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Media as Misleading Business: An Analysis of Nepalese Online Media Practices

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By

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Media as Misleading Business: An Analysis of Nepalese Online Media Practices” submitted by Santosh Ghimire to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned member of the Research Committee:

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Practices

Abstract

This research paper studies the extracts of the online media products supplied to ordinary readers as information and the motive behind those supplies. In the age of media transformation, people are spending a large chunk of their life browsing the online stuffs that are molded as information. This research, however, argues that the information, instead of providing the needed and accurate data, it cheats us with tailored items disguised in the garb of information. The distortion, manipulation, sensationalization of the facts for the economic interests are common practices in Nepalese media which are not concerned with what is true. Rather they are concerned about what sells among the audience by manufacturing adorned truth. Though there are several positive changes brought by the rapid growth of the online media too. They have transformed the media market, like ending the monopoly of big media houses, molding public opinion and helping to abolish the monarchy, and so on, they depended upon clickbait and making the news viral by any means rather than focusing on quality of the news report. This problem is compounded due to weak monitoring mechanisms of government and weak civil society. On the other hand, they rely upon copy-pasting of the international news. This manifests their incompetence. The local as well as international contents are mixed up, which results in diminished credibility.

Key Words: Media product, scrutiny, manipulation, distortion, civil society, monitoring, truth

This research paper aspires to study online media products as they are being produced and supplied to the audience as texts and evaluates their inherent interests.

The online media currently mushrooming are key to shaping the public opinions and affecting the overall system of the country as well as the daily life of the audience. They claim to present the fact or truth but the truth they present is often fabricated, partial, and invented. The invention is affecting the country and the ordinary people in adverse ways thereby hampering their critical ability as well as responsiveness. This research attempts to unravel the problem, and dig out whether the media products that are being produced live up to the claim made by the media persons or distort the truth for sake of economic gains and by and by, determine if the media are information servers or information exploiters.

Close analysis of the various extracts taken from various online media, and the headlines phrased in eye-catching ways disguising the actual information and emphasizing the particular profitable and sensational part of the news reveal the true interest of the online media publishers. It also becomes apparent that the media owners' interests play a crucial role in shaping up and packaging the information in such a way that they go viral and earn as much as possible. Their first and foremost intention appears to be the generation of profit rather than the dissemination of information.

It is an age of information glut. We get bombarded with an excessive amount of information every day. While the information we consume from social networks like Facebook and Twitter can be limited, these platforms tap on the ever-growing online media to supply us with the information. The contents provided in these online media are shared, reshared, manipulated, thereby multiplying the amount of information.

Johnson et. al. in their *The Practice of Cultural Studies* argue that a cultural product can be an object of analysis. They argue, "Treating cultural practices as the

text is a general resource, to be applied to domestic discussions, chatroom interactions, interview transcripts and ways of riding motorbikes, too” (254). Hence, they hold that there can be “the analysis of the media product as a text” (254). There have been a plethora of studies on the content of the media. However, there are only few studies on the practices of the media and how these practices have grave ramifications on general social life.

Yug Pathak, for example, has done an interesting study of the Nepali print media and its implications on social life. Arguing that the larger media houses are so powerful that they can structure the way of life, he says in “Nepali Media Ek Samayik Dristi 2073” anthologized in *Mangena*, “These Media which have reporters in the majority of places and have distribution channels all over the country are the major discourse creators of the contemporary time” (158). The discourses created, he seems to criticize, do not focus on the issues of the poor. “The media,” he says, “is producing the news on the behalf of the powerful industrialist, businessman, and regime” (173). He concludes that the print media is rich-friendly.

Pathak’s study focuses on print media. It seems there have been negligible studies about the online news sites and the studies conducted do not seem to be a value-based study. For example, a study titled *Online Media in Nepal: Need for Policy Intervention* done by Ujjwal Acharya concludes that “the media laws lack explicit explanatory provisions to govern the aspects of the online media, leaving loopholes that can be used to restrict the development and functioning of the online media” (20). Therefore, his study is silent about the practices and values of Nepali media.

There has to be scrutiny over the media particularly because this is the age of information overload and secondarily because this is the age of multiple

interpretations of the same event as well. We need to know how the information we consume is impacting our lives specifically when information and our engagement with it cost us a significant portion of our daily time.

