when the media internalizes public concerns, initiating proactive measures toward policy reform. Consequently, it can be posited that newsrooms are more inclined towards coverage of election activities than in-depth investigative content.

5.3 Order of Topics

It is not necessary for all information that journalists obtain to become news. The information must have news value. Stovall (2005) explains that events which change people's lives (impact) are classified as news. Besides impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, etc. are key news values that determine the order of topics.

For example, health and education are crucial election agendas. In all elections since 1959, these two issues have been finding greater importance in the manifestos of almost all political parties. However, with the newspapers focusing on formal election-related activities, these people-centric issues seem to be kept aside by the four national dailies. Of the total 602 materials published, health related issues are incorporated in 73 items and another 74 are about education. However, both of them have not been treated as independent electoral agendas. As they turn up in connection with other issues of concern, the newsrooms seem to work more in prioritizing these issues. *Gorkhapatra* allots least space to the health (10) and education (10). Despite placing higher priority upon political agenda, it gives less than half weightage than any other newspaper to these issues of public concern.

Another pressing issue regarding transportation seems to not have received much media attention. Despite having poor management and operation in the country, the issue of transportation somehow surfaces in 72 contents. The issue is most neglected in *Gorkhapatra* (7) while, in comparison, the private-sector papers give more than double the space.

Energy is another significant issue having a direct bearing on public lives. It appears to be a critical issue during the election since a majority of Nepali are reeling under the darkness caused by the long hours of power outage. But this burning issue does not seem to have fallen into the eyes of the media. A total of 71 items somehow includes the issue among others. *Gorkhapatra* treats this issue lightly as it gives coverage to only 9 news stories against other private newspapers that published at least 16 news stories to 30 stories at maximum.

The pressing items of human rights and social security also receive negligible space. As much as 79 and 78 contents are published under the theme of human rights and social security respectively during the study period. On the other hand, the issue of election-related security always gets utmost priority. The violence and crimes that take place during the election are deemed highly important also because negativity has a greater place in much of journalism. A total of 162 items are published under this subject matter. The data supports the statement by Alfred Harmsworth, founder of Britain's Daily Mail. As Williams (1998) notes, Harmsworth would instruct his reporters to "Get me a murder a day."

Security issues related to elections receive significant attention as all three forms of security forces, including the Nepali Army, Armed Police Force, and Nepal Police, are deployed at all levels of the election and play a role in transporting election-related materials to and from remote parts of the country.

The issues of development, prosperity, governance, economy, and business environment become more prominent during election times. As such, newspapers pay special attention to these subjects. Even if the print media deals with them in fewer numbers, these issues are still reflected heavily through ground reporting of the election. Editorials and opinion pieces also pay special attention to them. However, the data suggests that the studied newspapers do not give a fair coverage to these issues. A total of 119 news stories have included the mentioned issues in some way, with 153 news stories being dedicated to the governance agenda. Economic issues have found space in 136 contents, and the issue of business environment has found a place in 84 printed materials.

The content analysis suggests that newspapers have not prioritized topics according to the public's day-to-day issues. Election-related violence and crime have received more coverage compared to issues affecting other aspects of daily life.

The tone of readers towards newspapers is generally positive. When asked to express their views on the statement "newspapers cover people's agendas during elections," 59% agreed with it, while the remaining disagreed. Similarly, election officials in Nepal have expressed a positive tone towards the media for bringing out some public issues. P11 explains that many public issues are raised by the media, and the way is opened for solutions. P11 provides an example of reports, "I found news report criticizing ECN for its weakness regarding the voter ID card. For me, as an official, it was unpleasant. Whereas from the point of view of citizens it was correct. After reading the news I did what I need to do."

P14, however, seems unsatisfied with the media's coverage regarding public issues. He explains that the media ignored major issues regarding corruption. Similarly, P4 is more critical of the media coverage, stating, "The content made it clear that the majority was influenced by power and money, and that the public agenda was fragmented, incomplete, and not comprehensive."

P1 explains that public issues are different not only during elections but also during other times. The expert says, “There are many problems, from high costs of agriculture to not getting citizenship, and the media has not been able to bring these issues to influence policy. During the election period, pressing matters are raised based on the topics spoken by the people, but the media has not yet been able to raise the voice of the public and be influential.”

Overall, the KIIs show mixed perceptions of the media's coverage of public issues. Some editors (P5, P7, P8) claim to prioritizing public issues, and election officials (P11, P12, P13) appreciated the media's role in bringing out public issues. Other participants express dissatisfaction with the media's coverage, with P14 and P4 being particularly critical.

5.4 Public Trust in Public Agenda

Ghanendra Purush Dhakal, a columnist for *Nagarik*, writes in his article titled "Fisteko Khutta ra Pramukh Dalko Ghosanapatra" [Wood Warbler's Leg and the Major Party Manifestos] on November 19, 2017, "When you see the scene of the leaders of the major parties of Nepal releasing their manifestos, it seems that the leaders are busy making fools of the ordinary Nepalis." The satirical article by Dhakal provides an example of how election manifestos are critiqued. Other columnists also present similar arguments regarding political parties' manifestos. These opinions and articles strongly reflect public perception on the matter.

Apart from political changes, all other issues included in manifestos from the 1959 election to the polls in 2022 appear similar. However, the parties seem ineffective in implementing the agendas they introduce, as evidenced by the repeated inclusion of similar agendas in every election. Due to the frequent political changes that take place in the political landscape, such issues seem to have received higher

importance, while the valuable issues of development remain neglected. For example, the issue of fertilizer for agriculture that the political parties introduced during the 1959 election gets repeated in the manifesto for the 2022 election as well. This shows that despite the parties coming up with new manifestos, the content inside them stays the same. Political stability and socio-economic development become permanent and ever-trendy agenda of parties.

More than half of the sampled respondents (54.30%) notice political party policies for development. However, a significant percentage of them (45.70%) do not notice these policies, indicating a potential lack of information and awareness among the general public.

Regarding the understanding of the development process, 61.42 percent of respondents disagree with the statement, "I have found minimum understanding among political parties regarding development process." However, a significant percentage (38.58%) agree with this statement, indicating a potential lack of expertise and knowledge among political parties when it comes to development issues.

The majority of respondents (64.69%) agrees that Nepali political parties have prioritized global issues as well as national ones in their manifestos. This suggests a recognition of the importance of global issues and their impact on national development.

It is clear that the majority of respondents disagree with the statement, "I believe in the commitments of leaders" (78.34%) and "Sometimes I am influenced by the speeches made at election rallies" (78.34%). This suggests a lack of trust in political leaders and their speeches, potentially due to past experiences of unfulfilled promises or corruption in politics.

Overall, the data suggest a mixed perception of political parties and their policies among the Nepali public, with a lack of trust in political leaders but a recognition of the importance of global issues and consulting with experts and stakeholders.

On the other hand, the parties have shown indifference towards making people understand which of the promised agendas came into effect and which did not. This shows that the parties do not remain accountable for their own manifestos. In this regard, Sukadev Khatri, a columnist for *Nagarik*, writes in his article titled "Chunabi Ghosanapatraka Chunauti" [Challenges of Election Manifestos] on November 23, 2017, "Unless political parties declare their accomplishments, challenges faced in manifesto implementation, and achievements, people have no reason to believe in their promises."

None of the political parties miss the opportunity to announce mega projects in their electoral manifestos. They declare significant projects like railways, metro, mono-rail, airports, and ship operations, among others, even before understanding the feasibility of the purposed projects, as the attraction of the election.

The content analysis and survey data are further triangulated by the Key Informant Interviews. All experts participating in the KIIs express a negative tone regarding the trust in public agendas imposed by political parties.

5.5 Public Trust in Media

As Mencher (1981, p. 67) notes, news is what newspapers print in their news columns. To ensure trustworthy content, he emphasizes the importance of direct observation and the use of reliable sources in news and articles. He suggests that news should be based on facts and evidence. It should be free from errors, misleading information, and exaggerations.

Likewise, the news source should have a reputation for providing accurate and reliable information. It should be transparent about its sources. Similarly, it should be presented without any bias, providing all sides of the story and allowing the readers to form their own opinions. The use of sources is a crucial element in journalism, with many theories emphasizing their role in establishing the validity and objectivity of news. Kharel (2010) states that news stories with multiple sources are considered more balanced, and identifiable sources are deemed more credible than anonymous ones. The data suggests that Nepali newsrooms use a range of variables to assess the situations in which sources are used, and sources play critical roles in setting agendas.

In this study, 91 percent of the news stories included revealed their sources, with 6.3 percent projecting anonymous sources and 2.5 percent using indirectly indicated yet identifiable sources. These data demonstrate the sensitivity of newsrooms when it comes to identifying sources, as they have been found to use multiple forms of sources.

Of the published news, 54 percent used multiple sources, with at least two sources used in 8 percent of the news, and at least one source mentioned in 38 percent of the content. Single sources include press conferences organized by the ECN and GoN, orations of political leaders, and press statements issued by the Home Ministry, among others. Newspapers have been found to use statements issued by government machinery as strong sources. However, the study has not found evidence of cross-checking the information disseminated by government sources by newsrooms.

Trust in news media is crucial for a healthy democracy. It helps to form public opinions and make informed decisions. However, the trust level in news media can vary based on several factors, including the political climate, journalists' credibility, and their previous contributions.

Based on the study data, it can be concluded that there is a moderate level of trust in Nepali newspapers during elections, with 79.53 percent of respondents agreeing to the statement "I trust the media's content during elections."

However, the trust level decreases when it comes to the political balance of newspapers. Table 5.2 shows that less than half of the respondents (43.92%) believe that newspapers provide equal priority to all political parties, and only slightly more than half (52.23%) believe that editorial content is politically balanced. Similarly, only 48.37 percent of respondents find articles politically balanced, and only 45.40 percent find news politically balanced. The public opinion on the imbalance in coverage is further supported by newspaper content data, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter VII.

Table 5.2

Media Trust Among Voters

Media Trust	Agree	Disagree
Trust the media's content during election	79.53%	20.47%
Newspapers provide equal priority to all political parties	43.92%	56.08%
Editorial are politically balanced	52.23%	47.77%
Newspaper articles are politically balanced	48.37%	51.63%
News is politically balanced	45.40%	54.60%
Usually influence or change my mind about voting after reading newspapers	35.91%	64.09%
Total Participation	338 voters/readers	

Source: Field Study, 2022

In the KII, participants expressed mixed views on the trustworthiness of media content. P13 says positively about the Nepali broadsheet dailies, stating that they expose gaps in the political process and accurately reflect the mood of the people. He

believes that the newspapers correct any weaknesses in their reporting and adhere to ethical standards. Similarly, P11 has confidence in the accuracy of the broadsheet's reporting and believes that they strictly adhere to ethical standards. However, P12 believes that the political bias is visible in weekly newspapers and online news sites but not in broadsheets.

According to P4, trust in news media depends on the platform and the reader's engagement with it. He emphasizes the importance of skepticism in both the journalist and the reader, which can lead to errors. He believes that news is generally trustworthy because of gatekeeping and that individual readers and media outlets must also be considered.

P9 questions the media's coverage and its repetition of similar stories without substantial new information. But P6 believes that the media has not adequately covered critical issues such as corruption and that the EC's code of conduct has restricted reporting on specific topics.

P2 believes that news impact is significant and that readers look for reliability in reporting, but incorrect information can be used against political opponents.

In a holistic assessment, the consistent utilization of discernible sources in the four newspapers analyzed underscores an affirmative trend for newsrooms. Incorporating multiple sources for the same news item appears to augment the robustness of the news. Nonetheless, the disposition of voters toward the news media indicates a degree of pessimism in comparison. On the contrary, most respondents have a favorable view of the media's content. Experts, while generally positive about the newspaper scrutinized in this study, express some reservations about its presentation. A triangulated perspective suggests indications that the media's established trustworthiness, despite its firm foundation, may encounter potential vulnerabilities.

5.6 Media Credibility from Public Perception

As Hohenberg (2007) states, a sincere devotion to public service is one of the keys to successful journalism. According to him, “the first responsibility of a serious newspaper is to print the news courageously and impartially. The second is to serve the public interest. The third is maintain its independence by solvent (Hohenberg, 2007 p 381).” The credibility of media makes newsreaders more supportive over their profession.

Based on the survey data, it appears that the majority of newspaper readers/voters agree with several negative statements about newsrooms and journalists.

Firstly, 83.09 percent of respondents think that journalists or editors are not sufficiently active as they ought to be, suggesting a perception that journalists are not doing enough to report on important issues or to hold powerful entities accountable.

Furthermore, 83.09 percent of respondents think that newsrooms are not adequately oriented to professionalism indicating a perception that newsrooms are not doing enough to address these issues. The data also suggest that respondents believe newsrooms are not investing sufficiently in content, with 86.05 percent agreeing with the statement, "Newsrooms are not sufficiently spending on content."

A vast majority of respondents (90.50%) also agreed with the issue of the social responsibility role of media getting eroding speedily, indicates a perception that the media is failing to fulfill its role in promoting public interest and providing accurate and unbiased information.

Similarly, 91.39 percent of respondents think that the emergence of social media has directly challenged newsrooms, indicating that social media is seen as a significant threat to the traditional role of newsrooms and journalists.

Inquiry into the current state of journalism was conducted, and a predominant number of participants supported the notion that journalism's creativity is declining to the detriment of readers. P13 argues that newspapers are being run in a traditional manner, failing to establish themselves as they should.

P11 shares the same understanding, stating that significant changes are actively pursued only when they arise. During the recent election process, media failed to bring up important issues in the same manner as during the conflict period.

P12 contends that journalists are becoming indolent and weakened by the rise of social media. She opines that if journalists worked with more conviction and integrity, social media would not have the same level of influence.

P1 concurs that the creativity present in journalism during the conflict period is dissipating, attributing the blame to a lack of quality journalism education.

P3 and P5 assert that the media is not progressing as it should, and journalists are fixated on becoming desk-based journalists, contributing to the declining quality and credibility of the industry. The numerical increase of media outlets has caused journalists to be seen in sizeable numbers at various events and has given rise to the influence of social media, further weakening their ability.

P6 believes that not only the media and journalists but also the behavior of other societal elements has impacted the responsibility of journalism. He posits that state institutions are no longer addressing issues raised by the media, leading to a decrease in media activity and content. P10 asserts that a journalist's work slows down after reaching mid-career, and their ability decreases with time.

On a broader note, an undeniable reality emerges among regular newspaper readers - a perceivable decline in journalists' activism, consequently eroding the newsroom's vitality. Concurrently, the exponential growth of social media within the

online sphere has caused a reduction in the credibility of traditional media. This viewpoint of the readers found validation through the insights shared by participants in the Key Informant Interviews (KII). These participants proposed a proactive orientation of journalists towards the professional ethos of journalism. They contended that the erosion of media credibility poses a potential threat to the democratic fabric itself.

Through triangulating the study's findings, it becomes evident that a feeble newsroom diminishes the impact of news dissemination, gradually undermining its role in Agenda-setting.

5.7 Political Parties and Public Agenda

Almost all media outlets tend to treat major political parties and their leaders as their primary sources of information during election times. Likewise, political parties expand their public sphere through the media, mass meetings, announcements, and manifestos. Meyer and Hinchman (2002) argue that democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that empowers individuals to decide and act autonomously.

Priority in Manifestos

Walgrave and Nuytemans (2009) state, "In Agenda-setting terms: the political agenda, i.e., the issues that get political actors' attention, must react to the societal agenda, i.e., the things people care about."

Social agenda, to a large extent, directly connect with people's lives. Since social issues directly impact the common mass, political parties tend to cover them in their manifestos. Social issues also set populist agendas. In this context, this study looks into the degree of significance that the parties have laid upon the social issues.

Education and public health remain topmost social agenda with political parties placing these issues in their manifestos since the first general election of 1991 following the restoration of democracy. From the gender perspective, women's education and health are further highlighted. While the NC prioritizes “women's rights”, the CPN-UML calls for “free education for women”. Showing concerns over the growing population, both the parties incorporate population control as their agenda. The CPN-UML gives importance to the issue of “laborers’ rights”, while the health of the children also grabs the party’s attention. Easy access to transportation and communication are other common priorities set by the political parties in their manifestos.

All political parties treated most of the issues that they present during the previous election with similar importance during the 1994 mid-term elections, while giving further priority to some other issues. For instance, the agenda of “poverty alleviation” received elevated status. The issues of “children, women's rights, and women’s participation in business” got more importance this time than in previous elections. The CPN-UML proposed a slogan, "Home for the squatters" and also put emphasis on the issues of “Gender equality and rights of the laborers” as its important electoral agendas.

The social issues gain greater gravity in the 2008 CA election than in the three previous elections as the parties try to invent solutions to those problems in line with the state restructuring. For instance, it is mentioned in the manifestos that the “education and health sectors” would be reformed under the provincial structure. Similarly, peace in itself could never be only a political problem. The parties deal with this subject keeping in view that any kind of revolutions and conflicts are the results of social problems and causes. The manifestos also promise to resolve caste-

based and geographical discrimination. The CPN-UML brings to light the social development of Madhesh and the Karnali regions. Free health and education emerge as the significant agendas. The NC includes property rights and the rights of the Madheshis as well as differently abled people under its priority list in 2008 Election.

Most of the previous social issues are reflected during the second polling for CA, 2013. The issue of “foreign employment” becomes an important agenda item during the election. The CPN-UML which had demanded the stoppage of Nepali youths’ recruitment in the Indian Army during the 1959, election lobbies for safe foreign employment. This time, too, the party promotes social security schemes and stresses the need for the elevation of life-standards of dalits and underprivileged as well as the residents of Terai, Madhesh, and Karnali regions. The NC, continuing its previous stands, brings the issues of Madheshi laborers, indigenous and dalits under its primary list of priorities. It also raises the issue of food security, nutrition, and sanitation.

The 2017 election again witnesses a repetition of the social agendas of the previous ones. The reconstruction issue that was initiated following the 2015 Mega Earthquake happens to be one of the major agendas. The CPN-UML and the CPN-Maoists jointly give this issue higher dominance. The parties that would talk about education in the past elections mention quality education this time. All other social issues are replicated from the old documents.

Analysis of the manifesto shows that the social issues or public agendas advocated in manifestos are frequently reiterated. This sentiment is also shared by participants in KIIs, who assert that the social agendas within manifestos often lack substance and are merely symbolic commitments. In line with this observation, P14 points out that when analyzing election manifestos, approximately 70 percent of the agendas are consistently reiterated in each electoral cycle.

5.8 The Real-World Indicator on Manifesto

According to Dearing and Rogers (1988), real-world indicators in Agenda-setting are factors that influence which issues are deemed important by policymakers, politicians, and the public. These indicators include events, social and political movements, economic conditions, and other issues that capture public and policymaker attention.

It has been observed that the manifestos of different political parties do not significantly differ in the issues they highlight. Major issues endorsed in party manifestos are often similar across the political spectrum. While some ideological differences exist, the public issues addressed in the manifestos of parties with different ideologies tend to be alike. Commonly included topics are the political climate, with parties often blaming each other, and economic indicators such as rising unemployment, inflation, or income inequality, which also drive policy priorities. Unique or singular issues that could distinguish political parties are generally not featured in their manifestos during elections.

The First Manifesto

In an effort to establish a new trend, the NC introduces the 1959 election manifesto as "Sandesh Patra" (a letter) whereas the Communist Party states it "Ghosana Patra", the manifesto. The Communist Party mentions its detailed political background in the introduction of its manifesto.

The 1959 election manifestos are concise and focused on issues related to the 1950 people's movement and the political changes it brought about. They also address political activities following the restoration of democracy and the resulting instability, lamenting the failure to hold elections even eight years after the establishment of democracy.

The NC (1959) states in its manifesto, "Several efforts and experiments made after 2007 have made the political situation uncertain. During this time, those willing to create illusions and regressive forces who are good at making fun of democracy got the opportunity to play nasty games." The Communist Party (1959) also paints a negative picture of the political situation, writing that "the government and 'pratikriyabadi' [reactionist forces] are heading towards snatching the rights received from the revolution, contrary to the commitments made during the time of revolution."

Both the NC and the Communist Party address development and the financial system in their respective manifestos. They share similar opinions on the conservation of Nepali as a national language and other languages as mother tongues, as well as a common commitment to the democratic system and periodic polls.

However, the NC expresses goodwill towards all religions and mentions "religious freedom" in its manifesto, whereas the Communist Party does not raise the religious issue as its agenda. In interpreting foreign policy, the Communist Party proposes shutting down the "Gorkha Recruitment Center" and seeks the rights of elected representatives in the constitutional amendment. The party also criticizes other parties without mentioning their names.

After the 1959 elections, the country had to wait until 1991 for another multiparty, poll as per as political parties were banned until then. The Referendum of 1980 was not held under the party system, as parties were forbidden at the time. In the referendum, voters chose between the improved Panchayat system and democracy, with parties contesting the referendum without using their names.

The Restoration of Democracy and the First Election

The poll of 1991 is the first election following the reinstatement of multiparty democracy. The manifesto presented by the NC during that election is still referred to as a continuation of the 32-year-old electoral document by the party.

Using the commoners' language, Nepali Congress (1991) writes in its manifesto, "Citizens are not only tax-paying common proletariat; they are the kings. In the context of the accomplishment of democracy, NC has issued this manifesto, giving citizens the utmost position."

In 1991, the party explains democratic socialism as its political ground, as it had done in 1959. In the same vein, the party offers its manifesto by addressing the underprivileged, poor, and unemployed citizens. It uses the term "nimukha" for the downtrodden, multiple times.

"The primary goal of democratic socialism is to distribute the nation's authority, benefits, and prosperity to rural farmers, workers, women facing social inequality, innocent children, unprotected elderly people, people from oppressed castes, and those living in low-income households," the 1991 manifesto of NC states. The party explains "politics" and "economy" as two sides of a coin, arguing that economic development is impossible without democracy.

The party expresses bitter remarks against military rulers and Communists, labelling them "tyrants." The manifesto mentions, "The dictator military tyrants and the single-party communist authoritarians think that the path of economic development is short and simple by snatching away democracy and the rights of the people."

Citing the end of most Communist regimes at the global level, the NC accuses the Communists of spreading rumors that the economy can only get stronger once

industries and investors are crushed by the government. It tries to create an unfavorable environment for the Communist Party through its manifesto without mentioning the opposition's name.

On the other hand, CPN-UML (1991) reiterates its commitment to democratic values and principles in its manifesto. It is clear that the party is reiterating its commitment to democratic values and principles in order to address the anti-communist movement initiated by the NC. Along with the pledge, the Communist Party promises not to incorporate a multiparty system or democracy into its party-centric totalitarianism. The party, which had poor performance in the 1959 polls, makes extra efforts in its manifesto after the political change of 1990. Introducing the slogan of "Communist unification" it appears vigorously on the electoral battlefield. It not only prioritizes its plans and agendas in the manifesto but also introduces measures to tackle the electoral campaigns of other parties. These efforts are made with the intention of establishing itself as a democratic political power despite being a communist party.

In addition to these, CPN-UML (1991) raises the agenda of development strongly and places a high importance on the issue of social justice. Despite the Civil Act (1963) prohibiting untouchability, the practice is still prevalent in society. The party addresses this social problem in its manifesto. It also draws attention towards creating an equity-based society, which is limited only to paper and calls for concrete action. Furthermore, CPN-UML proposes economic development and social justice as issues of equal importance while also criticizing its opponent, the NC. Similar to the NC, this communist party uses a substantial number of words to create an atmosphere against its opponents. The manifesto encompasses CPN-UML's perspective towards the NC as well as the 30-year-long Panchayat system, along with asserting that

despite the NC having public support during the 1959 polls, it failed to preserve public trust. The communist party claims the country had to compromise democracy due to the NC's failure to maintain public trust. The party castigates the Panchayat system and stresses the need for communist unification.

Mid-Term Election and Criticism-Based Agenda

Inter-party criticisms, promotion of self-conducted activities, and commitments towards socio-economic development have become the major themes of manifestos brought forth by political parties in Nepal during subsequent elections. Despite the rise of the NC generally as the strongest party after the restoration of democracy, the country has not experienced political stability. The Parliament formed after the first general election in 1959 came to an early end due to royal takeover in 1960. Subsequent elections in 1991, held after the restoration of democracy, did not fulfill their five-year mandate, leading to mid-term elections in 1994 and a pattern of regular changes in government, followed by party splits. The opportunity for a mid-term election arises with both the ruling and opposition parties losing ground in the democratic process.

Despite intra-party differences within the NC, the party places all the accusations on the main opposition, the CPN-UML. In its manifesto (1994), the party notes:

Since the formation of the NC government, the behavior and treatment of some major opposition parties have become very unharmonious and contrary to parliamentary dignity. Irrespective of Nepali citizens' trust in CPN-UML as a supporting power during the historic people's movement, the party failed to maintain the faith. Consequently, it has become very difficult for our democratic process, in transitional as well as sensitive stages, to fare smoothly. The opposition parties remained continually proactive in launching road

protests, even for the smallest of differences, and in making the situation more violent and chaotic. The trend of rejecting majority decisions and promoting minority chaos has gained traction. All these factors do not allow the country's politics to remain stable.

The NC, in its manifesto for the election, highlights a list of works it has completed during its tenure, particularly in the national economy, including foreign currency reserves and reforms in the export sector, in an attempt to present these as its agenda. The party also aims to take credit for these achievements.

On the other hand, the CPN-UML asserts that the ongoing election outcome is a consequence of the NC's shortcomings, attributing blame to both the party and the ineffective prime minister for the prevailing circumstances. Within its manifesto, the CPN-UML critiques the NC for its perceived failure to uphold its obligations in bolstering the multiparty framework, reinforcing national identity, and delivering relief to the public for fostering the nation's progress. Moreover, the party asserts that during the Congress's current leadership, democratic principles have been violated and compromised, painting the party as increasingly totalitarian in nature.

It also alleges that people continue to suffer from inequality, insecurity, and discrimination as a result of political differences and that those having opinions different than the Congress are being mistreated and discriminated against by the state and the administration, and those believing in communist thoughts are facing hatred and political imprisonment.

The Communist Party also details instances of corruption and irregularities that occurred during the NC's rule in its manifesto. Compared to the defensive tone of the NC's manifesto, the Communist Party's manifesto remains aggressive.

Manifestos Against the Backdrop of Maoist Insurgency

The results of the 1994 polls further deepen the country's political crisis as none of the political parties secure a clear majority. The CPN-UML emerges as the biggest party with 88 seats in the House of Representatives, while the NC secures the second position with 83 seats in the lower assembly. The RPP has 20 seats and is the third largest party in the parliament, but it turns out to be strategically strongest in the parliament. The power game among the parties, including CPN-UML and RPP, makes the parties weaker in their core founding principles. At this time, there are a lot of policy repulsions between the Congress and the Communists. The idea that parties and leaders would do anything for power becomes widespread, while the insurgency launched by the Maoists heightens. The numbers of armed raids and the number of people losing their lives, both by the state and the insurgents, increase steeply. The political parties decide to go to polls under this pretext, and their manifestos for the 1999 elections add some new themes, such as the Maoist people's war and political stability. The 1999 election becomes the last one to be held under the provisions of the 1990 Constitution.

Looking at the agenda offered by individual political parties, the NC adds two new issues in the 1999 polls, the first being the resolution of the political crisis and the second being politics based on norms and values. These agendas, which were neglected in previous manifestos, become highly significant due to the circumstances following the mid-term elections. The NC's manifesto places these issues as the first and second priorities, indicating the party's critical evaluation of the mid-term polls.

In regard to political instability, the NC (1999) states in its electoral document: "The hung HoR caused political instability in the last four and a half years, resulting in the formation and dissolution of several governments. The economic, social, as well as administrative policies and programs are not able to continue."

The manifesto also acknowledges that the Maoist war not only puts pressure on a certain political party, but also threatens the country's democracy. It also acknowledges that the split in the CPN-UML leads to infighting and accusations of corruption among the different factions. In an effort to end the political instability, the Congress declares the formation of a majority government as its main agenda.

In the section on politics based on norms and values, the party clearly states the incidents of sales and purchases of lawmakers, abuse of power and authority, and the rise of disrespectful tendencies. It also pledges to create a peaceful and secure society and to condemn the violent activities conducted by the Maoists.

The NC, claiming to have led a moral protest for political reforms, treats reforms in politics as an important agenda item, while issues of socio-economic development are basically carried forward from previous manifestos.

Contrastingly, the CPN-UML seems to have paid little attention to this issue. Instead, it sets an agenda based on the projects it undertook during its nine-month tenure as a minority government following the 1994 mid-term polls. Along with its agenda of socio-economic development, it focuses on criticizing the NC and CPN-ML. Additionally, it does not fail to comment on the Maoists, who are not participating in the elections.

The manifesto (1999) states:

This is a group of anarchists and terrorists. In the name of revolution and people's war, they are conducting criminal activities, including the killing of cadres and candidates of our party, which have been in the mainstream of the Nepali communist movement. This faction of terrorists is looting, attacking, murdering, and terrorizing the common citizens and defaming the entire communist movement. No matter how much it lauds its revolutionary principles, it is active simply as a tool of domestic as well as foreign reactionaries.

The manifesto of the Communist Party criticizes almost all contending parties, including the NC, RPP, Nepal Sadhavana Party, Nepal Majdur Kisan Party (Rohit faction), CPN-Maoists, CPN-Unified Center, CPN-Masal and CPN-ML. The CPN-UML even creates separate sub-titles to blame other parties in its manifesto, which seems to aim at weakening the other parties' reputations. In its manifesto for the 1999 elections, the party includes the issue of identifying the "murderers" of its leaders, Madan Bhandari and Jibraj Ashrit, and bringing them to justice.

Common Agenda: the Republic at the Center

Political purification does not occur as promised by political parties during the 1999 elections. The NC, which had secured a majority, falls apart. The armed conflict intensifies after the royal palace massacre that saw the killing of a large number of royal members, including the king and queen. The country sees three rounds of emergency due to the war. King Gyanendra, who ascended the throne following the palace massacre, becomes heavily involved in politics. All these events lead to another popular protest. The parliament, revived on the strength of this movement, declared an interim constitution in 2006. The first Constituent Assembly (CA) election is held in 2008 under the spirit of the same constitution. However, the elected CA fails to deliver a constitution, leading to the formation of a technocratic government under the leadership of Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi, which holds the second CA (2013) election.

The dissolved HoR is reformed and enlarged as per the demands of seven political parties in the aftermath of the 2006 protests. The very first meeting of the re-established HoR decides to hold CA elections, as there is "a need for a new constitution to relieve the country from the present serious crisis." The roadmap for the republic state then moves forward gradually. The political parties change their

objectives and founding policies in the first CA election. In this context, the NC (2008) writes, "Discarding its six-decade-long objective of a constitutional monarchy, the NC has made a historic decision to concentrate on the objective of a complete democracy with the inclusion and supremacy of citizens." The pact signed between the seven parties in 2005 lays the foundation for this move. Other parties also follow suit.

On May 8, 2005, the seven parties declare their common commitment, stating: "We commit to stay prepared to end all existing conflicts in the country and to embrace all democratic processes, including the Constituent Assembly."

In both CA elections, the main agenda of all parties becomes the drafting of a new constitution. Except for one party, which presents its own agenda in the second CA election, using aggressive language against other parties. In fact, all parties try to accuse others of the failure of the first CA to draft a constitution in the second CA election. Additionally, they come up with additional agendas, highlighting the work they performed during the first CA.

First Manifesto After the Promulgation of the Constitution

With the promulgation of the constitution in 2015, the CA's five-year tenure ends in 2017. In the same year, the first election is held following the enactment of the constitution. The election is held in two stages – on November 26 and on December 7 – electing the first federal as well as provincial representatives. It is regarded as a significant milestone in the implementation of the constitution. Political parties take this poll as the entry point of political stability. On the eve of this election, two major communist parties, the CPN-UML and the CPN Maoist, enter into unification and launch an election campaign by issuing a unified manifesto. Another big party, the NC, issues its manifesto naming stability as its major agenda.

This election is also considered to be important in terms of political polarization. The unified communist parties and the NC, having faith in democratic socialism, enter the electoral battlefield, pushing forward their own policies and agendas. CPN-UML becomes the most powerful force in the wake of the recently held election. In this context, the unification of the communist parties is deemed crucial from the perspective of political stability and economic prosperity. The unified manifesto of these communist parties (2017) says-

We make this historical declaration of the unification of the two separate communist parties, CPN-UML and the CPN-Maoists, which have remained as the decisive forces in the integration of Nepal's communist revolution on October 3, 2017. As the first step towards the implementation of this declaration, we have gone to the election with nationwide collaboration and communist alliance.

The NC, which suffered defeat in the recent local-level election held under its own leadership, however, comes up with a manifesto with an agenda in traditional style. It also states that the organizing of the upcoming election is its commitment towards laying the cornerstone of a federal inclusive democratic republic. The NC, which usually stayed silent about other parties in the previous elections, makes strong criticisms against the communist alliance this time.

Thus, the manifestos issued by the NC and the Communist alliance look different than what they used to be in the past. As these parties tout their commitments towards political stability and economic prosperity, their firmness towards federalism, the notion that had been their primary agenda in the previous manifestos, seems weakened.

5.9 Summary of the Chapter

Every election hinge upon people's concerns. Upon dissecting the content, it is evident that the public's agenda receives very limited attention in the media, while political subjects dominate the landscape. During periods marked by elections, the implementation of the constitution, and the pursuit of federalism, media coverage is visibly directed towards these issues, while leaving agendas tied to the daily lives of voters comparatively marginalized. Despite newsroom determining topic prioritization, the public agenda fails to gain substantial traction. The consensus among most editors (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P9, P10) acknowledges content-related weaknesses. According to the experts, there is an observable deficiency in the media's presentation.

In light of the media's limited involvement with the public agenda, political parties fail to accord it a formidable priority. Despite political parties introducing development concerns through their manifestos, the establishment of a robust policy agenda remains elusive. Manifestos often lean toward populist issues, inviting critique from experts who perceive them as mere catalogs of avoided actions. Voter survey validates the unequal references between newspaper preferences and party manifestos. Content analysis underscores the in inadequacy of public content newspapers, and the manifestos' inability to find resonance. Simultaneously, insights from survey participants and experts indicate that efforts to establish a public agenda have fallen short.

CHAPTER-VI

POLICY AGENDA DURING ELECTIONS

6.1 Background

This chapter aims to explain on policy agenda, with a particular focus on the news coverage and manifesto issued by the political parties during elections. The manifesto is regarded as the authentic agenda of any political party, which political parties utilize to reach out to voters and persuade them to support their cause. This chapter examines the policy agenda in media and in manifestos.

6.2 Parties Policy in Newspaper

According to Kharel (2012), it has been again and again demonstrated in Nepal as to how the media has consistently failed to reflect the general public mood in the run up to elections. The result validates the above statement of Kharel. Almost all media outlets tend to treat major political parties and their leaders as their primary sources of information during election times. In this context, the study looks into the significance of how political leaders deal with policy agendas. Of the total published items in the specific one month of the 2017 election, the parties and leaders as source of information fail to raise their policy agendas in 98.15 percent of the newspaper content.

Despite the fact that elections are conducted to select lawmakers who are expected to work in making policies, the leaders are found to not realize the importance of such a pressing issue. Instead, they engaging in creating buzz around populist issues and activities. A negligible number of news articles are generated with policy issues at the center.

Of the limited policy agendas circulated in the news content, most of them are related to commitments and plans for development. These plans and commitments are

not announced spontaneously by the leaders, but appear in the form of answers to questions put forward by journalists. These agendas are mentioned in the news in a way that benefits the leader's own party. The development of Madhesh receives central space in such agenda issues.

The content analysis reveals that only 1.85% of the items analyzed are associated with political sources promoting policy issues. In contrast, the overwhelming majority—98.15% of the 602 items—are attributed to non-political sources addressing policy-related matters.

These limited pieces magnify political parties' works and activities while presenting their agendas. Some leaders, who would otherwise remain silent, come forward to write articles linking their election campaigns with development projects during the election period. For instance, Gagan Thapa, a leader of the NC, appears in *Kantipur* daily, publishing two articles within a month. Similarly, an article by KP Oli, president of CPN-UML, is published. Many politicians from both CPN-UML and NC adopt this tactic. Most of these writers do not contribute opinion pieces to any newspaper at other times.

On the other hand, the articles based on party manifestos seem to prioritize policy issues. They have hints that most of the time the manifestos fail to deliver on their promises. Such articles criticize the parties for comprising populist programs to win votes without properly evaluating the situation of the mass public. The writers of such articles do not criticize any particular party but seem to have a minute analysis of the manifestos of all parties to denounce them equally. Some articles cover issues such as women, environment, and human rights, which fail to be included or properly included in the manifestos.

6.3 Coverage of Policy Agenda

It would be unjust to say that political parties alone are responsible for setting agendas. Instead, the general public and the media are equally responsible. Of the total, the media has not included issues relating to policy agendas in published content. Only 13.5 percent print materials have raised this issue.

The issue of policy agendas seems to have more space in articles than in the news. Such articles have made sharp criticism against parties raising concerns in areas like a decline in the turnout of voters, rampant corruption, and sluggish development works, among others.

News, editorials, and opinion articles raise issues such as lack of public interest towards the election, disable-friendly voting stations, and misuse of money and resources during the poll, lack of voting education, unification of communist parties, public expectations for development, agriculture and farmers, failure of parties in development, mobilization of resources to secure an election ticket, investment in the social sector and policy-level complications, misuse of power in the election, gender equality, voter rights of women, foreign policy and neighboring nations, shortcomings of proportionate voting, implementation of the election code of conduct, looking out for youth leadership, implementation of manifesto, expectations of voters, election partnership, corruption, concerns of Dalits, economic development, electoral voting and security of the public.

Similarly, issues concerning hydropower potential, distortion during the election, restructuring of the state, victims of floods and landslides, ethnicity and alcohol consumption, restructuring of the EC, crimes under political protection, conflict and others are given space in the printed materials in one way or the other.

The media seems to have given relatively little space to policy-oriented agendas. This vital issue, ignored by political parties, is raised by newsrooms in the

forms of editorials. In their editorial the newspapers not only take up problems relating to the agenda, but they also try to shed light on the measures pretending solution.

Issues concerning regional development also seem to have found space in the media. The reformation in political parties' working style had also surfaced as a solution. Opinion pieces also demand the development of a common thought process among the parties.

To sum up, the media gives space to policy agendas on the basis of diversity of issues and concerns. However, not all issues have been included. The media has tried to incorporate some of these issues in their editorials.

Public Approach to Media for Policy Agenda

The survey data suggest that a majority of respondents (62.31%) agree that media often covers the issues that they feel are important. Similarly, a significant proportion of respondents (76.26%) agree that newspapers cover people's agenda during an election. However, slightly more than half of the respondents (52.23%) agree that the media follows the issues it raised earlier, even after the elections.

A large number of respondents (75.67%) agree that they have approached the media to cover the agenda that they feel is important, but only 59.05 percent agree that the media has supported them in establishing their agenda. This suggests that while people are willing to approach the media to raise issues, they feel are important, they may not always receive the necessary support from the media to establish their agenda.

Overall, the data suggest that people generally trust the media to cover issues they feel are important, but they may not always see the media as a partner in establishing their own agenda. This has implications for Agenda-setting theory, as it suggests that while the media may have the power to set the agenda, people are still active participants in the process and can approach the media to raise their own issues.

News of Manifestos in the Newspapers

Based on the content analysis, it is found that newspapers demonstrate a reluctance to cover stories based on political manifestos. Out of a total of 602 items that appeared in newspapers, 3.82 percent (23 items) were solely based on political manifestos. In addition, 6.14 percent (37 items) of the content mentioned political manifestos as one of the information sources while using multiple news sources. The data suggest that newspapers prioritize other sources of information over political manifestos when covering news stories. It appears that newspapers cover the formal news of manifestos issued by political parties in the form of hard news. However, none of the contents of deep lens an issue or offer through analyses of the manifestos. This suggests that newsrooms do not dedicate the necessary time and resources for comprehensive analysis of political manifestos. On other hand, the survey data shows that the majority of the respondents agree that they usually find major issues regarding manifestos of political parties in newspapers, with a percentage of 81.31 percent. This indicates that newspapers play a key role in providing information about political parties' manifestos to the public though editors agreed that newspapers are left behind while covering manifestos. It also indicates that people rely on newspapers as a source of information to form their opinions and make informed decisions during the election process.

During KIIs, all editors expressed a similar conclusion regarding election manifestos, namely that they are what they saw as a not-to-do list of promises by political parties and leaders. This perception may explain why there is limited coverage of manifestos in newspapers, as editors may believe that the information contained within them is not significant enough to warrant in-depth coverage.

P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P10, P12, P13, P14 agree on that the newsrooms also fail to do follow-up reporting on which of the proposed agendas of the party or the

promises made to the public during the previous election get implemented. This shows the weakness of the news media in making political parties accountable through their reporting. Nevertheless, editorials and opinion pieces on the manifestos seem to have found some space, albeit very few in number.

The analysis dwells upon the ignorance of the media in bringing out the real public agenda and the issues concerning their lives. The answer to the question, "what does the public really want?" is neglected in the media. The public expect the media to present a depth analysis on the promised agendas of the parties, the real expectation of the public and the actual outcome.

However, newsrooms appear to provide space for commentaries by analysts and writers on the manifestos. *Kantipur* published an article titled "Kaslai ra Kina Mat" [Vote for Whom and Why] (October 30, 2017), in which columnist Achyut Wagle states, "Writing the election manifesto has become an unnecessary and burdensome ritual for the party. However, in a democracy, the implementation of the manifesto's commitment to economic and social transformation addresses the people's wishes and needs."

Fewer in number, the manifestos are scrutinized in articles and editorials. The published articles draw skepticism regarding the implementation of the manifestos into reality. The analysts also conclude that the parties would fail to live up to the public expectations. Criticizing populist programs brought forward by the parties, the analysts seem to share a consensus that Nepali do not cast votes by reading manifestos.

6.4 Policy Agenda in Manifestos

Manifestos are written documents that outline the policy agenda of a particular party and serve as the party's primary communication material for the election. They are an important tool for political parties to convey their messages to the public through various communication channels.

In the words of Eder, Jenny and Muller (2016) “three functions manifesto can serve are to provide a compendium of valid party positions, to establish supremacy over all other policy positions that may be attributed to the party and thereby streamline the party's campaign, and to use as a campaign tool to directly inform voters (p. 76).”

These documents, which are typically made public during elections, reflect the current principles, ideas, and strategies of a particular party, as they outline the party's policy priorities and perspective on social and economic development. Nepal has a history of political parties presenting manifestos, dating back to the first general election in 1959.

The data from the survey among voters/newsreaders suggest that Nepali voters are politically attentive. A majority of respondents (82.20%) agrees with the statement that they compare political parties' commitments before voting. Only 17.80 percent disagreed with the statement. These findings indicate that for a significant portion of the population, political parties' commitments play a role in their decision-making when it comes to voting.

Table 6.1

Political Interest of Voters/Readers

Compare political parties' commitments before voting	Percent
Agree	82.20%
Disagree	17.80%
Total Participation	338 voters/readers

Source: Field Study, 2022

In Nepal, election manifestos are seen as a combination of a party's plans, ideology and agenda, as well as criticism of other parties. The periodic election manifestos and the recurring issues present in these documents highlight the political instability in Nepal. Almost all periodic elections are marked by some kind of

transition, the effects of which can be seen in the manifestos. Changes in the political system, party, and struggles for power all impact elections in Nepal. The political instability of the country overshadows the issues of concern to the general public in the manifestos, which often seem more ambitious than realistic. In this regard, on November 9, 2017, *Annapurna Post* publishes an editorial titled "Karmakandi Ghosanapartra" [Ritual Manifesto], criticizing political parties for the content of their manifestos. On the same day, *Nagarik* publishes an editorial titled "ApatyarilaAaswasan" [Unreliable Assurances]. In contrast with the two privately owned newspapers, the *Gorkhapatra* publishes an article titled "Aba Sambriddhiko Palo" [Now the Era of Prosperity].