We have big media houses and countless (in that the government does not seem to have kept a reliable and updated database) online news portals that serve us information. The information that comes from the former is thought to be more engaging and reliable than the one that comes from other sources as they have a more dedicated team. No matter how reliable or unreliable the information we consume is, we spend hours reading news items, interpreting them, and assimilating them into our lives every day. As Daniel J. Levitin, American psychologist and writer suggests in the “Introduction” of his influential book, *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, “Our brains are busier than ever before. We are assaulted with facts, pseudo-facts, jibber-jabber and rumor, all posing as information” (17). We thus consume more information than we can digest. Consequently, as Levitin argues, “trying to find time to schedule all our various activities has become a tremendous challenge” (17). This, therefore, makes our age the age of information overload as well, and this overload has been possible only because of the news based online media.

This does not, however, mean that the news-based online media have created the state of information overload only. Transformation in information technology, by extension, media technology has resulted in several positive changes. For example, as Mark Dice, the American writer in *Big Brother: The Orwellian Nightmare Come True* holds, “This (information technology) has created a fairly large amount of competition for the mainstream establishment media, and has damaged their long-held monopoly of information” (105). It is because of this transformation that small

informative endeavors have been able to break the monopoly of the big media houses over the information. For instance, in the Nepalese context, *setopati.com*, *onlinekhabar.com*, and other similar media outlets- the outlets with less capital- have proved themselves to be as equally good information servers as *the Kantipur*, *the Annapurnapost*, or any other big print-based ventures. Also, these media serve equally engaging content while they have a huge number of loyal audiences. These media have delved into the issues that have traditionally been ignored by the conventional media practices (although there is a politics behind this new engagement), thereby extending the purview of journalism.

Another good work the media did for us is it created a groundwork for overthrowing of the kingship in Nepal. While there can be a contentious debate as to whether it was good to overthrow the monarchy from Nepal or not, what we have to acknowledge is that the media psychologically prepared the Nepali populace for federalism.

In fact, the list of the positive changes the media has brought can run pages. Despite this, the media has failed and is failing us in many respects too. Although many media persons and liberal politicians deem the media to be the pillar of democracy as Thomas Jefferson puts it in the following lines, “The only security of all is in a free press” (325). We have several instances in the world in which the media has gone off the rut. Nick Davies, a British Investigative journalist, for instance, substantiates how the failure of the world media about the Y2K virus cost millions of dollars to the western governments and how the media got manipulated by the US government and UK government to make space for war in Iraq.

We can observe these types of deviations in Nepal too. These deviations could be costlier in countries like Nepal where the presence of civil society is weak as Tika

R Pradhan says “there is an absence of civil society in Nepal” (n. pag) in his article “Where Has Nepal’s Once Active Civil Society Gone?” published in *the Kathmandu Post Online*.

The deviation of the Nepali online media is reflected, first and foremost, in its monetary bent. Our media primarily looks like a business venture rather than informers. It is true that there has to be some money and incentives in a business for it to attract investors. But people getting in the media business for money has its own cost, which has been calculated in the west by a veteran British journalist Nick Davis. When the media is interested in making money and profits, it will have far-fetched and multidimensional impacts as Davies suggests. Davis in his influential book *Flat Earth News* reveals that the media owners exercise their power “in the style of prostitution, allowing for a flexible range of ideological activities so long as they can produce the right reward” (n. pag). “the right reward” will influence what types of content are served and how they are served (to be specific, it impacts the way the content is created and disseminated to lure more audiences). In more clear words, there is a high chance that the media will report only the events that have monetary leverage or they will tweak the events to make them newsworthy, and by extension more profitable. How this comes true is reflected in how almost all Nepali media compete to report about deaths, blights, rapes, calamities primarily.

Another problem with Nepali media is its inadequacies. They do not have sufficient manpower and dedicated resources to create original content and report the events, tidings from a faraway place. How this impacts the media practices is reflected in how the media mix up the local and international news items. A significant percentage of our news items is about foreign affairs. It might look surprising why these international tidings which have nothing to do with local lives

are given such great leverage that most print-based papers apportion a whole page on it. But on a deeper level, the media are only on the moneymaking mission (the larger the paper, the more space for the advertising).