As Krishna Khanal, a prominent academician and columnist, writes in *Kantipur* (November 12, 2017), "The question arises: Who writes these manifestos? Who reads them? Who understands them? The party leader is expected to drive the election issue and campaign, but this is often not evident in the context of Nepal." It is reflected in the voter's opinion as well as the experts. All participants of the KIIs agree that the election manifesto is a formal document that is not intended to be implemented due to political instability and lack of accountability, which are the main reasons for this. However, all of them agree on the statement that the manifesto is the authentic ideological as well as the socio-political agenda of the party.

It is observed that "political stability" has consistently been a top priority in the manifestos of all parties in Nepal, but the country does not experience it since the first general election in 1959. The parliament formed after the first election comes to an early end due to changes in the political system, and subsequent elections in 1991, held after the restoration of democracy, do not complete their five-year mandate. This leads to mid-term elections and a pattern of regular changes in government, followed

by party splits. By the time of the 1999 election, the country already faces insurgency. The armed conflict led by the Maoists, internal conflicts within the ruling NC party, and the palace massacre all contribute to the uncertain direction of the political landscape.

In 2006, Nepal enters another political system, and the elections held in 2008 and 2013 result from this transition. The 2017 election, the first held under the new federal democratic republic system established by the new constitution, is marked by the participation of more than 100 parties. Despite the high number of parties, the election is not inclusive, as several parties and groups are excluded from the process. The 2017 election also sees a low voter turnout compared to the previous election. Overall, the political parties focus on their own political and strategic interests in presenting their manifestos rather than prioritizing solutions to the public's problems.

Section '4' of the Act related to political parties, 2073 BS in Nepal stipulates the work, duties, and rights of political parties in the country (GoN, 2017). According to this law, political parties are responsible for bringing economic and social development policies, plans, and programs to the public. As such, election manifestos play a crucial role in outlining a party's policies and priorities, thereby enabling voters to make informed decisions.

When addressing the defined job, political parties issue a manifesto that focuses on their ideological position, including foreign policies, governance, human rights, economic policies and social policies.

6.5 Political Agenda

Eder, Jenny, and Müller (2016) describe manifesto as “a document that provides economic access to how their party sees the real world, and the resulting blueprints or guidelines for policy change, is certainly advantageous for those who are responsible for spreading the party message to the people in face-to-face contacts in constituencies (p. 76).”

Political stability has been a long-term stable game in Nepal, the impact of which is reflected in the electoral agenda adopted by the political parties. Since the 1991 election was the first one following the restoration of democracy, the major parties of that time, the NC and the CPN-UML, set multiparty system and democracy as their most prioritized agendas. The parties that substituted the 30-year-long Panchayati rule with a multiparty system through the people's movement seem to give it a permanent structure. Along with the multiparty democracy, they also emphasized the fundamental rights of the citizens. While the NC accommodated "Constitutional Monarchy" in its manifesto, the CPN-UML stayed silent on this. Similarly, the NC raised the issue of the rule of law, whereas the CPN-UML brought to the center the issue of laborers' rights and rights of organized bargaining in its manifesto. In this election, both parties make their attempts to establish the rights of the citizens.

During the 1994 mid-term election, the agenda of the previous election receives a similar kind of importance. But the commitment to strengthen democratic norms and practices receives a higher position. The CPN-UML adds its political agenda to this election, calling for the rights of the citizens in the amendment of the constitution. The communist party also highlights the importance of free and fair elections. It also talks about judicial independence. The NC, on the other hand, does not bring forward any additional political agendas as the CPN-UML does. NC pushes forward issues of nationality, democratic socialism, human rights, religious rights, and local self-government as its election agendas. Despite having majority in the previous election, the party which had hardships in governance, could not introduce new agenda in this poll.

As held against the backdrop of the Maoist insurgency, peace and security happen to be the most highlighted agenda item during the 1999 general election. All

parties set this as their prioritized agenda, followed by the issue of political stability due to the unstable politics that surfaced after the mid-term election. The CPN-UML proposed the identification of the "killer" of its party leader, Madan Bhandari, who was the propagator of people's multiparty democracy in this election. It mentions identifying and penalizing the Bhandari assassin in its manifesto. While good governance becomes another important agenda of this party, the CPN-UML gives additional space to the CPN-Maoists in its manifesto, labeling them as terrorists.

The NC again fails to introduce new plans and agendas in this election but establishes the decentralization of power as one of the critical agendas.

Restoration of peace becomes every party's remarkable agenda during the first CA elections held in 2008. The term "prajatantra" [democracy] is replaced by the new word, "loktantra" [People's democracy] in the manifestos. The CA, state restructuring, federalism, and the formation of a secular state are some of the other important subjects endorsed by the parties in their respective manifestos. Unity among the political parties as well as democratic exercise with inclusive characteristics receive greater weightage. The end of the monarchy and the establishment of a republican state appear as a hot cake in the documents of all parties. Completion of the peace process and providing it a legal status as well as the promulgation of the constitution through CA also receive topmost status as electoral agendas. Looking into the manifestos of all political parties, they do not seem much different in their political agendas.

As the first CA fails to deliver the promised constitution, the manifestos of the parties in the 2013 second CA polls are featured with inter-party criticisms and accusations. The CPN-UML that brought into use "loktantra" [democracy], introduces new terminology – "agragami loktantra" [progressive people's democracy]. The NC,

promising to deliver a democratic constitution, envisions the agenda of state restructuring with seven provinces as well as a strong local government – issues which the CPN-UML leaves unaddressed. The communist party presents economic development and other issues impacting public lives as its agenda. It also commits to promulgating regulations within a year. Blaming opponent parties for their failure in drafting a constitution, the party carries over the remaining agendas from the 2008 manifesto.

The Communist alliance becomes the most important agenda in the 2017 election. The unification of CPN-UML and CPN-Maoist overshadows other important agendas. The unified parties propose political stability and economic prosperity as their primary agenda items in the unified manifesto. Issues of peace and equality also find a place in the manifesto, pledging to take the country into a new era of development by concluding the peace process and ensuring good governance. On the other hand, the NC uses the maximum number of words to promise the implementation of federalism and creation of a justice-based society. Yet again, the agendas of this party are not much different from those of its past.

All of the experts who participated in the KIIs acknowledge the inclusion of political parties' ideological positions in their respective manifestos. However, the majority of the experts interviewed claim that the practical implementation of these ideologies is often lacking. P9, for instance, notes that the NC has espoused "Socialism" as its guiding ideology since 1959, but has largely adhered to capitalist outlook in practice. Similarly, while communist parties have embraced the theoretical principles of communism, they have not consistently implemented these principles in practice.

P1 argues that political parties in Nepal are not serious about ideology. If they were, the kind of political alliances currently seen would not have occurred. This sentiment is echoed by P8, who believes that competition is more about populism than ideology.

P12 comments on the significance of manifestos, stating that they have lost their meaning in Nepali society, which has been affected by politics. She suggests that people have already made up their minds about who they will vote for, and there is a need for voters to read and question manifestos.

6.6 Social Agenda

Social agendas, to a large extent, directly connect with people's lives. Since social issues directly impact the common mass, political parties tend to incorporate them in their manifestos. Social issues also set populist agendas. In this regard, this study looks into the degree of significance the parties have laid upon the social issues.

Education and public health remain topmost social agendas with political parties placing these issues in their manifestos since the first general election of 1991 following the 1990 restoration of democracy. From the gender perspective, women's education and health are magnified. While the NC prioritizes women's rights, the CPN-UML calls for free education for women. Showing concerns over the growing population, both the parties incorporate population control as their agenda. The CPN-UML gives importance to the issue of laborers' rights, while the health of the children also grabs the party's attention. Easy access to transportation and communication is a common priority set by the parties in their manifestos.

All political parties treat most of the issues that they present during the previous election with similar importance during the 1994 mid-term elections, while giving further priority to some other issues. For instance, the agenda of poverty

alleviation receives elevated status. The issues of children, women's rights, and women's participation in business get more importance this time than in the previous elections. The CPN-UML proposes a slogan, "Home for the squatters" and also brings forward the issues of gender equality and rights of the laborers as its important electoral agendas.

The social issues gain greater gravity in the 2008 CA election than in the three elections of the past as the parties try to invent solutions to those problems in line with the state restructuring. For instance, it is mentioned in the manifestos that the education and health sectors would be reformed under the provincial structure. Similarly, peace in itself could never be only a political problem. The parties deal with this subject keeping in view that any kind of revolution and conflict is the result of social problems and such other causes. The manifestos also promise to resolve caste-based and geographical discrimination. The CPN-UML places importance on the rights of women and children. It brings to light the social development of Madhesh and the Karnali regions. Free health and education emerge as the significant agendas. The NC includes property rights and the rights of the Madhesi as well as differently abled people under its priority list.

Most of the previous social issues are reflected during the second polling for CA. The issue of foreign employment becomes an important agenda item. The Communist Party demanded the stoppage of Nepali youths' recruitment in the Indian Army during the 1959 but CPN-UML now lobbies for safe foreign employment. It promotes social security schemes and stresses the need for the elevation of life-standards of Dalits and underprivileged as well as the residents of Madhesh, and Karnali regions. The NC, continuing its previous approach, brings the issues of Madhesi laborers, indigenous and dalit under its primary lists. It also raises the issue of food security, nutrition, and sanitation.

The 2017 election again witnesses a repetition of the social agendas of the previous ones. The reconstruction issue, initiated following the 2015 mega earthquake, is one of the major agendas. The CPN-UML and the CPN-Maoists jointly give this issue higher dominance. The parties that would talk about education in the past elections mention quality education this time. All other social issues are replicated from the old documents.

It appears that the social issues or public agendas endorsed in manifestos are repeated frequently. Participants in KIIs agree that the social agendas in manifestos are often just empty promises. According to P14, when reading election manifestos, we can find that 70 percent of the agendas are repeated in every election. His opinion aligns with the survey data and manifesto analysis.

6.7 Economic Agenda

The political parties never fail to introduce ambitious agenda of economic development in almost all elections. While not bothering to review which of the declared agendas get executed and which are left unimplemented, they keep on presenting mega economic plans and development projects to allure the citizens. The CPN-UML and the NC seem to have different takes on how they look at the private sector. Unlike Congress, which advocates privatization in its manifestos, the communist party appears to be more concerned with labor issues.

Both the NC, which is guided by the principle of democratic socialism, and the CPN-UML, which seeks to communism, present their economic agendas embracing private investment and foreign direct investment (FDI) in the 1991 election. The NC issues its manifesto, giving priority to the private sector for the country's economic development. The party proposes a mixed-economic model, privatization, and economic transformation through FDI as its agenda. The CPN-

UML, while pushing forward the idea of regional development, says that the FDI could be accepted. Both the parties list agriculture, tourism, and hydropower development as important areas for economic growth. They recognize the role of industrialization in the country's development. They claim that the country's economic status could be enhanced through the utilization of natural resources as it would help to bring positive changes in the lives of people. The CPN-UML also seeks master plans for the economic development.

Both the parties, in the 1994 mid-term election, float the same agendas of economic transformation that they had done before. The CPN-UML demands the termination of feudal land ownership, which, it asserts, could be implemented through progressive land-reform. The NC also raises the land reformation issue but without mentioning the matter of land-ownership. The CPN-UML further presents issues like progressive taxation, foreign aid control, industrialization, and the reformation of banks and financial institutions (BFIs), among others, as the basis of economic development in its manifesto. The NC, while, mainly focuses on improvement in the per capita income, liberal economic policy, export, foreign aid and privatization. It envisions economic transformation through the utilization of information and technology.

The political parties continue to present ambitious agendas of economic development in almost all elections. While not bothering to review which of the declared agendas got executed and which were left unimplemented, they keep on presenting mega economic plans and development projects to allure the citizens. The CPN-UML and the NC have different takes on how they look at the private sector. Unlike the NC, which advocates privatization in its manifestos, the communist party appears to be more concerned with labor issues. The NC gives higher significance to

the agenda of economic prosperity, especially the issue of economic development at the provincial level. It also gives equal importance to the agenda of physical infrastructure. The party highlights the need for modernization of agriculture as well as the mobilization of natural resources in its manifesto.

Towards the agenda of economic reformation, the unified manifesto of the CPN-UML and the CPN-Maoists appears even more revolutionary. They propose ideas like upgrading the country to the list of developing nations within five years and achieving sustainable development goals, among others. Issues of Nijgadh International Airport, high-speed railway and international water-route are also incorporated in their manifesto.

Overall, apart from CA polls, when the parties maintain some differences in the political and economic agendas, they seem to be in harmony in pushing similar kinds of social agendas. The political agendas of all parties remain more or less the same during the CA polls.

The NC, from the beginning, adopted the policy of encouraging the private sector, while the CPN-UML, which did not seem very confident regarding the private sector in the beginning, gradually became flexible. Some agendas differ when it comes to the economic development front in the context of political changes. Nevertheless, the election manifesto does not seem to reflect the founding principles of either political party. Both parties, having different political thoughts, also become pro-public in the context of development. However, the parties fail to become accountable when it comes to the execution of the promises made in the manifestos.

Table 6.2*Major Key Words of Agenda in Manifesto: CPN-UML and NC During Elections*

Year	Party	Political agendas	Economic agendas	Social agendas
			Master plan for economic development, Local development, Human resources, Regional development, Agriculture, governance, Private and foreign investment, Industrial development, Hydropower, Tourism, Transportation	Population control, Child health, Women's education, Welfare for workers, Public health, Free education for women, Social security
	CPN UML	Multiparty democracy, Fundamental rights, Right to organize, Right to collective bargaining, Foreign policy		
1991	NC	Democratic socialism, Multiparty democracy, Constitutional monarchy, Fundamental rights, Legal rights, Foreign policy	Mix economic policy, Privatization, Foreign investment, Hydropower, Tourism, Natural resources, Employments, Decentralization, Local development	Education, Health, Child welfare, Transportation, Communication, Population control, Women's right
1994	CPN UML	Strengthening multiparty democracy, Fundamental and democratic rights, Amendment of the constitution to ensure sovereignty of the people, Free and fair election, Independent judiciary, Human right, Foreign policy	End of feudal land ownership, Agricultural development, Master-plan for the development, Progressive tax system, Downsizing foreign aid, Industrialization, Improve banking system, Employment, Local	Salter for squatter, Population control, Fundamental rights, Educational right, Health, Governance, Equality by gender, Labor rights

		development, Regional development, Tourism, Transportation, Communication: Media as an industry, Hydropower	
		Economic development, Per-capita income, Liberal economic policy, Priority for private sector, Tourism, Agriculture, Human resource development, Workforce, Irrigation, Public transportation, Export, Foreign aid, Decentralization of sources, Science and technology	Poverty alleviation, Women' involvement in business, Children's and women's right
NC	Nationality, Democratic socialism, Human rights, Religion right, Local Self-Governance, Foreign policy		
		Poverty alleviation, Long and short-term development projects, Foreign loan and grant, Privatization on selective way, Private sector, Agriculture, Hydropower, Industrialization, Tourism, Infrastructure development, Transportation,	Education, Health, Public participation on development, Employment
CPN	Political stability, Good governance, Multiparty democracy, Human right, Peace and security, Investigation of the culprits of Madan Bhandari's murder		
UML			
1999	NC	Democratic Socialism, Political stability, Good governance, Decentralization	Education, Health, Poverty alleviation, Social security, Women empowerment

		Employment, Transportation, Cooperatives	
		Constituent Assembly, Democracy, Peace and Journey to progress, Unity, cooperation and understanding among democratic forces, Political stability, State restructuring, End of monarchy and establishment of republic, Inclusiveness with economic rights, Provincial political structure, Egalitarian state system, National government and new constitution, Human rights, Fundamental rights, Political freedom, Right to equality, Secularism, Federal Democratic republic, Inclusive democracy	Health, Education, Resources mobilization between and province, Peace, Social security, Good governance, Women's right, Children's' right, Free education, Free health service, Special privileges for Madhesh and Karnali
CPN		A national economy oriented toward socialism, Public-Cooperative and Private as pillar for economic development, Foreign investment on the basis of national interest, Monetary policy, Revolutionary land reform,	
UML		Hydropower, Transportation, Tourism	
2008 NC		Constituent Assembly, Constitution, National unity, Peace, Democracy, Pluralism, National consensus, Federal democracy, Provincial structure, Mixed electoral system, Inclusion, Free from	Finance commission, Investment promotion from government and private sector, Entrepreneurship, Foreign trade, Infrastructure, Transport, Communication, Fast track, Cooperative Employment, Press freedom,

	violence: Sustainable and peaceful democracy, Transparent and responsible politics, Secularism, Multiparty democracy, Public participation in constitution making, Good governance	and community development, Agriculture, Tourism, Industrialization, Foreign employment, Hydropower, Open economic policy	Worker's rights, Third gender, Madhesi and least developed, Women, disable, and children's rights
			Human rights, Fundamental rights, Education and health as fundamental rights, Social security, Foreign employment, Women's rights, children's rights, Dalit and minority, Tarai-Madesh, Karnali, Disability
CPN	Constitution, Federal republic Nepal, "Aragami loktantra", Social justice, Political freedom, Secularism, Inclusive democracy, Good governance,	Socialist oriented economy, Agriculture, Hydropower, Tourism, Human resources, National industry and foreign investment,	
UML			
2013	NC Constitution, Local level election, Creation of a democratic constitution, National unity and integrity, Civil rights, Supremacy of the constitution, Fundamental rights, Proportional inclusion, Inclusive state structure, Multiparty democratic system, State restructuring and federalism, Basis of	Agriculture, Tourism, Hydropower, Industry, Sustainable development, Economic growth, Environment for investment, Infrastructure development, Land reform, Transport, Tarai-Madhesh special program, Karnali special program	Social justice, Health, Water and Sanitation, Education, Nutritional security, Consumer right, Women, Dalit, Indigenous, Madhesi, Workers

		state building: Identity and power, Seven province, Strong Local level			
		Left alliance, Peace, prosperity, and equality, Socialism oriented constitution, Multiparty democracy, Peace process, End of all the remnants of feudal exploitation, Unequal treaty, Good governance	CPN UML	Economic development, Target for the status of developing nation within five years, Sustainable development, Land reform, Agriculture, Hydropower, Transportation, High speed railway, Nijgad airport, National and international waterway transportation, Tourism, Industry and mining, Human resources, Cooperatives, Labor issues	Quality education, Health service, Social-security, Consumer right, Reconstruction and disaster management
2017	NC	Implementation of federalism, Inclusive democracy and human right, Inclusion and empowerment, Rightful society, Good governance		Economic prosperity, Natural resources, Tourism, Employment with dignity, Modernizing agriculture, Renaissance of industry, Human resources, NRN and foreign employment, Cooperatives, Infrastructural development, Hydropower, Transportation, Tarai- Madesh, Provincial possibilities of economic growth	Social security, Commitment of social progress, Quality education and health, Social security, Women empowerment

Source: Field Study, 2022

6.8 Tone Toward Opponents

As Eder, Jenny, And Müller (2016) note regarding election manifesto, “Political parties may provide such documents not only to ease the job of their candidates, allowing them to devote more time to actual campaigning rather than preparing for it, but also to streamline the campaign (p-76).” As they argue, it creates limitations and restrictions for election campaigns. Political parties do not only share and communicate their agendas with the public as well as the potential voters through their manifestos. They also convey anti-campaign messages against the thoughts and strategies of other opposing parties based on their manifesto. Nepal's political parties tend to have a negative tone against their opponents. The 2008 CA poll is the only election in the country where none of the political parties gave space to criticisms and accusations against other parties in their manifestos. Following the Maoist insurgency and the comprehensive peace agreement, based on the foundation of electing a Constituent Assembly, with the aim of drafting a new constitution, all political parties had a single objective. All of them gave equal importance to the agenda of the formation of the CA and the delivery of the new constitution through it, eventually leading the nation towards a new direction. In all other elections, the parties attempted to take credit for success and blame others for wrong-doings.

From the very first election of 1959 to the most recent 2022 poll, the parties have almost always used negative expressions against their opponents in the manifestos of all elections. However, while setting a negative agenda against other parties, they fail to back up their claims and accusations with statistics and concrete evidence. The study of the manifestos presents a different psychology of the parties. The more they become weak the more they use negative language against others. For instance, in the 2017 election, the negative tone used by the NC exhibited its

weakened position following the election alliance of two communist parties. The party used 30 sentences against the CPN-UML and spent another 18 sentences against the CPN-Maoists in its manifesto. In contrast, the communist alliance in its manifesto used only two sentences to criticize the NC. While denying the accusation that the two communist parties tried to bring a communist reign to the country, the alliance did not mention the name of the NC.

Political parties continue to exhibit this kind of threatened psychology in 2022 elections as well, when the CPN-UML uses a large number of words in criticizing the NC. Not only the NC, but the CPN-UML also continues to make criticisms against other parties by creating a sub-title in its manifesto. The election is being held against the backdrop of the separation of a bigger group, CPN-ML, from the founding CPN-UML. The NC argues that the division is the outcome of an internal struggle within the CPN-UML party, stating that every party is undergoing some kind of internal disturbance.

Political parties come up against one another with greater magnitude during election. All parties make an escape-attempt, blaming other parties for the failure of past attempts at formulating a new constitution. While the CPN-Maoists blame the NC and the CPN-UML for the failure of the first CA, the NC targets the CPN-Maoists and the CPN-UML for the same. The CPN-UML also follows the same line of accusation, blaming the two other parties.

The comments against other parties do not look less aggressive during other elections. The CPN-UML continues to be the most vociferous in accusing others. Despite the NC staying silent about the CPN-UML, the latter makes sharp criticism against the NC.

6.9 Voters' Take on Manifestos

Based on insights gathered through the KIIs, all participants are in agreement that political parties' manifestos hold the role of authoritative agendas in elections. However, it's crucial to also consider the viewpoint of voters on this matter.

Analysis of the survey data reveals that a majority of participants (65%) acknowledge political parties' manifestos as their authoritative agendas, while 35% do not share this sentiment. This suggests a certain degree of consensus among the general public regarding the significance of political parties' manifestos.

The survey findings also indicate that a significant section of people reads political parties' manifestos to gain insights into their election strategies. Precisely, 76% of participants concur that they engage with manifestos for this purpose, while 24% do not share this perspective.

Additionally, the study implies that reading manifestos might not necessarily sway voters' decisions. Specifically, 65% of participants reported that their voting preferences remained unchanged after reading manifestos, while 35% reported a change in their choices.

6.10 New Media and Policy Issues

Throughout the history of media development, the emergence of the new media has directly challenged the traditional media. In the 1920s and the 1940s, radio and television respectively challenged newspapers in the west whereas the new media after 2000. Today, the second generation of internet technology has given rise to online and social media, which have altered the news consumption habits of audiences and newsrooms alike.

According to survey participants, the emergence of social media has directly challenged newsrooms (91.39%). They suggest that online and social media have

changed their news consumption habits (89.61%) and have dominated the Agenda-setting role of the traditional media (90.21%). However, newspaper subscribers (82.49%) agree that the content of social media may not go through professional editing processes, including information verification. Despite this, people are largely attracted to social media due to the absence of effective gatekeeping stages present in traditional media. Furthermore, political parties have begun using social media to disseminate their policies to a wider audience. The majority participants of KIIs agree that social media has transformed people's information consumption habits. In this regard, P2 highlights social media often carrying the same agenda as traditional media, especially newspapers. P6 believes that audience habits will change automatically once they realize that social media content is not as thoroughly processed as news from the newsroom.

During elections, political parties present their policy agendas through the announcement of their manifesto. However, due to limited coverage of their policy agendas through the traditional media channels, political parties have started using social media as an essential tool to disseminate their policies effectively. The modern technology and reach of social media have become essential for political parties to communicate their policies effectively. Nepali political parties have recognized the influential power of social media and have begun to use it to disseminate their policy agendas. The local level election of 2022 serves as a case study for the use of social media by Nepali political parties to disseminate policy agendas.

6.11 Summary of the Chapter

Nepali society showcases a noteworthy political awareness and consciousness, as evidenced by statistics. People meticulously scrutinize a party's vision and manifesto, maintaining strict oversight of their implementation. However, there's a

growing disillusionment with political parties concerning their follow-up action. The manifesto issued by a political party stands as a potent policy agenda. In the electoral context, political stability has consistently been a fixture in the policy agenda. Yet, despite its recurrent presence, this policy objective has yet to be comprehensively addressed in any election.

Furthermore, parties invariably set policy agendas for each election. When these agendas fall short of effective implementation, people's dissatisfaction remains palpable. While political, social, and economic agendas are articulated by parties, the sticking point remains implementation. Experts have interpreted manifestos as mere to-do lists, substantiating this viewpoint. The presentation of extensive development plans without actual implementation has gradually intensified dissatisfaction with the manifesto. Even editors acknowledge that newsrooms treat policy provisions of manifestos as pre-prepared material.

CHAPTER-VII

NEWSROOM AGENDA PRIORITIZATION

7.1 Background

This chapter discuss the position of broadsheets in election 2017. It explains the priority of newspapers, tone toward political parties, issue attributes, objectives of the news content along with campaign coverage, and public perceptions. The contents of newspapers are analyzed for 30 days before the voting day of the Election 2017. Altogether 602 newspaper items are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Similarly, the voters' perception on newsroom are analyzed in this chapter.

7.2 Priority of Newspapers

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staffs, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A comprehensive analysis of the coverage, editorials and op-ed pages of the newspapers selected for this study is presented. News that appears on the first page is of higher significance than those featured on subsequent pages. The first page also represents news published in the succeeding pages of any newspapers, as spillovers or remaining news from the first pages are carried over to other pages. Therefore, the first-page information along with the carried-over information is drawn for this study.

On the other hand, editorials provide a glimpse of the complete perspective of any newsroom. It sets the notion of a concerned newspaper towards a given subject matter. However, not every issue that is covered in a newspaper becomes a take for an editorial due to very limited space, so only issues of utmost value and relevance make way for an editorial. The content analysis of an editorial is done to understand a newspaper's viewpoint towards a particular agenda.

It is not necessary for any article or write-up that appears in the op-ed or opposite to the editorial page to be in sync with the editorial perspective. However, the prioritization of such articles is also set by the editorial team. The team decides which and whose articles are to be printed. Hohenberg (2007) explains that editorials generally reflect and test the character of the writer as well as the flavor of the newspaper (p. 385). As the op-ed pages hold considerable value within newspapers, analyzing them represents another essential component of this study.

Table 7.1

Classification of Newspaper Contents

Content	Number of Contents	Percentage
Editorial	57	9.47%
Soft news	82	13.62%
Hard news	236	39.20%
Interviews	11	1.83%
Infographics	2	0.33%
Article	214	35.55%
Total	602	100%

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 7.1 presents an overview of newspaper coverage during the election 2017, predominantly focusing on formal events and hard news. A total of 602 print materials relating to elections are published during the study period, a majority of them have been featured in the form of hard news as well as opinion pieces. During this period, a substantial number of editorials have also been published. Infographics, in the form of news content, are few in number. Of the only two infographics – the election-related statistics in the form of a chart or diagram – are found both incorporated in *Annapurna Post*. In a similar manner, a total of 11 election-related

interviews are published jointly on the first and op-ed pages. During the study period, *Kantipur* publishes five interviews, followed by *Annapurna Post* and *Gorkhapatra*, which feature four and two interviews, respectively. *Nagarik* daily does not publish any of this content in the form of a conversation in its first and editorial and op-ed pages.

During the month-long study, the four newspapers jointly publish a total of 57 editorials. A list of editorials, published during the study period, is provided in Appendix 7. Among the published content, *Nagarik* daily places a higher number of editorial contents at 18, followed by *Annapurna Post* with 17 editorials. Meanwhile, *Kantipur* and *Gorkhapatra* have posted 11 editorials each. The fact that a particular newspaper publishes 18 election-related editorials during the span of 31 days speaks a lot about how much that daily paper has laid focus on the poll. The quantitative analysis of election-related opinion pieces reveals that a total of 214 write-ups have been published in the four daily newspapers. Such write-ups are considered vital in generating thoughts and transferring opinions. Unlike the news content, editorials and op-ed articles cater to a specific group of people who are capable of grasping issues of national interest and initiate discussions in the public domain. *Nagarik* publishes a larger number of such articles (58), followed by *Gorkhapatra* (52) articles. Likewise, *Kantipur* gives space to 55 articles pertaining to the election, while *Annapurna Post* publishes the least number of the same content (49). Table 7.2 illustrates the significant role newsrooms play during elections. The volume of editorials published over the course of a month underscores the high level of alertness among Nepalese newspapers regarding the democratic process. In this context, election-related articles and opinions are prominently featured.

Table 7.2*Editorials and Opinions/articles Published by Newspaper*

Newspaper	Editorials	Opinions/Articles	Total
Gorkhapatra	11	52	63
Kantipur	11	55	66
Annapurna Post	17	49	66
Nagarik	18	58	76
Total	57	214	271

Source: Field Study, 2022

In this regard, survey participants are asked whether they read editorials and opinion pieces in newspapers. The data indicates that a significant percentage of respondents read editorials (83.98%) and articles (84.57%). This suggests that most respondents have a habit of reading and actively engaging with written content, particularly editorials and articles.

Additionally, the majority of editors who participated in KIIs (P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9) confirm that they receive feedback from readers regarding editorial and opinion pieces. As P2 explains, "If someone subscribes to a newspaper, they definitely read the editorials and opinions. Moreover, highly media-literate individuals not only read these pieces regularly but also provide feedback on them."

Kathmandu Centric Agenda

All four newspapers included in this study are of national level and classified as "Ka+". While they have a presence across the nation, they also enjoy a better position than that of others in terms of circulation. The rankings of the PCN grading also establish their significance.

Despite having substantive status, the content analysis of news published in these papers depicts market shortcomings. The analysis of contents find that these papers served a central perspective while election-related news with Kathmandu dateline was too heavily dominant. Despite the country having adopted a federal structure, the centralization of Kathmandu in terms of political affairs and administrative mechanism is to be partly blamed for this situation. It has also proven the statement of Kharel (2016) – “Kathmandu valley is the epicenter of the media politicization in terms of race and influence.” Of the total 320 news publish on the first page of the selected four newspapers, 182 (56 percent) has Kathmandu as their dateline. The news publish with non-Kathmandu dateline are noticeably very few. Besides news with Kathmandu dateline, a sizable number of news items with Kailali (4) and Jhapa and Ilam jointly (3) datelines make their way to the front pages of those papers, which are followed by news with Dadeldhura (2) dateline. It reflects that VIPs are automatically given considerably greater priority than issues concerning the general public. It also explains the reason behind issues pertaining to the rest of the country—outside of Kathmandu— being downplayed.

Moving into the analysis of individual newspapers in terms of datelines carry in first-page news, the *Gorkhapatra* appears to be the most conservative. Of the total election-related news features on the front page, a whopping 68 percent had Kathmandu as their dateline. *Kantipur* daily appears to be more diversified in this respect as of the total front-page news only 37 percent has Kathmandu dateline. Similarly, *Annapurna Post* and *Nagarik* daily serve 64 percent and 53 percent news respectively with the federal capital as their dateline. The study has also given some consideration towards the news having joint datelines. A total of 15 news content has been published with a joint dateline covering at least two to four districts. A majority of joint-datelined materials fall under soft news as well as features category.

Table 7.3*Dateline Kathmandu*

Newspaper	Total News First Page	Dateline Kathmandu	Percentage
Gorkhapatra	94	64	68%
Kantipur	68	25	36.78%
Nagarik	70	37	52.85%
Annapurna Post	88	56	64%
Total	320	180	56.25%

Source: Field Study, 2022

A closer look into this matter finds that NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba emerges as the most determinant in attracting datelines. As he had been country's prime minister during the election time, news from those places where he travels earns higher importance in the newspapers. Since he has launched the election campaign of NC being based in Dhanghadi of Kailali district, news items having Kailali dateline gain topmost space in the newspapers followed by the news items with Kathmandu as their origin.

Shrivastava (1992) explains that top leaders are in great demand. They have very busy schedules and many hop from place to place using helicopters (p. 106). Because of that, dateline of news media moves following the leaders during election. The situation as described by Shrivastava is reflected in Nepali context. News originated from Dadeldhura catches attention from newspapers as it is Deuba's election constituency. Similarly, the reason behind Jhapa being another important newsmaker is that it is the district and electoral consistency of former Prime Minister and Chairman of CPN-UML, KP Sharma Oli. Deuba and Oli seem to have created huge amount of news with the datelines from the places they frequent for their

election campaigns. The same feature applies to other top leaders. A total of 66 out of the nation's 77 districts appear in news datelines. Interestingly, two districts from Kathmandu valley – Bhaktapur and Lalitpur do not make it to the dateline.

The place of news origination does not surprise the KII participants. They unanimously agree that this phenomenon is driven by market dynamics. The data from the KIIs (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P14) suggest that Kathmandu is the hub of news production and consumption in Nepal, and hence, news is mostly datelined from there. Their opinion is in consistence with government data. Based on the report released by the Communication Registration Office of Bagmati Province, the Bagmati Province accounts for a significant proportion of the national registrations of newspapers, with 57 percent of the total registrations. Moreover, a significant proportion of these registrations, specifically 89 percent, are concentrated within the Kathmandu Valley, primarily in the Kathmandu district (CRO Bagmati, p. 24). Almost all KIIs agrees that the country's centralized structure, with the leaders of all provinces often located in Kathmandu, contributes to this phenomenon. Additionally, the majority of policy decisions is made in Kathmandu, which is another reason why news is concentrated on the city.

Furthermore, KIIs (P1, P2 P3, P6, P9, P10) point out that journalists' ability and access to resources play a significant role in the centralization of news in Kathmandu. The capital city has a centralized market and experts, which make it the prime source dateline. Many KIIs (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8 P9, P10) mention that prominent leaders are centered in Kathmandu, and the media may not have enough correspondents in other districts. This lack of proactive correspondents contribute to news being packaged from Kathmandu, even for district news.

The KIIs (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P14) suggest that Kathmandu is a hotbed for news as much of everything from politics to corruption happens there. However, a few KIIs (P5, P7) point out that news from other districts is also covered by newspapers. They are of the view that the inner pages of newspapers are not always centered on Kathmandu, and news from other districts is also covered.

The KIIs (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P9, P10, P14) highlight the centralized mindset of people as a reason for news being datelined Kathmandu. Moreover, living in Kathmandu has become a status symbol, and elites reside there. This may contribute to the concentration of power in the city.

Finally, a few KIIs (P5, P7, P8) noted that the shift of power to the provinces is starting to change the dynamics of news centralization in Kathmandu. However, it is not clear from the data how significant this shift is and whether it will lead to a more decentralized news landscape in the days ahead. In conclusion, of the four newspapers the *Gorkhapatra* lags behind the others in according priority to local and provincial activities on the front page.

Uses of News Source

The use of sources is a crucial element in journalism, with many theories emphasizing their role in establishing the validity and objectivity of news. News stories with multiple sources are considered more balanced, and identifiable sources are deemed more credible than anonymous ones. According to Hutchison (1986), developing sources not only means cultivating them but also educating them and keeping them available for your questions (p. 76). Newsrooms use a range of variables to assess the situations in which sources are used, and sources play critical roles in setting agendas.

In this study, 91% of news stories reveal their sources, with 6.3% utilizing anonymous sources and 2.5% employing indirectly identifiable sources. These findings demonstrate the sensitivity applied by newsrooms in the identification of their sources, reflecting the use of diverse source types. This practice underscores the professionalism of Nepali newsrooms.

Of the published news items, 54 percent contain, with at least two sources use in 8 percent of the news, and at least one source mention in 38 percent of the content. Single sources include press conferences organized by the ECN and GoN, speeches of political leaders, and press statements issued by the Home Ministry, among others. Newspapers have been found to use statements issued by government machinery as strong sources. However, the study has not found evidence of independent cross verification of government disseminated information sources tapped by newsrooms.

Gender Based Source

In the first election of 1959, ten female candidates participated, with Dwarikadevi Thakurani being elected. Thakurani thereby becomes Nepal's first elected parliamentarian and subsequently its first female minister. The representation of women in parliament has seen a notable evolution over time. In the 1991 and 1994 elections, women constitute 3.4 percent of Members of Parliament (MPs). This percentage increases to 5.8 percent in the 1999 election. The restored parliament witnesses a further rise, with 17.3 percent. By 2008, women's representation reaches 32.78 percent, though it experiences a slight decline to 29.28 percent in the 2013 election (Pandey, 2024). As per ECN data, women's representation in 2017 stands at 32.73 percent, and by 2022, it attains 33 percent.

The growing representation of women in Parliament is not reflected in their presence as sources in newspapers. From a gender perspective, women are almost invisible in the role of agenda setter. Only four news stories quote women as the

primary source, while 43 others use statements of women in some neglected way. This shows the weakened position of women in setting agendas. Hachhethu and Shrestha (2002) find that the inclusion of women in political party committees or elected bodies is often merely symbolic. This situation contributes to a visible gender imbalance in news content. Additionally, when women are not in positions of Agenda-setting, newsrooms themselves struggle to adequately address gender-related issues.

All KIIs explain that factors like fewer numbers of women candidates than male candidates in the direct poll, their weaker presence in policy-making as well as less participation in party and government leadership seem instrumental to this effect.

In sum, newsrooms have largely relied upon major political parties and leaders, the prime minister, the EC, and government agencies as their primary news sources. The general public, on the other hand, has little say in the news. Newsrooms also fail to integrate election manifestos as prominently as they deserve in their published content. Additionally, they exhibit little proactivity in independently verifying statements made by political parties and leaders. It also indicates the negligible space given to women agenda maker.

Political Parties as a News Source

Election in itself is a political practice to keep democracy alive. It revolves around political parties. Hence, they have the highest stake in the polls. In the context of media, political parties are the most relied upon sources for news. This section tries to explore which party or leader received the highest amount of space and attention in the news that was published on the front pages during the study period.

The analysis of the four aforementioned daily newspapers finds that NC received to the highest level of significance in the news content. The party as well as its leaders have found space in a total of 198 news followed by CPN-UML and its

leaders in 140 news as news source. Similarly, Maoist Centre appears in 116 news items while RPP secured its name in 32 news. MJF and RPP remain limited to 32 and 19 news respectively. This way, the newspapers seem to treat the NC, CPN-UML and Maoists Centre as first, second and third important parties respectively.

To discuss newspapers individually, *Gorkhapatra* has given the NC greater space keeping other parties behind with a huge gap. The then ruling party is accommodated in 63 news followed by the main opposition CPN-UML that found space in 35 news items. While Maoists Centre finds space in 27 news items.

Nagarik daily and *Annapurna Post* come behind *Gorkhapatra* respectively in giving priority to the NC. Although, *Kantipur* gives least space to the NC compared with other newspapers, the space given to the ruling party is far more than to other parties.

Table 7.4

Parties as News Source

Party	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Annapurna Post
NC	63	38	51	46
CPN-UML	53	32	39	34
CPN Maoist	27	24	34	31
MJF	4	7	11	10
RJP	3	6	13	10
RPP	2	7	5	5

Source: Field Study, 2022

CPN-UML, on the other hand, receives almost the same amount of coverage from all four newspapers. While it enjoys the largest amount of space in *Nagarik*, *Kantipur* gives it the least space. But compared with CPN-UML, the space the NC receives, *Kantipur* seems more balanced. While this newspaper writes 38 news regarding NC, it gives a coverage to CPN-UML in 32 news. *Kantipur* also seems to

treat MJF, RJP and RPP in almost the same manner in its news. *Nagarik*, however, has allocated larger space to these three parties in comparison to other newspapers. *Gorkhapatra* puts them in the least priority.

In conclusion, as the NC has been in the ruling position, it receives a greater degree of media attention and is treated a majority of times as a news source. Except in the *Gorkhapatra*, the left parties are found widely covered in comparison to the NC.

7.3 Campaigning Coverage

According to Walgrave and Aelst (2006), the political perception of what is conveyed through the media depends solely on the context. As a result, election-related activities have found much space in the news content, with campaigning activities being the major sources of those news. Field reports, journalist's diaries, and campaigning styles have also been converted into news content. Campaign activities, in one way or the other, have been found to be widely used sources. Press conferences, on the other hand, happen to be the second-largest source for election-related news as the information imparted during such events was used in news content.

It is not uncommon for any politician's speech to find a place in news during election times. A total of 109 news is created on the basis of such orations while 102 news items use government documents as their sources. Likewise, 67 news items quote the common public and another 66 make reference to the manifestos of different political parties. However, newspapers fail to pay attention to the expectations of the general public regarding the manifestos, as well as the measures and strategies to be taken by political parties to implement their manifestos. Due to

the little importance placed upon the manifestos and the voices of general people, it can be analyzed that political parties, leaders, and government officials have been in a dominant position in Agenda-setting.

The survey data shows that the majority of respondents (78.64%) consider themselves interested in political campaigns, while a smaller portion (21.36%) do not pay much attention to them. A significant percentage of respondents (68.25%) consider themselves well-qualified to participate in politics, while 31.75 percent disagree with it. Additionally, a majority of respondents (85.46%) believe that they are better informed about politics and government than most people.

Regarding financial contributions to campaign funds, 60.83 percent of respondents reported not giving any contributions to individual candidates for their campaigns, while only 24.04 percent said they contributed. Likewise, 15.13 percent of the respondents chose not to answer this question. However, only 26.41 percent of respondents reported attending election campaigns, while the majority (73.59%) said they do not attend.

No Horse-Race Coverage in Front Page

Opinion polls are not allowed in Nepali elections. The code of conduct of the Election Commission restricts public opinion regarding elections, which could indicate the reality of the election campaign as a horse race. The ECN code of conduct (2015) states, "With regard to result of candidates or political parties, no poll survey or declaration of result thereof shall be made from the date of filing of candidacy till the announcement of the poll results (p. 5)." Because of that no front-page news is observed regarding the horse race competition during this period.

However, some coverage is found inside the newspapers, carefully crafted to avoid violating the Election Commission's restrictions. In these reports, no public opinions are endorsed. It is noted that most stories in newspapers use previous voting

data to predict election results. While covering these horse race stories, no news favors a single candidate. Most stories depict a triangular or dual fight in particular electoral areas, covering their campaign activities and statements.

The situation is out of the control of the Election Commission (EC) regarding the code of ethics. As Hari Adhikari, columnist for *Nagarik*, writes (November 9, 2017), "In today's era of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the environment is akin to Dashain, Nepal's most popular festival, for those who engage in claims, counter-claims, and speculations."

Newsroom's Follow-Up

In any democracy, it is commonly understood that the news media has an essential role in following up on the political agenda raised by political parties. This helps to hold parties accountable for their promises. However, in Nepal, the media has been found to be weak in this regard. Very few follow-up stories appear in newspapers regarding manifestos, and even the editors who participate in KIIs agreed on the lack of sufficient follow-up. As P13 argues that media has not seriously taken manifesto during elections. In his opinion, a research institute working only on the accountability aspect of manifesto is necessary in Nepal.

As Lau and Redlawsk (2006) explain, voting for leaders who best represent their views, and holding those leaders accountable for their performance in office at the next election, make democracy work. P9 elucidates that the media's ability to hold political parties accountable is compromised, with both the media and civil society failing to exert sufficient pressure to ensure accountability. Additionally, other organs of the state are not fulfilling their duties. As his opinion, there is hardly any discussion in parliament about inflation or the issue of law and order, and parliament hardly discusses the people's agenda. The media's performance in parliament mirrors that of the parliament itself, indicating a systemic failure.

P10, acknowledges the media's weakness in following up on political agendas; states, "We have failed, in a way, in our follow-up. If we kept pointing out that nothing was working, it would have put some pressure on the parties. However, regarding the larger measures outlined in the manifestos, we have not been able to hold parties accountable for policy matters. We are caught up in reporting current events, and as leaders and ministers are involved in the process, we also seem to be involved in their reactions."

Similarly, P2 explains, "The weakness of our disciplines is reflected not only in political parties but also in the media. The lack of skilled manpower is a significant reason for the poor reporting on manifestos. As a result, we have not been able to produce quality coverage of political agendas."