However, this trend has a bad impact on the readers. On the one hand, this trend weakens and divides our ability to respond to the local tidings. On the other hand, it also brings to light the incompetence (or copy-paste business) of the media. Although one can argue that we have to aware of international news, a cursory observation of our news portals will show these international news items are merely fillers. Interestingly, the primary source of these news items is the internet. In this sense our media plays the roles of information recyclers and if we were to burrow the word from Davies “churnalism”. Davies thinks there are two key sources of churning namely “the wire agency (Reuters, AP) and there is the PR industry ” (n. pag). Given that the multiple news portals recycle the news from the same source (which are of course few), they create not only a state of information overload but also multiple truths. This further renders the media truths from objective to subjective, thereby making them incredible.

We are in the age of the media revolution. Now the media businesses are spiraling up every other day. According to the document titled “Registered Online Media” published by the Press Council of Nepal, there are 1756 enlisted media in Nepal. Because of the unnecessarily large number of news sites, the news sites have had to face an existential struggle. Although with the surge of the online news sites, there have been new sources of income for the news sites (Facebook Instant Article, Google AdSense, Native Adverting), not all the media ventures have access to them. Even the ones which have access to these money-making platforms have to get into

fierce competition to earn their shares. This stands particularly valid given that the number of audiences is significantly limited.

The existential struggle makes it imperative that the media do something to stay in the business. This is when the clickbait comes into play. And the most cashable clickbaits are deaths, blights, oppression, and anything that is negative. It is not then wondering why our media practices delve into society and come up with the negatives. If we analyze a portal of a day, we will see that there is more negative news than there are positives.

Roy Greenslade's "The Good News About Bad News - It Sells" in *The Guardian* argues that bad news sells. He says, "...the regular calls for papers to publish "good news" rather than bad is largely a waste of time...They (people) want to know what has gone wrong rather than what has gone right." (n. pag) This is precisely why our media compete to report about deaths and blights. Nick Davies calls this competition "Ninja Turtle Syndrome". Giving the reason for this syndrome, he says, "This requires the media to run stories which are being widely published elsewhere, even if those stories clearly lack merit." (n. pag) So, we continue to have meritless reporting in our online media portals.

The Ninja Turtle Syndrome has a disguise. Although the events that are being reported are the same, the media make sure that they have different titles, each trying to sensationalize the titles as much as possible. To this, American media theorist Neil Postman and the writer of *Amusing ourselves to Death* says, "adorned truths". He says, "Truth does not, and never has, come unadorned. It must appear in its proper clothing or it is not acknowledged, which is a way of saying that the "truth" is a kind of cultural prejudice" (22-23). The aim is to lure the audience. The more people you

lure into your sites, the greater the chance of clicks and the more the clicks and the more the money.

Then, sensationalization is an inherent nature of Nepalese journalism. Without sensationalization, more audiences cannot be lured into sites and by and by into clicking ads or creating impressions. And various tools are used to sensationalize the event. One such tool is decontextualization. If a message is delivered in the context, the message won't be cashable. You have to detach the event or expression from the context. Decontextualization makes sure that more audiences come to the site as BBC journalist Ben Frampton in his article "Clickbait: The changing face of online journalism" says. He argues, "If you cannot hold someone's attention for a sentence, you have no hope of getting them to read the rest of your article. The same is true for headlines; stark, witty or intriguing ones can draw the reader's eye to a story" (n. pag). Frampton's idea holds very true in the Nepali contest.

For example, *setopati.com* wrote an article under the heading "Another Maoist will Come into Existence, There Will Be a Bigger Danger of War" on February 8, 2019. The good thing about the article is that they have supplied a video of Prachanda's speech. The content of the video is not as provocative as the *Setopati's* title suggests. Prachanda says what the title of the article says he did. But there is a conditional part in the speech also. He says, "Laws should be made based on the constitution...if anyone downplays the achievement made, it will invite a misfortune...If someone thinks that they have done away with the Maoists, a new Maoism will come into existence. (n. pag)" *Setopati* seems to pick up the sensational part so that more visitors would come to their site. There is some distortion in the article too. The article claims that he said, "If someone thinks that they have done away with the Maoists, it will be a misfortune" (n. pag). However, he does not say

that it will be a misfortune after he said if someone thinks that they have done away with the Maoists.