7.4 Issue Attributes

It is imperative that the news media disseminates accurate and fair reports on campaigns by contesting parties and candidates among the electorate (Quraishi, 2019). But the data explains the coverage bias, limited coverage, negative inclination and focus on formal activities as issues concerning Nepali newspapers during election. While the *Gorkhapatra* gives considerable space and portrays the NC positively, private newspapers like *Kantipur* tend to have a negative perspective towards the ruling party. Conversely, *Gorkhapatra* portrays CPN-UML negatively, whereas private newspapers tend to have a relatively positive attitude towards it. Maoist Center, on the other hand, receives the most coverage from *Gorkhapatra* and the least from *Kantipur*, with a negative overall tone, including more negative news than any other party.

Additionally, the text discusses the limited coverage received by the RPP, MJF, and RJPN in Nepali newspapers. These parties tend to receive negative bias in

most news articles, with a focus on formal activities rather than their agendas. The RPP receives the least coverage, with only 14 news items published about it, while the MJF and RJPN receive 49 and 50 news items, respectively.

In the realm of journalism, the categorization of news articles into negative or positive is determined by analyzing the language used within the content, the quality of sources utilized, inclusion of quotes, and the use of language in the headline. In striving to maintain objectivity and impartiality, the tone of the news piece may shift towards a negative or positive sentiment, while still adhering to the principles of balanced reporting. As such, while the balance of the news story may be considered, the tone may exhibit a discernible leaning towards either a negative or positive disposition.

Nepali Congress - Positive Tone in Government, Negative in Private

A total of 246 print materials concerning the NC are analyzed for this study. It has already been mentioned that government-owned *Gorkhapatra* allotted the largest volume of space to this party while *Kantipur*, under private ownership, did just the opposite. The data presented in Table 7.5 shows that government-operated media outlet holds a positive attitude towards the ruling party while private outlets keep a critical eye. Of the total 246 published news items pertaining to the NC, 24 are entirely positive while 27 others cast a negative tone towards the party. *Gorkhapatra* has played a leading role for the total tally of positive news for the NC. Barring *Gorkhapatra*, the NC has received full support in only 10 materials published in other papers while a significant number of news (26) painted a negative picture of the party.

Table 7.5*Tone of News Toward NC*

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	12	1	7	7	27
Neutral negative	15	6	6	19	46
Neutral	15	21	24	21	81
Neutral positive	23	17	4	14	58
Positive	2	24	6	2	34

Source: Field Study, 2022

In comparing negative and neutral negative with positive and neutral positive, the NC seems to have garnered more positive outlook. While 92 materials fall under positive and neutral positive group, 73 others have negative and neutral negative outlook. Nevertheless, if *Gorkhapatra* is to be excluded from this study, 66 materials were inclined towards negativity and the remaining 51 had carried positive outlook. When taken into consideration these data, NC seems to carry a more positive image due to the government newspaper. However, if only neutral contents are to be analyzed, the contents published in *Kantipur* were found to be more balanced.

The analysis of news contents published regarding NC seems to have their foundation on formal election strategy which basically deals about the activities of election campaigning. A total of 32 percent news appear, based on this strategy. While 28 percent of the news are directly related with the party and its representatives, news with the stance of party and its candidates had 22 percent share and the rest 18 percent of the news focus on traits of party and its representatives. The reason behind the dominance of news based on election activity is because of newsroom's prioritization of party's formal events. Overall, NC receives first priority

in the newsroom due to its ruling party status as well as its grip over the government-owned print medium. On the other side, private newspapers seem to be relatively neutral towards the NC.

CPN -UML - Negative Tone in Government, Positive in Private

In total, 209 news contents related to CPN-UML have been analyzed, the majority of which have a neutral tone towards this party. *Gorkhapatra* has published the highest number of news related to CPN-UML while *Kantipur* gives the least coverage.

Table 7.6

Tone of News Toward CPN-UML

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	5	16	7	2	30
Neutral negative	14	8	4	16	42
Neutral	12	17	22	25	76
Neutral positive	14	16	5	8	43
Positive	6	4	6	2	18

Source: Field Study, 2022

The treatment of *Gorkhapatra's* newsroom to CPN-UML seems the just opposite to its treatment of the NC. Although, this daily paper carries the highest numbers of news about the party, a majority of them deal negatively. The number of negative news published in *Gorkhapatra* alone is so high that it surpasses the combined number of such news published in the other three private newspapers. While *Gorkhapatra* has published 30 news with a negative tone, the other three papers collectively publish only 16 negative news. Of the total 18 positive news regarding CPN-UML published in the four newspapers, *Gorkhapatra's* share is only four. Keeping *Gorkhapatra* aside, the number of negative and positive news published by the other three newspapers are almost equal. The same is the number of

neutral negative and neutral positive news. Setting aside neutral contents, a total of 72 news has a positive and 61 news had a negative note. Similarly, the analysis of news published in the other three newspapers finds 48 contents to be negative and 52 contents to be positive. This shows a positive outlook of private newspapers towards the opposition party.

When analyzing the CPN-UML related published contents, newspapers focus more on the party's election-related activities. As much as 36 percent of the total news are based on election campaign while the least space is given to news with focus on traits of the party and its representatives (16 percent). Likewise, two variables – party and its representatives, and stance of party and its representatives on the issue – receive the same amount of space at 24 percent each.

The analysis of news content shows that the newspapers depend upon hard news regarding the election-related activities news with agenda-based issues. In conclusion, private sector newspapers, in comparison to the government-owned, have a relatively positive perspective towards the main opposition party, CPN-UML. However, in total, CPN-UML is treated negatively more than positively by the four newspapers. Election-related formal activities of CPN-UML occupies more news space than do serious agenda-based issues.

Maoist Center - Negativity Portrait

A total of 203 news about Maoist Center have been analyzed in this study. The party, which became the third largest party following the second CA poll, received the most coverage from *Gorkhapatra* and the least from *Kantipur*. When looking at the tone, the majority of the total published news have a neutral stance. However, newsrooms seem to be relatively negative towards this party, with a higher amount of news with a complete negative tone than given any other party.

Gorkhapatra seems to be the most negative towards this party, just as it was towards CPN-UML. Of the total of 31 news that appear with a complete negative approach, more than half of them are printed under the masthead of *Gorkhapatra*. On the other hand, the newsroom of *Kantipur* is found to be relatively balanced towards this party. A meagre amount of 13 contents appears in favor of this party, with the same number of neutral negative and neutral positive news. If neutral negative and neutral positive news are to be set aside, a quantity of the total bigger (78 contents) were tilted towards negativity, leaving only 55 of them as positive.

If we exclude *Gorkhapatra*, the total number of negative and positive news published by other private newspapers are 55 and 36 respectively, showing the negative attitude of all newspapers towards Maoist Center. The weaker and unstable stance that the Maoist Center maintained in strategic activities as well as changes in government seem to be the cause.

The analysis of the content pattern shows that of the total news published in association with this party, 35 percent were based on election campaign. Like NC and CPN-UML, coverage of this party and its representatives' traits received the least space (17%). When the party and its representatives secure 26 percent of the coverage, 22 percent coverage is given to the agenda committed by the party and its officials. The election strategy receives more attention as the newsrooms prioritize more on hard news contents. The focus on agenda-based news, however, remains low.

Table 7.7

Tone of News Toward Maoist

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	5	15	7	4	31
Neutral negative	16	8	5	18	47
Neutral	10	16	22	22	70
Neutral positive	16	15	3	8	42
Positive	5	4	3	1	13

Source: Field Study, 2022

To conclude, the newsrooms do not seem to have a positive attitude towards Maoist Center. The activities conducted by this party following its landing upon mainstream politics in 2013 remain largely instrumental in this regard. However, the content analysis shows that the newsrooms try to maintain a neutral position as much as possible pertaining to this party. The newspapers barely seem to give much importance to the agenda brought forward by this party.

RPP - Partial Space

The data show that of the total 602 contents analyzed, 556 do not give any space to the RPP, which went on to establish itself as the fourth major party of the country after the 2013 Constituent Assembly Poll. Very few news articles have been published about this party. *Kantipur* seems to give this party the most coverage, publishing 14 news articles, while the government-operated *Gorkhapatra* published only seven news articles, making it the most unfavorable print media for this party. A deeper observation finds that a majority of the news contents treats the party with neutrality. The party that had its participation in the Constituent Assembly with 24 lawmakers also had its involvement in subsequent governments. Due to its weaker role in the government and poor internal as well as external performance, the media seems to have given it the cold shoulder.

Table 7.8

Tone of News Toward RPP

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	1	1	2	1	5
Neutral negative	4	1	1	5	11
Neutral	7	4	11	7	29
Neutral positive	0	0	0	0	0
Positive	0	1	0	0	1

Source: Field Study, 2022

When it comes to the tone of the news, the newspapers do not seem to have a positive mindset towards the RPP, as most of the news connected with this party has a negative inclination. The party receives only one positive media item from *Gorkhapatra* and none from the three private newspapers. No news appears under the neutral positive and positive variables. When neutral is treated as zero, there is the greatest amount of news towards negativity. Against 16 negative news, only one positive news is recorded.

The content analysis shows that 52 percent of the published news are based on the election campaign. Issues relating to the party and its representatives cover 18 percent of the news, while 15 percent each concern with the personal traits of the party and its representatives, and the stance of the party and its candidates. On the other hand, with more focus given to formal news, the reporting of the party's overall agenda remains overshadowed.

In brief, the RPP is not a priority for the newspapers. Very few materials concerning this party are published. Furthermore, without the positive coverage from *Gorkhapatra*, the party receives zero constructive mileage. Most of the content published are based on formal activities rather than that of the agenda of the party.

Madheshi Janadhikar Forum - Partial in Priority

Similar to RPP, the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) does not receive much attention from the newspapers. Only 49 news items are published about this party, of which the number of neutral news is higher. *Nagarik* gives the most space to it, followed by *Annapurna Post*. During the study period, *Gorkhapatra* gives the least space, as it publishes only 8 news items about this party.

Table 7.9*Tone of News Toward MJF*

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	0	0	0	1	1
Neutral negative	3	2	2	5	12
Neutral	10	3	8	9	30
Neutral positive	1	3	0	1	5
Positive	1	0	0	0	1

Source: Field Study, 2022

When evaluating the tone of the news, one news items is found to be negative and one to be positive. *Nagarik* and *Annapurna Post* each publish one news article with a negative and positive tone respectively. There is a dominance of neutral news among the total published news. When neutral is treated as zero, the majority of news published has a negative inclination. While there are 13 news articles with a negative tone, only six have a positive outlook towards the party. This party seems to fail to grab media attention to a larger extent.

Checking on the pattern of contents, of the total news items published in connection with this party, 42 percent are based on the election campaign. The coverage of this party as well as its representatives' stance received 14 percent of the space. When the party and its representatives secured 26 percent of the coverage, 22 percent coverage was given to the traits of the party and its officials.

The quantitative analysis of the content suggested that this party is a low priority for the newsrooms, and even among the covered issues, the issues of informal activities occupy more space.

Finally, the newsrooms do not give much weightage to the MJF. Even the published news articles show more negative temperament towards this party, while the stance of the party and candidates, which would have a direct connection with the party's agenda, is largely ignored.

Rastriya Janata Party Nepal - Limited in Priority

The treatment of newsrooms towards Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJP) supports that newspapers have similar sentiment towards RPP and all other Madhesh-centric parties. Of the total 602 contents analyzed during the study period, only 50 news articles published during the study period have a connection with this party.

Nagarik daily, as compared to other papers, has given significant coverage to RJP as it published 18 news items while the government-operated *Gorkhapatra* published only six news items, making it the most unfavorable print media for this party.

Deeper observation finds that a majority of the news contents treat the party in a negative manner. A total of four news items appeared with a complete negative image of this party, of which *Nagarik* alone has reported three news items while the remaining one was published by *Annapurna Post*. Of the total two positive news items regarding this party, *Kantipur* and *Annapurna Post* have reported them. When 26 news items plugged to neutral variable emerge as nil, a total of 16 news items are tilted towards the negative pole and the remaining 8 have a positive affiliation.

Table 7.10

Tone of News Toward RJP

Tone	Annapurna Post	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagarik	Total
Negative	1	0	0	3	4
Neutral negative	2	2	2	6	12
Neutral	8	2	7	9	26
Neutral positive	3	2	0	0	5
Positive	1	0	1	0	2

Source: Field Study, 2022

Analyzing the RJP on the basis of published contents, newspapers seem to focus more on the party's election-related activities than on agenda. A bigger portion,

as much as 38 percent of the total news, is based on election campaign while the total space given to the news with a focus on traits of the party as well as its representatives remains 16 percent.

Though, the Parliamentary Council at its 154th session in Paris (March 26, 1994) states, every candidate for election and every political party shall have an equal opportunity of access to the media, particularly the mass communications media, in order to put forward their political views. Similarly, Kharel (2016) explains that informed decision-making by informed people is key to good governance – a prerequisite for a thriving democracy. The media can also help pluralism flourish by giving space to diverse political beliefs even-handedly (p. 282).

In this regard, to summarize, the placement of a lesser amount of news with Madhesh as its dateline and the fewer focus given upon RJP underscores the Kathmandu-centric outlook of all four newspapers. In terms of the number of published news, it can be inferred that these newspapers do not pay much attention to Madhesh-based parties and RPP.

In sum 4 "Issues attributes" are identified from the above data –

1. Newspapers in Nepal have a bias against certain political parties. The coverage of the NC, CPN-UML, and Maoist Center is uneven across different newspapers, and the overall tone towards each party is either positive or negative. Similarly, RPP, MJF, and RJPN receive mostly negative tone.
2. Some political parties in Nepal receive very limited coverage in the newspapers, such as RPP, MJF, and RJPN.
3. News articles about these political parties tend to have a negative inclination, which suggests a bias against these parties.
4. Newspapers tend to focus more on the formal activities of these parties, such as rallies and meetings, rather than their agendas or policies.

The data aligns closely with that of the 2013 election. According to the report, the media exhibited bias in their election coverage, favoring the four main parties (ECN, 2014). It further highlights that the information communicated was limited in scope and unbalanced in both tone and the space allocated to candidates and parties. Even The range of information communicated was narrow and unbalanced both in tone and space devoted to the candidates and parties (ECN 2014, p. 156).

Similarly, the survey data support the result of the content analysis. They suggest that a majority of respondents agree that publishers, editors, reporters, and the market influence newspapers' content with their preferences, priorities, and recommendations (81.01%), and that journalists or editors are not sufficiently active as expected (83.09%).

Similarly, the majority of respondents believe that newsroom is not sufficiently spending on content (86.05%) and are dependent largely on press briefings and formal activities (86.35%) for news stories. A significant proportion of respondents (83.09%) feel that newsroom is not adequately oriented toward the above issues. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority (90.50%) of respondents agree that the social responsibility role of media is eroding speedily.

Chandrakishor, a columnist for *Kantipur*, writes (November 16, 2017), "The Nepali media, as an especially influential element in a democracy, must honestly fulfill its role of protecting voters' right to be informed about the election by providing neutral information."

These findings suggest that the respondents perceive a lack of rigorous integrity and maximum impartiality in the media, and a decline in their social responsibility. In the KIIs, participants are asked about the independence and impartiality of the editorial. The majority of the participants argue that editorials

cannot remain impartial and that it is natural for them to lean towards one side. P12 points out that it is impossible for editorials to cover all issues, and hence, they may not be able to do justice to everyone. However, she says that editorials written singly are not unbalanced.

P3, on the other hand, believes that editorial balance can be achieved through pluralism. The interviewee argues that different newspapers can give editorials in different ways, and hence, reading everything can help find a balance. Looking at a single media outlet may seem partial, but reading editorials from multiple newspapers can lead to a balanced view.

P10 and P9, however, argue that the newsroom must take its own positioning in the editorial. They state that their activities are often praised or criticized. While they agree that there can be partisan view in editorial, they emphasized the need for consistency in the opinion of the editor and publisher. The interviews shed light on the complexities involved in ensuring impartiality in editorials and the challenges faced by media outlets in achieving it.

Editors hold varying opinions on news balance in Nepali newspapers. P4 believes that media give more priority to powerful individuals and money, resulting in both good and bad news being linked to these factors. P1 suggests that the relationship between political parties and media investors determines news balance. Despite the two ideological sides of communist and socialist, both are inclined towards capitalism, and the media is being dominated by political parties, with media ownership controlled by business houses.

P2 argues that objectivity and merit-based evaluation are necessary for newspaper balance, but this is not the case in Nepal. Only those who could not join political parties or those with ideological baggage become editors. P8 claims that

newspapers rank political parties based on past election results and prioritize news accordingly, but coverage may be limited for new parties with unknown potential. P9 emphasizes the importance of editors being aware of prioritizing everyone, but acknowledges that special phenomena, such as a leader receiving more space, may influence news balance.

The participants in the KIIs have mixed views on the balance of the op-ed page. P13 and P11 believe that the media was attempting to maintain diversity, but the impartiality of authors was in question. P3, P5, and P6 argue that newspapers provide space for everyone's point of view. P1 disagrees, stating that few people in Nepal write opinions for newspapers, and therefore there is no Opinion Leader. P8 claims that *Gorkhapatra* is different, as it covers all castes and receives articles from individuals who understand its limitations. P14 claims that there is no priority in determining articles, but during election time, there is an opportunity to contribute to the people's state policy. However, the data from KIIs reflects that there is a lack of good opinion writers in Nepal, which restricts the reach of quality opinions to newspapers. The perspective of newspaper editors suggests that newsrooms are somewhat constrained in their ability to engage with new opinion-makers, remaining within self-imposed boundaries and thereby limiting their exploration of diverse viewpoints.

7.5 Influence on Decision Making

General elections held in Nepal in two phases on November 26 and December 7, 2017 to elect the 275 members of the House of Representatives (HoR), the lower house of the Federal Parliament of Nepal and the final result was announced on 14 February 2018. A comparison of newspaper coverage with election results reveals that

the Agenda-setting role of the media is weak. Table 7.11 shows that in the election, the alliance of CPN-UML and CPN-Maoist Center secured a favorable outcome, while the Nepali Congress, despite receiving the most coverage, had a weak election result.

Table 7.11

News Coverage Vs Election Result

Party & Newspaper	Gorkhapatra	Kantipur	Nagari k	Annapurna Post	Winning Seats
NC	63	38	51	46	63
CPN-UML	53	32	39	34	121
CPN Maoist	27	24	34	31	53
MJF	4	7	11	10	16
RJP	3	6	13	10	17
RPP	2	7	5	5	1

Source: Field Study, 2022

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explain that both consumers' choice of products and voters' choice of politicians depend more on their interpersonal relations to significant others in their networks of family and friends than on their direct exposure to mass-mediated commercial or political messages. The result justifies the scholar's statement.

The data indicate that there is a significant interest in reading among the population, but the impact of newspaper content is not as influential. According to the survey data, many individuals report reading editorials and opinions, which are typically viewed as distinguishing feature of newspapers. Despite reading the media's content, respondents claimed that it does not have a significant impact on their beliefs and opinions. When asked if they often read editorials, 83.98 percent of the respondents agreed, while only 16.02 percent disagreed. Similarly, when asked if they often read articles, 84.57 percent of the respondents agreed, while only 15.43 percent disagreed.

In terms of the impact of newspapers on voting behavior, only 35.91 percent of the respondents agreed that they usually get influenced or change their mind about voting after reading newspapers, while 64.09 percent disagreed. Regarding the respondents' trust in the media content during elections, 79.53 percent of the respondents agreed that they trust the media's content, while 20.47 percent disagreed.

Overall, the data suggests that a majority of the respondents often read editorials and articles, and they tend to trust the media's content during elections. However, a significant percentage of the respondents do not believe that newspapers influence or change their voting behavior. According to Comstock and Scharrer (2005), a large majority of voters made up their minds before election campaigns based on their party loyalty, regression to the post, and reinforcement from mass media. Similarly, the experts (KIIs) are in consensus. All of them agree that various factors influence voters' decisions, including family relations, personal relationships, caste and ethnicity, social movements, the impression of candidates, and the influence of friends and followers. P2 states in this regard, "In our country, the majority of voters already have a fixed mindset. The swing voters, who might change their position after reading newspapers, are very few." In this regard, all KIIs except P6 agree on the changing communication ecosystem, where social media exerts a greater influence on voters than traditional media.

7.6 Case Study of Social Media and Election

Expansion of the new media, particularly social media, has overtaken traditional mainstream media and has had a profound influence on people from all walks of life, including those in politics. Political parties are increasingly turning to social media for unique networking and interactive opportunities with the public.

As of July 30, 2022, the number of followers of NC Chairman Sher Bahadur Deuba on Facebook is over 241,000, even though he is not as active on social media as other. Similarly, Gagan Thapa has 485,000 followers, CPN-UML President KP Sharma Oli has 341,000, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Chairman of the CPN Maoist Center, has 481,000 followers, and Dr. Baburam Bhattarai has over 1.5 million followers on Facebook.

This figure illustrates the popularity of social media among political leaders, who are drawn to it for the directly reaching out to the Nepali mass public without any media gatekeeping process. With increasing numbers of leaders, activists, and supporters of a particular political party being connected on social networking sites, the presence of the political parties on social media has also increased. Most political parties have social media plugins on their official websites. Major political parties in Nepal, CPN-UML, NC, and CPN Maoist Center each have at least three social media plugins (Facebook, X, and YouTube) on their respective official websites.

Table 7.12 presents the number of followers/viewers of social networks plugged into political parties' websites as of 30 July, 2022. Besides social networks with plugins, political parties are also available these days on TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp and Viber.

Table 7.12

Party and Social Media Followers

SN	Political Party	Facebook	Twitter
1	CPN UML	362,000	7,917
2	NC	314,000	20,000
3	CPN Maoist Center	3,500	194

Source: Field Study, 2022

New Media, Traditional Perspective

A total of 477 contents related to the local elections 2022 have been uploaded on the official Facebook pages of the named three major parties NC, CPN-UML, and CPN (Maoist Center) within a period of one month. A majority of the fed contents are based on the election agenda. Regarding the form of expression, most of the messages appear in the form of text, followed by the posts in the forms of images and videos. A very few posts have appeared in the form of URL links on Facebook. Most of the integrated posts have videos and pictures along with text. Some pictorial posts are uploaded without texts and any other references. Less interactions have been noticed in URLs sharing.

The study finds the primary objective of political parties in feeding contents to their official social media sites is to create a better atmosphere for their party as well as candidates.

As much as 18 percent of total fed posts has dual intention – the first criticizing the opponent and the second promoting as well as validating the self. However, no post targeting the campaign of the opponents is noticed during the study time.

Some characteristics of social media differ significantly from traditional media. Social media provides ample space for discussion with speed and quicker feedback to audiences of different tastes, sizes and geography. This contrasts with the limitations of newspapers, radio, and television. Political parties, however, have used social media as a linear communication tool, posting their messages and ignoring them in the same way they do with mass media.

While no interactions are typically observed between party leaders, general social media users engage in discussions revolving around election issues. Some posts

receive more than 3,000 comments, demonstrating how a single post can inspire extensive virtual interaction, while many other posts fail to garner even a single response.

7.7 Political Parties and Leaders in an Electoral Frame

An examination of 477 posts by the political parties/leaders during the period of elections indicates that an agenda can be presented from different perspectives and with the use of new medium. CPN-UML tries to brand KP Sharma Oli as the symbol of election. NC places Sher Bahadur Deuba out of the frame of the election campaign, as opposed to the experiment of CPN-UML. Instead of branding any leader, NC has tried to convey the agenda of its manifesto to the public through social media. On the other hand, imitating the CPN-UML, another communist party, CPN Maoist, highlights its party supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" at the center of the election campaign.

Even in the case of electoral candidates, the strategy of the NC seems more consistent with agenda. It does not prioritize candidates but the agenda. Regarding the social media campaign, the CPN-Maoist Center seems very weak. Though the presence of Maoist on social media looks weaker, the account of party president, Prachand is robust during the election campaign. CPN-UML General Secretary Shankar Pokharel is also very active in using social media platforms to advocate his party agendas.

The afore-mentioned six senior leaders jointly created 170 election-based contents on social media during the study period. In a span of 31 days, Prachanda posted 62 contents on Facebook. He is followed by Shankar Pokharel who uploaded 51 contents. Similarly, Baburam Bhattarai made 28 election-targeted posts while

Deuba and KP Sharma Oli are found limited at 12 and 9 posts respectively. Gagan Thapa happens to be the least content uploader, making only eight election-centric posts.

The data shows that political parties and leaders have used social media with different frames during the elections to set their agenda. It also indicates the presence of new media as an Agenda-setting tool Nepal's elections.

Oli Icon and Live as TV

CPN-UML projects party president Oli as an electoral "icon" in the 2022 local election. Oli's graphic appeal as well as video, texts and photos are uploaded on Facebook in higher frequency. Similarly, an interview by Vijay Kumar Pandey, a prominent television journalist, is webcast on Facebook.

Another post with 35,000 likes on the election campaign video showcasing Oli addressing the indigenous people on May 5, 2022 testifies his reach out to the community members. The post is shared more than 5,200 times with 1,300 plus interactions by social media users. The video turns out to be the most influential tool throughout the election campaigning on the basis of reach, interactivity, and share. Hashtags like #UML #umlnepal #KPOli #KPSharmaOli are widely used in the party's handle.

The CPN-UML appears to be the most systematic and active in social media election campaigning as compared to other national parties. Of the total (477), more than half are posted by CPN-UML indicating at its seriousness towards the use of social media as an Agenda-setting tool.

The party also comes ahead, in comparison to other parties, when it comes to webcasting. It does Facebook-live to establish its agenda as well as its candidates. It also makes sure to showcases skilled professionals belonging to Press Chautari,

journalist fraternity of CPN-UML, in live interviews. A total of 31 live interviews had been webcast from the party's Facebook handle. The study also found that a total of 11 local-level candidates from Itahari, Dharan, Rupakot, Majhuwagadhi, Halesi Tuwaching, Kathmandu, Tokha, Budhanilkanth, Damak, Lalitpur, and Biratnagar as well as other 20 central-level leaders, including the party president participated in the election campaign through the Facebook page. An election song rendered in multiple languages is uploaded on the party's Facebook page. Similarly, the messages from Party General Secretary Shankar Pokharel, Deputy General Secretary Prithvi Subba Gurung and other leaders are also figure on Facebook. Looking at the facts detailed above, CPN-UML went an extra mile in establishing its agenda through the use of social media platforms.

Nepali Congress, Posting Agenda First

NC, as part of its election campaign brings in limelight its agenda and not the image of its senior leaders. So much so that even the image of its President Sher Bahadur Deuba rarely appeared in any of the election campaigns.

The study also finds that Deuba is very passive in using social media as very few posts appeared on his Facebook and Twitter feed during the campaign period. Rather, he was regular in extending his wishes on occasions like Press Freedom Day, Labor Day and Eid, among other events on his social media account.

NC General Secretary Gagan Thapa seems to have followed Deuba's path as his social media pages are rarely fed with contents relating to the election and election focused campaigns. Despite having around half a million followers on Facebook, he does not bring the party's agenda into the notice of the mass.

Looking at the pattern, the presence of the NC on social media during the election was more agenda-centric than showcasing the personality of its leaders. The party made ample use of infographics to set its agenda.

The contents fed by the NC on its social media platforms had two primary purposes – first, to set up its agenda and, second, to inform about the policy decisions and notices issued by the party. Though the official Facebook page frequently uploaded statements made by the party, it ignored to upload the joint statement issued on May 10, 2022 by the electoral alliance of five parties.

The NC also uploads many videos on its Facebook page, most of which feature the experiences shared by local level representatives. It also conducts Zoom, a popular video-conference application, meeting and shares it on its Facebook page. Altogether 12 Zoom meetings are conducted by the party supporters from the USA and uploaded on the page.

Prachanda at the Center

The social media campaign of CPN Maoist Center features its Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) at the center. His personal Facebook account is more engaged than that of his party's. The followers are more attracted towards his personal page than the official page of his party, proving Prachanda's fine-tuning in uploading multiple posts regarding election campaign.

A close monitoring of his Facebook page reveals that Prachanda posted multiple contents relating to his own and party's activities as well as coalitions' during the campaign from his Facebook handle. The main four hashtags include #chairmanprachanda, #VoteForCPNMaoist, #VoteForCPNMaoistCentre, and #VoteForChange.

Although the CPN Maoist Center placed its chairman at the focal point, the salient election agenda is women-centric as most of the social media feeds are around the theme of women empowerment and liberation.

Renu Dahal, the mayor candidate for Bharatpur Metropolitan City, is given the same level of priority as is given to her father the party Chairman. Video footage of

the development works initiated by mayor candidate are shown to create a favorable atmosphere for her bid for a second term. Prior to the 72 hours of the silent period, a short video appeal of Prachanda appears on the Facebook page on May 10 asking supporters to vote for his daughter.

Maoists' election agenda lands into controversy as the party featured the image of Kulman Ghising, the Managing Director of Nepal Electricity Authority in its election flyer along with the slogan *Andhyarodekhi Ujjyaloko Yatra* (Journey from Darkness to Light). The endeavor turns to create a backlash to the party as thousands of followers spontaneously go to their social media page and criticized the move. This indicates that social media is not only the Agenda-setting tool but also a medium to guide political parties on the right track.

The study finds CPN Maoist Center of not making use of the Facebook-live to establish its agenda as effectively as does CPN-UML. On May 5, the Maoist used Facebook-live to cover the mass gathering of the five-party alliance at Bharatpur, Chitwan. On that day, the speeches delivered by the leaders of the alliance are cast live on three posts. The hashtags used by the party page are #VoteForCPNMaoist, #VoteForCPNMaoistCentre, #VoteForChange and #YourVoteMatters.

Election Campaigning from YouTube

During the one-month-long election campaign, Facebook is the widely used social media platform by the parties. However, another audio-visual medium, YouTube is also deployed to a larger extent to convey election related messages.

CPN Maoists Center uses this particular platform more than any other political parties do, while the NC ranks at the bottom when it comes to making use of YouTube as an Agenda-setting medium.

The YouTube channel of CPN-UML uploads a video message of KP Sharma Oli on April 14 regarding the election and New Year wishes. Similarly, on April 17,

another video titled *Madhesh ko Mann ra Aastha Nekapa Yemale* (CPN-UML: the Heart and Faith of Madhesh) is uploaded with the intention to create a positive image of the party's candidates among the voters of Madhesh.

The CPN-UML releases another video on May 1, describing the party's policies and priorities as regards local development, governance and prosperity. The following day, another video content appears in which the views of common people are shown focusing on KP Oli. Likewise, on May 7 another agenda-based message is shared with the title "Why UML?"

When compare with the CPN-UML, the presence of the NC is zero on YouTube. No content related to local elections is uploaded on the official YouTube channel of the party though it has posted related content on Facebook and Twitter.

The CPN Maoist Centre uses YouTube for political campaigning more than other political forces. It uploads altogether 15 videos during the period. Most of these contents focus on campaign songs, portraits of Prachanda, issues related to women, and Renu Dahal. On April 24 a video appears with the title *Tharu mahilale Maobadima vote kina halne?* (Why should Tharu women vote for Maoists?). The party uploads an election song titled *Byebastha badalyeu aba awastha badalna Maobadi Kendralai vote* (We have changed the system, vote for the Maoist Center to change the situation). The party uploads another video on May 3 to inform and influence voters with the title *Vote kasari halne ra kaslai halne?* (How to vote and whom to vote for?). On the same day, an interview of Prachanda is uploaded.

The music video titled *Bharatpurki chhori hoon ma* (I am a daughter of Bharatpur) is posted for the election campaign of Renu Dahal, the mayor candidate of Bharatpur Metropolitan City. The video includes a song and the work she conducted during her first tenure as a mayor as well as vox-pop of the local people. Similarly, a news reel style video is uploaded on May 6 entitled, "*Chhatrasanga mayor program*

in Bharatpur public schools.” Two more election songs – "Gathbandhan" and "Whose policy, his leadership, Maoist government at the local level" – are released on the party’s YouTube account. Leaders of other political parties also figure in the song.

Uses of TikTok in the Election

With the features of acting, singing and delivery of dialogue as well as conversation, TikTok, of late, has been a much-followed trend among the young generation in Nepal. The video-based social networking application is widely used in 2022 election campaign. However, the use of this tool for election Agenda-setting moves more unorganized and scattered.

The TikTok account being personal in nature, none of the parties has used the same as their official account. However, fake accounts are found claiming them under the ownership of different parties. For example, the NC has confirmed that it does not own or operate any an account on TikTok. But surprisingly, the keyword 'Nepali Congress' on the TikTok search reveals many handles. One of the handles named ‘nepalicongressofficial1’ has more than 10,000 followers. More than 124 videos are streamed from the handle during the election, and more than 356,000 views are recorded on some posts. However, no other visual contents are uploaded from this handle in the post-election period. This suggests that the TikTok algorithm is more expandable than any other social networking sites.

The CPN-UML confirms to the researcher that it does not have an official TikTok account, but party president KP Sharma Oli has one. On the other hand, the cyber cell of CPN-UML extensively uses TikTok in the run-up to the elections. The cyber cell recognizes it as the most effective medium to convey the party's positive messages to the people. This is the reason why; the cell organized a TikTok competition focusing on the election. Rs. 10,000 has been awarded to the winner who made the best TikTok explaining the role of CPN-UML in national development.

A search for the keyword "CPN-UML" on TikTok reveals the handle @cpn_uml, with more than 6,400 followers and videos being uploaded on random topics including a few relating to the election campaigns.

CPN-UML President KP Sharma Oli's TikTok account has been followed by more than 13,300 people. However, his account remains almost defunct during the election. A total of 27 videos are uploaded on Oli's account, all of them from the time of his premiership. Of the 27, six videos shared by his handle are parts of Zee News that interviewed him. In the similar manner, the CPN Maoist Center does not have an official TikTok account. However, party workers use this tool during the election campaign extensively. Its use is widespread at the level of leaders and party workers. Election songs, statements against other political parties, and memes going "viral" on TikTok keep going until the election days.

Overall, the case study suggests that social media is becoming an essential component for setting agenda during election. It has reduced the dependency on the traditional media for political parties to disseminate their message to the wider range of people concurrently. Similarly, political parties have been using it without the process of gatekeeping that newsroom regularly practices.

7.8 Summary of the Chapter

Among the 602 news items and articles published on the front page and op-ed sections in a month, 57 were exclusively editorials. The quantity of published editorials underscores newspapers' emphasis on elections, positioning editorials as a vital pillar of the media's agenda. During this period, 214 items illuminated various facets of the election. Just as newspapers prioritized editorials and article writing, survey participants exhibited similar preferences. The fact that over 80 percent read editorials and articles solidifies the newspaper's credibility.

Examining the content of the news reveals a discernible imbalance. Experts contend that the emphasis on Kathmandu-centric datelines is market-driven. In terms of news sources shaping the agenda, not all political parties receive equal priority. The newsroom appears to concentrate on prominent leaders. Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and CPN-Maoist Center secure greater coverage, while other parties receive substantially limited space in newspapers. Private newspapers exhibit a more favorable disposition towards the opposition party, while government newspapers lean towards the ruling party.

Assessing the agenda set by newspapers, voters express reservations. They assert that the media could have done more and was not entirely successful in highlighting and tracking public concerns. This viewpoint aligns with the acknowledgments of editors and experts. Voters tend to place greater trust in newspapers than in party manifestos. Furthermore, their interest in social media has witnessed an uptick. The case study of social media usage clearly indicates the changing ecosystem of the media during elections. Political parties have used various social media platforms to deliver their political messages avoiding the in-house gatekeeping of Newsroom.

In this changing scenario, analyzing content, survey results, and triangulated KII insights underscores the necessity for newsrooms to prioritize public issues to enhance their Agenda-setting capacity.

CHAPTER-VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Summary

This chapter presents the summary and conclusions of the study, synthesizing findings based on the variables identified in alignment with the study's objectives. It provides an overview of the role of media in Agenda-setting during elections in Nepal.

The introduction chapter provides an overview of the research focus, framed by McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-setting theory, which examines the role of Nepali newspapers within the broader context of media evolution, political communication, and democratic practices in Nepal. It traces the historical and theoretical foundations of media's influence on public opinion and political discourse, emphasizing how newspapers have evolved in tandem with Nepal's democratic journey, shaping public agendas and electoral narratives over decades. Its objectives are threefold: to assess voter perceptions of public agendas, to evaluate the prioritization of policy agendas, and to analyze the role of newspapers in representing and influencing electoral narratives.

The third chapter outlines the methodologies employed. The study analyzes 602 items from the first and op-ed pages of Gorkhapatra, Kantipur, Annapurna Post, and Nagarik during the 2017 election. It also examines manifestos from the Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN-UML, surveys 338 newspaper readers, and includes a case study on social media presence. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) are conducted with editors, election experts, and the Chief Election Commissioner to enhance the study's robustness.

This chapter provides a historical overview of media's role in elections, from 1959 to the latest election in 2022. It underscores how Nepali newsrooms have

consistently supported democratic processes and acted as agenda setters, shaping public discourse and political priorities. Newspapers have documented Nepal's political history and transitions, serving as both chroniclers and influencers of political narratives.

This chapter addresses the first objective, examining variables such as newspaper coverage of public agendas, topic prioritization, public trust, and media credibility. Analysis reveals that public concern issues receive low priority in newsrooms during elections. Political parties often recycle public agendas in campaigns, and media tend to focus on current affairs rather than deeply addressing issues of widespread public interest. KIIs and survey participants noted that formal news coverage of public agendas is limited, emphasizing the need for broader representation of public concerns.

The fifth chapter explores the second objective, focusing on the representation of political parties' policies in newspapers, coverage of policy agendas, manifesto priorities, tone toward opponents, voter perspectives, and the role of new media. A minimal percentage of news items (1.85%) focus on policy issues advocated by political actors, with the majority of these stories centering on their commitments. KIIs highlight the lack of emphasis on policy-driven agendas by political parties and actors.

This chapter examines the third objective, analyzing the prioritization of news by newspapers, sources of campaign coverage, follow-ups, accountability, and issue attributes. Findings indicate that hard news dominates election reporting, with content largely Kathmandu-centric campaign coverage is prevalent, but follow-up stories and in-depth analyses are missing. Survey results show that 35.91% of respondents believe media influence their voting decisions. Social media emerges as a critical platform for political parties to establish and propagate agendas.

8.2 Conclusion

8.2.1 Public Agenda in Election

The first objective of the study is to assess voter perception regarding public agenda and media coverage. The Agenda-setting theory has established that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception by prioritizing certain issues over others during election campaigns. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) assert, the mass media sets the "agenda" of the campaign by influencing which issues the public perceives as most important. Dearing and Rogers (1996) further emphasize that public opinions are key factors in measuring the public agenda, shaped significantly by media coverage. Additionally, Kharel (2012) highlights the critical role of media literacy in enabling voters to distinguish accuracy from distortion in the news, underscoring its influence on voter perceptions.

Newspaper Coverage

The analysis of newspaper coverage reveals a tendency for the media to prioritize election-related activities over issues directly impacting the public. The fact that over 39% of the total newspaper coverage consists of hard news out of 602 printed materials underscores this situation. This observation is further supported by survey results, where 86.35% of participants expressed awareness of the newsroom's focus on formal activities of the election commission and government during the election period. Consequently, topics overlooked by newspapers also tend to be absent from online and social media platforms. Private newspapers have generally allocated more space to such neglected issues (Education, Health, Social Securities, Transportations, etc.) compared to government-operated media. During elections, coverage prominently featured Kathmandu-centric activities, while issues such as the peace process, constitutional amendments, federalism, and international relations varied in their prominence across the newspapers examined.

The overall coverage by the media suggests a noticeable gap between media priorities and the concerns of ordinary people. Addressing this gap requires a greater focus on issues directly impacting the public.

Order of Topics

The content analysis suggests that newspapers have not prioritized topics according to the public's day-to-day issues, despite generally positive reader/voter sentiment toward newspapers. Health and education, despite being perennial election agendas, are inadequately covered. Out of 602 articles, only 73 and 74 address health and education respectively, often in conjunction with other topics.

Notably, there was no dedicated coverage focusing solely on health and education as election agendas during the period. Similar neglect is evident for issues such as transportation, energy, human rights, and social security. In contrast, election-related topics such as security and governance, economy, and the business environment received substantial coverage.

Interestingly, 59% of survey participants believe that newspapers cover public agendas during elections. In this regard, P4 states, “The content made it clear that the majority was influenced by power and money, and the public agendas was fragmented, incomplete, and not comprehensive.”

Public Trust in Public Agenda

Nepali political parties appear to maintain a recurring set of agendas over the years, prominently focusing on political stability and socio-economic development. However, implementation of these agendas often falls short, leading to neglect of critical development issues. For instance, the agricultural fertilizer issue, first introduced during the 1959 election, continues to reappear in manifestos for subsequent elections, including the latest one in 2022. This pattern underscores the political parties' ineffectiveness in translating their agenda into actionable outcomes over time.

The majority of survey participants (61.42%) indicate a lack of minimal understanding among political parties regarding the development process. Additionally, 78.34% of respondents expressed disbelief in the commitments made by political leaders. This widespread skepticism reflects a significant lack of trust in political leaders and their agendas. In this context, Sukadev Khatri's comment, published in *Nagarik* daily (November 24, 2017), resonates: "Unless political parties declare their accomplishments, challenges in manifesto implementation, and achievements, people have no basis to believe in their promises."

Public Trust and Media Credibility

The use of reliable sources and factual information is crucial in journalism to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of news. Data indicates that 91 percent of news stories explicitly disclosed their sources, with 6.3 percent relying on anonymous sources and 2.5 percent using indirectly identifiable sources. Moreover, multiple sources were cited in 54 percent of news stories, highlighting a commendable practice in Nepali newspapers to enhance media credibility.

Trust in Nepali newspapers among newsreaders/voters during elections has been found moderate (79.53%), but the trust level decreased when it comes to political balance (52.23%). A vast majority of respondents (90.50%) agreed that the issue of social responsibility role of media getting eroding.

The participants in the KII have expressed mixed views on the trustworthiness of media content, with some believing that news is generally trustworthy because of gatekeeping, while others are critical of the media's coverage and its repetition of similar stories without substantial new information.

Priority in Manifesto

The analysis of manifesto indicates that social issues play a crucial role in the political agendas of Nepali political parties. Education and public health remain the

topmost social agendas, and parties have been focusing on these issues since the first general election of 1991 after the restoration of democracy in 1990. From a gender perspective, women's education and health receive larger attention. The parties have also given priority to population control, labor rights, and the health of children, among other issues.

While there is a repetition of social agendas in the manifestos for different elections, participants in KIIs highlight the gap between the promises made in the manifestos and their actual implementation. It establishes the question raised by Krishna Khanal-Who writes these manifestos? Who reads them? Who understands them? The party leader is expected to drive the election issue and campaign, but this is often not evident in the context of Nepal ((November 12, 2017).

The Real-World Indicator

There are many factors that influence issues to be highlighted in any election. Political is one of them. The recent political developments have always captured the importance in manifestos. The frequent changes in government and elections have highlighted the importance of manifestos and the ability to implement them in maintaining political stability. Despite some shared beliefs, political parties in Nepal have notable differences, particularly in their approach to religion, foreign policy, and socio-economic development. In recent years, political polarization and criticism among parties have remained a challenge, with agendas such as federalism taking a back seat.

The promulgation of the constitution in 2015 was a significant milestone in Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic. However, the country's political landscape continues to evolve, with the common agenda of a republic system at the center. The unification of the two major communist parties and their unified manifesto highlights the importance of collaboration and alliance-building in achieving political stability and economic prosperity.

Summary of the Key Findings of the First Objective

Grounded in Agenda-setting theory, this study concludes that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of electoral agendas. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) establish, the media determines the salience of issues by prioritizing certain topics during election campaigns. However, the findings reveal a disparity between the issues highlighted in media coverage and the public's trust in political commitments. While newspapers maintain moderate trust (79.53%) among voters, skepticism about political balance (52.23%) and the fragmented, incomplete nature of public agenda coverage highlight gaps in the media's role as a comprehensive informer. The study aligns with Dearing and Rogers' (1996) assertion that public opinion, shaped significantly by media representation, is a key indicator of Agenda-setting. Voters perceive public agendas as inadequately addressed in newsrooms, with limited focus on actionable social issues like education and public health—despite their prominence in political manifestos since 1991. This disconnect between public concerns, media coverage, and political accountability underscores a weakening of the media's Agenda-setting efficacy in addressing voter expectations.

Moreover, Kharel's (2012) emphasis on media literacy resonates strongly, as the lack of voter ability to separate bias or distortion exacerbates public mistrust. This erosion of trust is compounded by the perceived decline in the media's social responsibility role (as noted by 90.50% of respondents), further diminishing its influence on democratic processes.

In conclusion, while media retains a significant role in shaping voter perceptions and public agendas, its effectiveness is hindered by limited coverage of pressing social issues, political bias, and declining public trust. Strengthening the media's social responsibility and fostering greater media literacy are essential to enhancing its Agenda-setting role, thereby ensuring a more informed and engaged electorate.

8.2.2 Policy Agenda During Election

The second objective of the study is to evaluate policy agendas established by political parties and media. The alignment of media and political party agendas is a critical component of effective electoral communication. According to Dearing and Rogers (1996), the importance of issues is often reflected in their inclusion in policymakers' agendas, which the media in turn amplifies. Norris (2000) emphasizes the media's responsibility to educate the public on major issues and political commitments, reinforcing its role in setting policy agendas. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) findings indicate that media coverage not only reflects but also determines the salience of political issues, shaping both public and policy priorities during elections.

Parties' Policy in Newspaper

The study reveals that political parties and leaders do not consistently prioritize policy agendas in their newspaper content, often opting to emphasize populist issues and activities to generate public interest. Only a small percentage of news items (1.85%) address policy issues advocated by political sources, predominantly focusing on commitments and development plans. News items based on party manifestos that delve into policy matters frequently criticize parties for failing to fulfill promises and for including populist programs designed to attract votes. Significantly, most policy-related discussions are more prominently featured in op-ed pages rather than in news sections.

Coverage of Policy Agenda

The responsibility of setting policy agendas lies not only with political parties but also with the general public and media. Data indicates that the media has given relatively less coverage to policy-oriented agendas, with only 13.5% of print materials addressing such issues.

However, articles and editorials have criticized political parties for their lack of focus on policy agendas and have offered potential solutions. The media covers a wide range of election-related topics, including regional development, political party reform, and issues like corruption, gender equality, and voter rights. While the public generally trusts the media to cover important issues, it may not always perceive the media as actively contributing to setting their own agendas. This suggests that citizens remain active participants in the Agenda-setting process and can engage with the media to address their concerns.

Public Approach to Media for Policy Agenda

The survey reveals that a majority of respondents (62.31%) believe that the media often covers issues they consider important, and an even larger proportion (76.26%) agree that newspapers address public agendas during elections. However, only 52.23% feel that the media consistently follows up on issues raised before elections.

While 75.67% of respondents have approached the media to highlight issues, they find significant, only 59.05% feel supported by the media in establishing these agendas. This indicates a gap between public expectations and media actions in amplifying individual concerns.

News of Manifestos in the Newspapers

Newspapers show a reluctance to prominently feature stories based on political manifestos. Out of a total of 602 items published, only 3.82% focused solely on political manifestos. Additionally, 6.14% of the content mentioned political manifestos as one of several information sources. Survey data indicates that a significant majority of respondents (83.31%) often find major issues regarding political parties' manifestos covered in newspapers.

The analysis reveals that newspapers tend to prioritize alternative sources of information over political manifestos when reporting news. There is a noticeable lack of in-depth or investigative coverage of political manifestos, indicating a hesitancy among newsrooms to delve deeply into these documents.

Furthermore, newsrooms frequently neglect to conduct follow-up reporting on whether parties have implemented their proposed agendas or fulfilled promises made to the public in previous elections. This highlights a weakness in the media's role in holding political parties accountable through their reporting.

Policy Agenda in Manifestos

Election manifestos serve as crucial tools for political parties to communicate their policy agenda to the public. Survey results indicate that a significant majority of Nepali voters (82.20%) compare parties' commitments before voting. However, due to political instability and lack of accountability, manifestos are often seen as more ambitious than realistic, and are not fully implemented. Nevertheless, election manifestos remain important as authoritative statements of a party's ideological and socio-political agenda, highlighted by the Political Parties Act, 2073. Since democracy's restoration in 1991, parties have consistently prioritized multiparty democracy, citizens' fundamental rights, peace, security, good governance, and state restructuring. Yet, experts note that while these ideological positions are articulated in manifestos, their practical implementation often falls short.

Manifestos reflect Nepal's evolving socio-political context and citizens' aspirations, critical for the country's democratic progress. Social issues, such as education, public health, and women's rights, have consistently featured prominently. While newer issues are occasionally included, repetition of social agendas over the years raises doubts about parties' commitment to their promises. Addressing societal concerns effectively is essential for parties to earn public trust and support.

Economically, parties propose ambitious agendas during elections, yet follow-up and accountability are often lacking. The NC and CPN-UML differ on approaches to the private sector, with the former advocating privatization and the latter focusing on labor issues. Both prioritize private investment, FDI, agriculture, tourism, hydropower development, natural resource utilization, and industrialization. Infrastructure development and agricultural modernization also feature prominently.

Tone Toward Opponents

Nepal's political parties often resort to negative language and criticisms against their opponents in their election manifestos. This strategy aims to garner support and divert attention from their own weaknesses. However, the absence of concrete evidence and statistics to substantiate these claims weakens their credibility. This trend of negative campaigning has persisted in all elections since 1959, except for the 2008 CA poll. The ongoing accusations and blame-shifting among major parties continue to highlight a fragile psyche and lack of unity in Nepal's political landscape.

Voters' Takes on Manifestos

The study highlights the significance of political parties' manifestos in Nepal's electoral process. While there is a general agreement among the public regarding the authenticity of these documents, the study suggests that reading manifestos may not always influence voters' decisions. Sixty-five percent of participants reported that their voting preferences remained unchanged after reading manifestos. However, the majority (76%) of the participants read manifestos to gain an understanding of parties' strategies.

New Media and Policy Issues

The emergence of new media has always posed a challenge to traditional forms of media, and the current generation of online and social media is no exception.

In this evolving media ecosystem, newspapers have transitioned online, with social media becoming an integral part of the landscape. Newspaper content now reaches people's smartphones via social media and online news channels. According to the survey, participants believe that the emergence of social media has directly changed newsrooms (91.39%). Similarly, 89.61 percent agree that their news consumption habits have changed due to social and online media.

However, the lack of professional editing processes in social media content is a concern for newspaper subscribers. Political parties have recognized the power of social media in disseminating their policy agendas and have started using it to reach a wider audience.

Summary of the Key Findings of the Second Objective

The study reveals that policy-oriented content remains underrepresented in Nepali newspapers, with only 13.5% of print materials addressing such issues and a mere 3.82% focusing exclusively on political manifestos. Despite the significant socio-political value of manifestos, they are often relegated to op-ed sections rather than featured prominently in news stories. Furthermore, political actors' opinions on policy rarely penetrate news coverage, reflecting a newsroom focus that prioritizes other electoral narratives.

The survey highlights the role of manifestos as a reference for voters, with 82.20% of respondents comparing party commitments before voting and 76% reading manifestos to understand party strategies. Manifestos frequently emphasize social issues like education, public health, and women's rights, aligning with Nepal's evolving socio-political landscape. However, political parties often include negative rhetoric against opponents, detracting from policy-oriented discourse.

Theoretical foundations support these findings. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-setting theory underscores the media's capacity to shape public focus by prioritizing specific issues. The limited media coverage of policy agendas suggests that while manifestos reflect citizen aspirations and democratic progress, their marginalization in newspapers indicates a gap in Agenda-setting. Dearing and Rogers (1996) emphasize that media attention significantly influences public salience, a factor underutilized for policy issues in Nepal.

Social media's rise is reshaping voter behavior and newsrooms, with 91.39% of respondents recognizing its transformative effect and 89.61% acknowledging changes in their news consumption habits. This shift underscores the growing role of digital platforms in shaping public perceptions and influencing political discourse, complementing the traditional media's role in Agenda-setting. In conclusion, while political manifestos and policy agendas hold significant potential for fostering informed democratic participation, their limited prominence in Nepali newspapers suggests a missed opportunity for the media to amplify these critical narratives effectively.

8.2.3 Newsroom Agenda Prioritization

The third objective of the study is to assess media representation in Nepali newspapers during elections. Media representation during elections involves a gatekeeping process, where editors and journalists filter and prioritize events to emphasize specific aspects, as highlighted by Meyer (2002). McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrate that this editorial selection directly influences the hierarchy of issues perceived as important by the public. Moreover, Kharel (2010) identifies the strategic nature of political campaigns, where messages are designed to maximize support and minimize negative perceptions, with media acting as a critical

intermediary in this process. The resulting representation reflects not only the priorities of political actors but also the inherent biases and systemic filtering mechanisms within the media.

Priority of Newspapers

The study conducted a thorough analysis of the cover, editorial, and op-ed pages of four national-level newspapers in Nepal to understand their coverage of election-related news. Out of 602 classified items, 236 were identified as ‘Hard news,’ while only 82 items were ‘Soft news’ dealing with the media agenda. The number of articles related to the election was 214, highlighting the importance of the democratic process. High-priority content from newspapers often finds its way onto online platforms via social media. Moreover, the political messages propagated within the information technology-driven ecosystem of social media are increasingly integrated as content within newspapers. The analysis reveals that a majority of election-related news content had Kathmandu as their dateline (56%), indicating a centralization of Kathmandu in terms of political affairs and administrative mechanisms.

Uses of News Source

News Source as Agenda Setter

The use of sources is crucial in journalism, as they play a critical role in establishing the validity and objectivity of news. Newsrooms employ various forms of sources, with identifiable sources considered more credible than anonymous ones. However, newspapers have largely relied on political parties and government agencies as their primary news sources, revealing 91 percent of their sources, with little proactivity in independently verifying statements given by political parties and leaders.

An area of concern is the underrepresentation of women as primary sources. Only four news stories quote women as the primary source, while 43 others use statements from women in a peripheral manner. This underrepresentation is linked to the fewer number of women candidates in direct polls, their weaker presence in policy-making, and lesser participation in party and government leadership roles. The study shows that the NC, with a presence in 198 news stories, the CPN-UML with 140, and the Maoist Centre with 116, are treated as the first, second, and third most important parties, respectively. As the NC has been in the ruling position, it receives greater media attention and is more frequently used as a news source.

Campaign Coverage

Campaigning activities are a major source of news content during election periods. Political speeches (109 news items) and government documents (102 news items) are frequently used as sources for news content. However, manifestos (66 news items) and the direct voices of the general public (67 news items) receive less importance.

Survey data shows that a majority of respondents (78.64%) are interested in politics and consider themselves well-informed (85.46%). Despite this, only a small percentage contribute financially or attend election campaigns (24.04%). Due to restrictions on exit polls and public opinion surveys, no horse-race coverage is noticed on the front page.

Overall, the media's coverage of election-related news tends to focus on political parties, leaders, and government officials, while the perspectives and expectations of the general public are not given much attention.

Follow-up and Accountability

The news media in Nepal faces challenges in effectively holding political parties accountable for their promises. Despite the importance of manifestos in

informing the public about parties' agendas, media coverage often lacks depth and investigative rigor. This issue is compounded by a shortage of follow-up reporting on the implementation of parties' agendas, highlighting a gap in the media's ability to scrutinize and hold parties accountable. This shortfall is evident in the limited parliamentary discussions on issues that matter to the public. The media's weaknesses can be attributed to a lack of skilled manpower and a predominant focus on reporting current events rather than delving into policy matters.

Issues Attributes

In conclusion, the analysis of Nepali newspapers suggests a bias towards certain major political parties, with very limited coverage and negative inclination towards others. The focus is on formal activities rather than policies or agendas, indicating a lack of depth in reporting. Survey data show a perceived lack of integrity and impartiality in the media, and a decline in their social responsibility. KIIs highlight the complexities and challenges involved in ensuring editorial impartiality. Editors hold varying opinions on news balance in Nepali newspapers, with some believing that media give more priority to powerful individuals and money, while others emphasize the importance of prioritizing everyone. The op-ed page also faces challenges in maintaining diversity and impartiality due to a lack of good opinion writers.

Influence on Decision Making

While there is a high level of interest in reading newspapers among the population, the impact of newspaper content on shaping beliefs and opinions is not as strong, with only 35.91% of respondents indicating significant influence. Despite the majority of respondents reporting trust in the media's content during elections, they do not believe that newspapers significantly influence or change their voting behavior. These findings raise questions about the role of newspapers in influencing public opinion and decision-making processes.

Case Study of Social Media and Election

Social media has become an indispensable component in communication, challenging traditional media's role in Agenda-setting. Political parties are leveraging social media to bypass the gatekeeping processes of traditional media. Nepali politicians and social media handles of political parties are active during election. This allows them to convey messages directly to the public without any editorial intervention, which explains their increased focus on social media platforms.

However, it is observed that political parties are using social media in a traditional, one-way communication manner, without engaging in meaningful interactions with the public. Additionally, the prevalence of fake accounts used for political propaganda poses a significant challenge to the democratic process.

Summary of the third Objectives of the Study

The third objective of this study aims to assess the media representation in Nepali newspapers during elections. The findings reveal that while Nepali newspapers cover election-related content, there is a clear focus on hard news. The coverage of elections, comprising 214 items, is largely centralized around Kathmandu (56%), reflecting the dominant political and administrative influence of the capital. Newspapers primarily rely on political parties and government agencies as news sources (91%), which points to a lack of independent verification and critical journalism. Political parties such as the Nepali Congress (NC), CPN-UML, and the Maoist Centre are heavily represented, with the NC receiving the most attention due to its position in power.

This selective coverage, with a focus on major political parties and formal political sources, aligns with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-setting theory, which suggests that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions by highlighting certain issues over others. The theory posits that the media sets the "agenda" by determining which issues and actors are considered most important by

the public. In this context, the over-representation of mainstream political parties and the emphasis on official sources in media coverage reflect the media's Agenda-setting role. However, the minimal coverage of manifestos and public voices indicates a narrower focus in shaping the public's understanding of the broader electoral issues.

Furthermore, the reliance on political elites and campaign-related activities without a deep dive into manifestos or public engagement highlights the limitations of the media in providing a comprehensive representation of policy agendas. Dearing and Rogers (1996) argue that the public agenda is shaped by the media's prioritization of certain issues, yet the lack of coverage on party manifestos and the general public's perspective suggests that the media is not fully meeting the public's informational needs during elections. This creates a gap in the representation of electoral issues and policy priorities, as the media coverage does not fully reflect the diversity of perspectives that shape public opinion. Moreover, the increasing role of social media in elections allows political parties to bypass traditional media gatekeeping, directly shaping public discourse and challenging the media's Agenda-setting role. This shift highlights the evolving dynamics of communication and the growing importance of social media in shaping public agendas, as political actors gain more control over the messages they disseminate. This finding reinforces the relevance of the Agenda-setting theory in understanding how media (both traditional and social) influence public opinion during elections.

In conclusion, while Nepali newspapers play a significant role in election coverage, their representation remains skewed towards major political parties and official sources. This aligns with the Agenda-setting theory but also exposes limitations in the media's role in providing a comprehensive and inclusive representation of electoral issues. The findings underscore the need for more diverse, balanced, and investigative media coverage to ensure that the full spectrum of public and political agendas is represented during elections.

8.3 Suggestions for Further Study

While this study sheds light on the evolving role of media in Agenda-setting, it does not cover many other pertinent aspects. One significant facet explored within this study pertains to the challenges faced by traditional newspapers, the oldest medium, as they grapple with the encroachment of new technologies. This issue, critical to the survival of newspapers, finds due attention in the study. However, a more comprehensive investigation is necessary to fully grasp the many-sided role of newspapers in the era of growing new media. Drawing from the insights gleaned in this study, several avenues for further research emerge, some major ones of which are as follows:

Manifesto Readability and Impact: A study that gauges the readability and impact of political manifestos could offer valuable insights into how such documents shape public perception and decision-making.

Misinformation and Electoral Agendas: A focused inquiry into the interplay between misinformation, media, and electoral agendas elucidates the challenges of information integrity.

Political Parties' Role in Agenda Formation and Execution: A study centered on how political parties contribute to the creation and execution of agendas provides a deeper understanding of their role in shaping public discourse. In summary, while the present study represents a step towards unraveling the media's evolving Agenda-setting role, it is evident that a more comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted media landscape is necessary. The suggested research areas collectively offer a larger view of the intricate interplay between media, politics, and societal dynamics in this digital age.

APPENDICES

Appendix-I: Frame for Content Analysis

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Name (Title) of article_____ | 7. Number of columns in the news story |
| 2. Date article appeared:
_____ | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 |
| 3. In which newspaper did the story appear?

Kantipur

Nagarik

Annapurna Post

Naya Patrika | 8. Number of words

Less than 100 words

101 to 300 words

301 to 600 words

601 to 900 words

901 to 1200 words

1201 to 1500 words

More than 1500 words |
| 4. News Format

Hard News (1)

Feature News

Opinion Article (2)

Editorial (3)

Interviews | 9. Is the news or article accompanied by illustration/ graphical presentation or photographs?

YES

NO |
| 5. News story datelined from:
(Only for news story)

Name of District:
..... | 10. If 'YES', is it:

Illustration/ Info graphics

Photographs

Cartoon

Others |
| 6. Issue of coverage

National significance

Regional significance

Local significance | 11. What does the image/ photographs deal with?

(.....) |

NEWS SOURCE**12. What is the source of the story?**

News Reporter

Columnists

Press Briefings

Announcements

Political Leader's speech

Interviews with political
parties

Campaign Activities

Wire story (RSS and other
international wire service)

Not given

Others

**13. Attribution in the news story
(number of quotes in the news
story)**

None

Single

Double

Multiple

14. Gender of news sources

Female

Male

Both Male and female

Others

Gender could not be identified

**15. What kind of sources is used in
the story?**

Identified

Anonymous

Both of the above

**16. News sources use by political
parties**

CPN-UML

NC

NCP Maoist

RPP

MJF

RJP

17. Other news sources used

Prime Minister

Ministers

Government officials

Election Commission officials

Political party top leader (head of
the party)

Political party leaders

Candidates

Political party cadre

Experts/ Academics/ Researchers

CSO/ NGO activists

Election Observers

General People

Others

18. **How many times were the political parties name and its representative's name mentioned in the article?**

- NC
- CPN-UML
- NCP Maoist
- RPP
- MJF
- RJP
- Others

19. **Based on the above question which political party or its representatives was mentioned the most?**

- NC
- CPN-UML
- NCP Maoist
- RPP
- MJF
- RJP
- Others

Tone of the news story

20. **Overall coverage tone of NC mentioned in the news/ article?**

- 1. Neutral
- 2. Positive
- 3. Negative

4. Party or candidate not in the article.

21. **Overall coverage tone of the CPN-UML party mentioned in the news and article.** [Uses of words/intention/presentation]

- 1. Neutral
- 2. Positive
- 3. Negative
- 4. Party or candidate not in the article.

22. **Overall coverage tone of NCP Maoist party mentioned in the news and article.**

- 1. Neutral
- 2. Positive
- 3. Negative
- 4. Party or candidate not in the article.

23. **Overall coverage tone of RPP party mentioned in the news and article.**

- 1. Neutral
- 2. Positive
- 3. Negative
- 4. Party or candidate not in the article.

24. **Overall coverage tone of MJF party mentioned in the news and article.**

- 1 Neutral

- 2 Positive Party's and representatives
- 3 Negative personal traits
4. Party or candidate not in the article. Formal events
25. **Overall coverage tone of RJP party mentioned in the news and article.** Campaign factors
- 1 Neutral Party and Candidate's stance on issue
- 2 Positive Party or Candidate not in the article
- 3 Negative
4. Party or candidate not in the article.
26. **What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?**
- NC Party and representatives*
- Party's and representatives personal traits
- Formal events
- Campaign factors
- Party and Candidate's stance on issue
- Party or Candidate not in the article
27. **What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?**
- CPN UML Party and representatives*
- Party's and representatives personal traits
28. **What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?**
- NCP Maoist Party and representatives*
- Party's and representatives personal traits
- Formal events
- Campaign factors
- Party and Candidate's stance on issue
- Party or Candidate not in the article
29. **What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?**
- Rastriya Prajatantra Party and representatives*
- Party's and representatives personal traits

Formal events

Campaign factors

Party and Candidate's
stance on issue

Party or Candidate not
in the article

30. What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?

*MJF Party and
representatives*

Party's and
representatives
personal traits

Formal events

Campaign factors

Party and Candidate's
stance on issue

Party or Candidate not
in the article

31. What topic was covered in the story, as per the political parties and its candidates?

*RJF Party and
representatives*

Party's and
representatives
personal traits

Formal events

Campaign factors

Party and Candidate's
stance on issue

Party or Candidate not
in the article

32. What aspect of issues does the story refer to audience?

Diagnostic

Prognostic

Symptomatic

Motivational

Others

33. The purpose of news source intended for -

Promote own
party/candidates

Neutralize/defend
own party/candidates

Damage others
party/candidates

Party or candidates
not in the article

34. Is there negative words against opponent party/candidates in the article?

Yes

No

35. **Based on the above question, negative words are used for which political party?**

NC

CPN-UML

NCP Maoist

RPP

MJF

RJP

Others

36. **Is there political sources promoted policy issues in the article?**

Yes

No

37. **Is there any policy related problems are focus in the article?**

Yes

No

38. **Is there political proposal of party/candidate to address those problems?**

Yes

No

39. **Checklist of political sources promoted issues (Campaign factors) –**

Peace

Election

Constitution

Federalism

Health

Education

Human right

Social security

Foreign relation

Infrastructure
development

Governance

Economy

Business environment

Energy (petroleum to
hydro-electricity)

Transportation

Crime

Appendix-II: Survey Questionnaires

Tribhuvan University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Office of the Dean, Kirtipur
Ph.D., Journalism
Survey questionnaires

Respected sir/madam

Namaskar,

I am a Ph.D. scholar in journalism at the office of the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tribhuvan University. I am undertaking thesis research entitled "**Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during elections**" I humbly request you to participate in the survey. This survey is one of the prime parts of the quantitative data collection for my study. The success of this research is reliant on your response. The information provided will be treated with maximum confidentiality and used for academic purposes only. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Rishikesh Dahal

Basic Information

Name	
Age	
Cast	
Gender	
Education	
Occupation	
Voting list area	
Participate in General Elections	

Newspaper and Agenda-setting

1. Independent journalism is considered one of the essential foundations of democracy. Journalism plays a crucial role in making people aware. How do you feel about the presence of newspapers in the context of elections?

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. I trust the media's content during elections	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. In my opinion, the media covers people's agenda during elections	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. In my opinion, newspapers provide equal priority to all political parties during the election	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. I often read editorials in newspapers	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. I find editorials are politically balanced	1	2	3	4	5	9
f. I often read opinions/articles published in newspapers	1	2	3	4	5	9
g. I find opinions/articles are politically balanced	1	2	3	4	5	9
h. I find political news are balanced						
i. I think publishers, editors, reporters, and the market influence newspapers' content with their preferences, priorities, and recommendations.	1	2	3	4	5	9
j. I usually influence or change my mind about voting after reading newspapers.	1	2	3	4	5	9

2. The number of news and articles shows that national media are Kathmandu-centric. Because -

Please make circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. Journalists or editors are not sufficiently active as expected	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. Newsrooms are dependent largely on press briefings and formal activities	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. Newsrooms are not adequately oriented to the above	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. Newsrooms are not sufficiently spending on content	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. Newsrooms are under the pressure of publishers and business interests	1	2	3	4	5	9
f. The social responsibility role of media is eroding speedily	1	2	3	4	5	9
g. Media are profit-centric	1	2	3	4	5	9
h. The emergence of social media has directly challenged newsrooms	1	2	3	4	5	9

Voting pattern

3. Generally, I cast my vote as recommended by -
- Suggestions from friends and family
 - Evaluating manifestos
 - As reported by media
 - Affiliated party
 - Family tradition
 - Don't know

4. Since the first elections in Nepal in 1959, political parties have been issuing manifestos. What is your opinion on those declarations?

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. I usually compare political parties' commitments before voting	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. In my opinion, the manifestos of political parties are their authentic agendas	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. I read manifestos to understand their strategies	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. I believe in the manifestos of all political parties	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. I trust the manifesto issued by the party that I support	1	2	3	4	5	9
f. I am confident that the party is working as per its previous election manifesto.	1	2	3	4	5	9
g. The political parties regularly send their manifesto copies during election-campaigns	1	2	3	4	5	9
h. I usually find major issues regarding manifestos of political parties in Newspapers	1	2	3	4	5	9
i. I have changed my mindset on voting after reading the manifestos.	1	2	3	4	5	9

5. The oldest forms of election campaigning are rallies and corner meetings. What effect do the speeches have on public opinion?

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. I usually attend in election campaigns	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. I believe in the commitments of leaders	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. I often read news regarding election campaigns	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. Sometimes I am influenced by the speeches at election rallies	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. Newspaper coverage of elections campaign is fair	1	2	3	4	5	9

Public Agenda

6. All political parties try to attract voters with their agenda. How much priority do political parties and media provide for public issues?

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. Political parties often carry those issues that I feel they ought to do.	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. I usually advocate for the issues that I feel are essential	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. Political parties have incorporated my priorities in the manifesto, public announcements, and during their interviews	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. Media often cover those issues that I feel important	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. Media follows the issues it raised earlier also	1	2	3	4	5	9
f. I believe political parties consult with experts and stakeholders while setting their agenda	1	2	3	4	5	9
g. I have approached the media to cover the agenda that I feel important	1	2	3	4	5	9
h. The media has supported me in establishing my agenda	1	2	3	4	5	9

Policy Agenda

8. One of the essential duties of political parties is to convey their policies for development. Have you ever noticed those policies through any medium?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Don't know

8.1. If your answer is 'Yes', what medium was that?

- a. Newspaper
- b. TV/Radio
- c. Internet/social media
- d. Both a, b and c
- e. Mass announcement
- f. Manifestos
- g. Others

9. Policy debate and discussion contribute to the stability of democracy. How far have the political parties and the media given importance to it?

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree (सहमत)	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. I have found maximum understanding among political parties regarding development process	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. In my opinion, the media is addressing the need of the public through their news contents	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. I find news stories carried in the media regarding social, economic, or cultural development issues	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. I find stories regarding good governance and civil rights during elections	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. Nepali political parties have prioritized global issues as well as national ones in their manifestos	1	2	3	4	5	9

Personal experience/interpersonal communication

10. Some people do not pay much attention to political campaigns. I think I am

- a. Very much interested
- b. Somewhat interested
- c. Not much interested

11. The political parties try to talk to as many people as possible to get them to vote for them. Has anyone from one of the political parties made a call or come around to you about the campaign?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. During any election year, people are asked for financial contributions to support campaigns. Have you given any individual candidates for his/her campaigns?

- a. Yes
- b. No

13. Self-evaluation on politics and media

Please make a circle on the options you prefer	Completely agree	Partially agree	Agree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree	Don't know
a. I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics	1	2	3	4	5	9
b. In my opinion, I am better informed about politics and government than most people	1	2	3	4	5	9
c. In my opinion, radio and television have the power of Agenda-setting as the newspaper does	1	2	3	4	5	9
d. The emergence of online and social media has changed my news-consuming habit	1	2	3	4	5	9
e. I believe the content of social media does not pass through the professional editing process, including verification of any information	1	2	3	4	5	9
f. I think social media has dominated the Agenda-setting role of traditional media	1	2	3	4	5	9

Appendix-III: Questions for Thematic Interview

Tribhuvan University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Office of the Dean, Kirtipur

PhD, Journalism

Respected sir/madam

Namaskar,

I am Rishikesh Dahal, a Ph.D. scholar in journalism at Tribhuvan University. I am conducting research on the "Agenda-setting role of Nepali newspapers during elections" for my thesis. I would like to request an interview with you to gather qualitative data for my study. Your participation is crucial to the success of this research.

The information you provide will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. You may also choose to respond to the questionnaire digitally in either English or Nepali. If you have any difficulties, please feel free to reach me at rishug@gmail.com or 9851079645.

Thank you for your cooperation and understanding.

Best regards,

Rishikesh Dahal

Personal Information

Name:

Organization/Affiliation:.....

Occupation:.....

Position and Responsibilities:

1. Newspaper and Agenda-setting

What is your view on media coverage during election period in Nepal?

- Are news items trustworthy?
- Does media provide a platform for public agenda?
- Do all political parties receive equal coverage?

1.1. OP-ED pages of Nepali media

- Quality of editorial writing -
- Readers' reading habits
- Political impartiality of editorial writing
- Opinion piece reading habits
- Does media provide equal space to all parties/diverse opinions?
- Does media follow the 'balance' theory of journalism?
- Are media contents influenced by publisher/editor/reporter/market?

1.2. Reader/Audience approach

Can media content change the public's mind, especially regarding voting? (If yes, please provide an example)

How do you comment on the following statements-?

- Media people lack reporting and creative skills
- Newsrooms focus only on routine tasks
- No proper orientation in newsrooms
- Low-cost newsroom operations, no proper investment in reporting and news production
- Media's standards are decreasing
- Social media pose a threat to newsroom content

2. Voting pattern

What factors influence people's voting pattern?

- manifesto

- family/friend influence
- traditional patterns

How do manifestos impact voters' mindset?

How do you evaluate election manifestos issued by political parties?

- Public issues and prioritization -
- Political ideology -
- Feasibility -
- Accountability -

3. Public Agenda: Manifesto

Do political parties prioritize public agenda in their manifesto, interviews, and rallies?

Does media prioritize manifestos before and after elections?

Do politically non-motivated citizens advocate election manifestos?

How are election manifestos prepared?

- Party committee decision
- Consultation with experts and stakeholders
- Public consultation
- Media influence
- Citizen voice carried by media

4. Policy Agenda by Political Party

- Do political parties carry policy agenda to the public through various mediums (internet/social media, newspaper, TV/Radio, etc.)?

- Is there coordination among political parties for national policy agenda?
- Does media raise public aspirations and give space to social, economic, and cultural development?
- Does media promote good governance and citizens' rights during elections?
- Do political parties prioritize international and national agendas?
- Why do you think public has less interest in election campaigns?

5. Political literacy

Agree/Disagree with the following statements:

Do you think citizens are aware of the political system and process?

Do you think radio and TV can set the agenda like print media?

Is it true that online portals and social media change news consumption patterns?

Do you think social media provide uncensored content?

Do you agree that social media set the agenda better than conventional media?

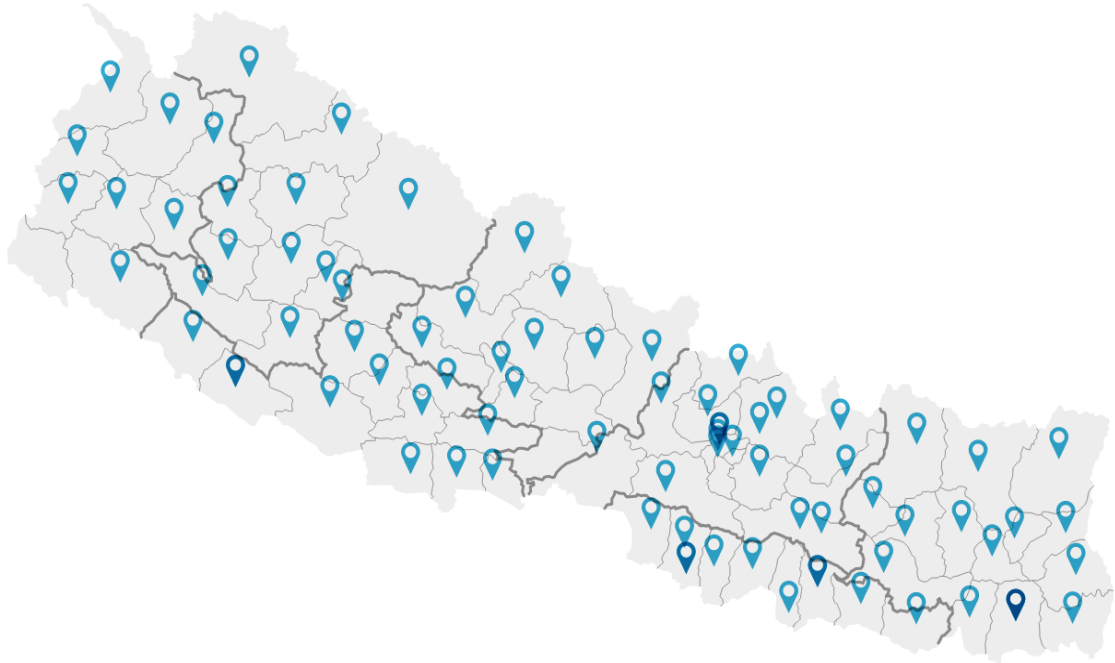
Appendix-IV: Demography of Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	259	76.85
	Female	78	23.15
Age	20 to 30 Yrs	68	20.18%
	31 to 40 Yrs	106	31.45%
	41 to 50 Yrs	102	30.27%
	51 to 60 Yrs	42	12.46%
	61 to 70 Yrs	15	4.45%
	Above 71 Yrs	4	1.19%
Education	Class 10	23	6.82
	School level (+2)	42	12.46
	Bachelor's degree	90	26.71
	Master's degree	152	45.10
	MPhil/PhD	30	8.90
Occupational sector	Business sector	65	19.29
	Government sector	51	15.13
	Private sector	94	27.89
	Academic sector	43	12.76
	NGO/INGO	84	24.93
Cast	Bramhin	156	46.29
	Damai	3	0.89
	Gurung	4	1.19
	Kami	3	0.89
	Kshatri	72	21.36
	Limbu	4	1.19
	Magar	7	2.08
	Muslim	2	0.59
	Newar	41	12.17
	Pariyar	1	0.30
	Rai	4	1.19
	Sarki	1	0.30
	Tamang	8	2.37
	Thakuri	6	1.78
	Tharu	7	2.08
	Yadav	3	0.89
	Others	15	4.45
Participation in general election	One time	38	11.28
	Two times	57	16.91
	Three times	70	20.77
	Four times	76	22.55
	Five times	42	12.46
	Six times	54	16.02
Total		337	100

Source: Field study, 2022

Appendix-V: Survey Participants Based on Voter List

Map of the Participants based on their voter list



Created with Datawrapper

Appendix-VI: KII Participants

KII	Name	Designation	Reason of selection	Date
P1	Kishore Nepal	Senior journalist, Former-editor in chief of Gorkhaparta and Nagraik daily, Founder editor of Deshantar weekly, Chairperson of Nepal Television, founding editor of Naya Sadak daily, Former member of PCN, Press advisor of PM Krishna Prasad Bhattarai	More than 50 years of active in journalism, Active and thought- provoking columnist, Author of multiple books related to media and politics including Mero Samaya, Under the shadow of violence, JanamatSangrahadekh i Jana Aandolansamma Nepali patrakaritakobikas	04 February 2023
P2	Rajendra Dahal	Ex-editor- Himal Khabar, Former president of PCN, Press Advisor to Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, President of Nepal, Editor of Sikshyak monthly	More than 40 years in journalism, the editor who led for the first public opinion survey during election in Nepali media (1999), Initiated first media content analysis on election (2008), One of the founders of Center for Investigative Journalism Nepal	04 February 2023
P3	Prateek Pradhan	Former editor in chief of Nagarik and the Kathmandu Post	Three decades active in print and online journalism, former member of PCN,	08 February 2023

		daily, Founder editor in chief of Karobar daily, Founder and editor in chief of barakhari.com	Served as Press Advisor to Prime Minister Susil Koirala	
P4	Jagdish Pokharel	Former editor in chief of The Rising Nepal	Academician, Media researcher, Involved in election monitoring since 1999.	17 February 2023
P5	GunarajLuite 1	Editor of Nagarik, former editor of Annapurna Post	Three decades in broadsheet dailies from reporter to the Editor in chief, Experienced in weekly newspapers like Jana Aastha	12 February 2023
P6	Hari B Thapa	Former editor of Annapurna Post, currently editor in chief of Ekagaj.com	Three decades in active journalism, Expertise in campaigning for good governance and anti-corruption, Author of multiple books on corruption and governance like Bhrastachar ko Salyakriya	12 February 2013
P7	Akhanda Bhandari	Editor in Chief of Annapurna Post, previously creative editor of Kantipur daily	Three decades in broadsheet journalism, Authors of books regarding media and literature	14 February 2023
P8	Shiva K Bhattarai	Editor in chief of Gorkhapatra, former editor of Muna and Madhuparka	Three decades in Government owned broadsheet daily and magazine in different positions	15 February 2023

P9	Yubaraj Ghimire	Former editor of Kantipur and Kathmandu Post, Annapurna Post, Rajdhani, Nagarik, Founder editor of Samaya magazine and Newsfront weekly. Currently editor in chief of Deshsanchar.com	Active and thought-provoking columnist, noted journalist in Nepal and India, Worked as radio journalist for BBC Nepali service, Auther of Sunya Samaya	08 February 2023
P10	Sudhir Sharma	Editor in chief, Kantipur Daily, Ex-Editor of Nepal magazine, Worked as a reporter in Himal and Kathmandu Today	Longest serving Editor in chief of Kantipur daily. More than 20 years as an Editor within Kantipur Publications, Author of Prayogsala, book regarding Nepali politics, conspiracy, and India	11 February 2023
P11	Dinesh Thapaliya	Chief Election Commissioner, ex-secretary GoN	Previously GoN secretary in various ministry	07 February 2023
P12	Ila Sharma	Former election commissioner, Visiting lecturer of Law, previously journalist at The Rising Nepal	Actively involved in EC's communication aspects, also covering two elections, previously served as journalist in The Rising Nepal, One of the team members of	05 February 2023

			the first media observer in 1999 election	
P13	Bhojraj Pokharel	Former chief election commissioner, Former chief secretary GoN, former secretary at Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, GoN	Served as Chief secretary of the GoN, Author of the book Vote for peace	09 February 2023
P14	Vijayakanta Karna	Professor, ex-diplomat, Former-editor in chief of the Everest Herald	Former Journalist at The Kathmandu Post and the Everest Herald	20 February 2023

Source: Field study, 2022

Appendix-VII: List of Editorials

Title of editorial	Date	Newspaper	Total
Matadhikar Prayogko Mauka	12/7/2017	Kantipur	11
Ajhai Farji Mat	12/4/2017		
Himsatmak Gatibidhi Roka	12/1/2017		
Baddo Nirbachan Kharchaka Bikriti	11/29/2017		
Aba Doshro Charanma Dhyan	11/27/2017		
Matadhikar Sadupayog Garau	11/26/2017		
Maun Abadhiko Maan	11/24/2017		
Griha Mantralaya Rikta Narakha	11/22/2017		
Surakshya Byebastha Sudrid Banau	11/19/2017		
Asambhav Sapana Nasunau	11/14/2017		
Bhadkilo Chunab Kharcha	11/9/2017		
Digo Shanti ra Sambriddhitarfa Pahila	12/7/2017	Gorkhapatra	11
Nirbachanko Maryada	12/5/2017		
Pahilo Charanko Sandesh	11/29/2017		
Tinglabasiko Maag Sambodhan Hoss	11/29/2017		
Utasahapurna Matadan	11/27/2017		
Matadhikar Prayogma Nachukau	11/26/2017		
Maun Abadhi	11/24/2017		
Sasakta Surakshya Byebasta	11/22/2017		
Upalabdhi Rakshyaka Lagi Nirbachan	11/20/2017		
Sudhrud Surakshya Byebastha	11/14/2017		
Aba Sambriddhiko Palo	11/9/2017		
Sanghye Sambidhanko Karyanwayen	12/7/2017	Annapurna Post	17
Mass Casualties ko Sambedansilata	12/6/2017		
Maun Abadhiko Jimmebari	12/5/2017		
Thagiyeka Yuba	12/4/2017		
Bibeki Matadata	12/3/2017		
Niriha Sarkar	11/30/2017		

Matpetikako Surakshya	11/29/2017		
Nirbachan Aayoglai Paath	11/29/2017		
Santoshjanak Matadan	11/28/2017		
Rajnitik Koshedhunga	11/26/2017		
Maun Abadhiko Sambedansilata	11/24/2017		
Grihamantri Toka	11/22/2017		
Khoi Surakshya?	11/19/2017		
Malako Arajniti	11/17/2017		
Ummedbarko Aakasiyeko Kharcha	11/12/2017		
Biplab Gatibidhi Banda Gara	11/10/2017		
Karmakandi Ghosanapatra	11/9/2017		
Matadatako Jimmebari	12/7/2017		
Himsalai Maljal Nagaru	12/6/2017		
Mulya Bighatan	12/4/2017		
Nirbachanma Paisa Prabhav	12/3/2017		
Chunabi Himsa	12/1/2017		
Nirbachan Pracharma Achar Samhita	11/30/2017		
Khatarnak Abadharana	11/29/2017		
Nirbachan Kharchako Niyati	11/28/2017		
Sahabhagitako Sandesh	11/27/2017		
1,54,27,938	11/26/2017		
Biteko Dashak	11/24/2017		
Shanti Surakshyako Prashna	11/22/2017		
Aapattijanak Abibyeki	11/21/2017		
Sarkar Surakshya Deu	11/19/2017		
Thekedar Ummedbar	11/16/2017		
Ausadhima Pahuch	11/15/2017		
Nirbachanko Surakshya Chunauti	11/12/2017		
Apatyarila Aaswasan	11/9/2017		
Total		Nagarik	18
		All four newspapers	57

Appendix-VIII: Registration of Kantipur

श्री ५ को सरकार
गृह मन्त्रालय
जिल्ला प्रशासन कार्यालय

काठमाडौं
पत्र पत्रिका फाँट
(... ..)

गृह मन्त्रालय
जिल्ला प्रशासन कार्यालय
काठमाडौं

फोन नं. ४-१०३१५
चारखाल, डिल्लीबजार
मिति: ०८३/०६/१७

पत्र संख्या:-
द० नं० ३९/०४२/०५०
प्राप्त पत्र संख्या र मिति:-

विषय:- प्रमाण-पत्र

श्री... सोमका प्रकाशत प्रा. लि.
... त्रिपुरेश्वर, काठमाडौं।

महाशय,
कान्तिपुर

तपाईंको / तपाईंहरूको
आधारमा निम्न लेखिए बमोजिम... ..
... ..

पत्र पत्रिकाको विवरण

(क) नाम:- कान्तिपुर
(ख) भाषा:- नेपाली
(ग) प्रकार:- दैनिक
(घ) विषय:- समाचार प्रधान
(ङ) संस्करण वा कुन कुन दिन प्रकाशित हुने... .. दैनिक
(च) आकार (साईज) आठ
(छ) पृष्ठ संख्या:- ८
(ज) छापीने न्युनतम प्रति:- १०००
(झ) सम्पादकको नाम र ठेगाना:- सोमका प्रकाशत प्रा. लि. त्रिपुरेश्वर, काठमाडौं
(ञ) प्रकाशकको नाम र ठेगाना:- सोमका प्रकाशत प्रा. लि. त्रिपुरेश्वर, काठमाडौं
(ट) मुद्रकको नाम र ठेगाना:- सोमका प्रकाशत प्रा. लि. त्रिपुरेश्वर, काठमाडौं
(ठ) पुँजी:-
(ड) पत्र पत्रिकाको कार्यालय रहने स्थान:-

क. वडा नं. आकाशरीप, आषाढली
ख. नगर पालिका श्री ५ को
ग. जिल्ला काठमाडौं
घ. अञ्चल बागमती
मिति

भवदीय
स्थानीय पदाधिकारीको सही...
पुगा नाम विद्यादेव शर्मा
दर्ता प्र० १७० अ० प्रशासकीय अतिरिक्त
क. पालय: जिल्ला प्रशासन कार्यालय काठमाडौं।

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