Another online news site *thahakhabar.com* also keeps a clickbait in the title of reporting dated February 8, 2019, about the same event. Their title reads, “If Someone Thinks They Have Done Away With Maoists, It Will Be A Misfortune: Prachanda”(n. pag). The online media persons decontextualize the incident and groom it in such a way that more audiences can be lured into the sites. It is not just about Pranchanda or Oli, or Deuba, it is about everything. Unless facts have been distorted, traffic won't come to the site. There are graver practices of facts distortion. Let us have a look at the following screenshot of the Suryodaya online news shared on Facebook. The title of the article says, “Kathmandu Bound Airplane from Tumlintar Crashes: 10 Died and 7 Wounded”(n. pag). When you visit their site, you would be shocked to know that the news was about a Demo given to the rescue workers to prepare them for airplane crash rescue.



It is not strange, therefore, that the media make money out of the distorted information about deaths, arsons, and to be precise, all the negativities of the world. The media seem to know how one can cash on a rape. The researcher, for instance, tried googling Nirmal Pant on February 2, 2019¹. There were 2950000 results for it, out of which 22900 were from the news portals. The list of the media which vied for reporting this included Setopati, Online Khabar, and topped by BBC Nepali Services. Similarly, there were 197000 video results, most of which belonged to YouTube channels.

The media reported (created even) about the tumultuous case from all (im)possible angles, never let the event go down until everyone got tired. The end was more money was made rather than more people were informed. In fact, money was made out of information chaos.

True enough, the primary function of the media is to serve information and make money out of this practice. However, the role shift from the information servers to the information creators (constructors even) does not bring good outcomes. At the same time, bringing all the negativities of society into the limelight for the mere sake of money and profits, thereby strengthening a hopeless sense that the society is on the verge of collapse does more bad than good. Add to this, this repeatedly exposes us to negative vibes to the extent that they become common sense in the way Lesley Jefferies suggests in her book *Critical Stylistics, Power of English*. She says, “We are unaware of some of our ideologies because they have become so naturalized in our society that we think they are common sense” (50). Therefore when we are repeatedly exposed to the negativities, we start to take them naturally and lose of faculty of responsiveness. This happened in Pant’s case.

¹ Picture given in the Appendix

George Simmel, a prominent sociologist has given us an insight into what an over-exposure to an event results in. His essay “Metropolis and Mental Life”, though it was written to describe urban phenomena, stands relevant in our case. He argues if we are repeatedly exposed to a certain thing, there occurs a psychological phenomenon called *intensification of nervous stimulation*, which, he says “results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli”(183). When more of our conscious mind is used up by the “rapid crowding of changing images”, we develop a blasé attitude, a sense of apathy. We do not care about what is going on in the world. “The blasé attitude” Simmel holds, “results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves”(186). He furthers

A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all. In the same way, through the rapidity and contradictoriness of their changes, more harmless impressions force such violent responses, tearing the nerves so brutally hither and thither that their last reserves of strength are spent; and if one remains in the same milieu, they have no time to gather new strength. An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy. (186)

We do not read online news items because we are in pursuit of pleasure, we read them because we are bombarded with them. This bombardment of news items tears our nerves in such a way that we lose the zeal and the capacity to react to them.

Neil Postman has offered us a similar idea in his *Amusing ourselves to Death*. He is of the opinion that because of this “information glut” resulting in the trivialization of public information” (111), “people...were faced with the problem of diminished social and political potency” (68). Arguing that our information-action

ratio is very poor, he asks, “How often does it occur that information provided you on morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or to take some action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve (68)? We do not have an affirmative answer to the above questions, because as Postman furthers, “...most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful actions” (68). He maintains:

In the information world created by telegraphy, this sense of potency was lost, precisely because the whole world became the context for news. Everything became everyone's business. For the first time, we were sent information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not permit the right of reply. (69)

Therefore, given that the information pieces that come in the guise of relevant news do not prompt us to act, we seem to have lost our humanness. Humanness is a summation of human values, and emotions. However, this overdose of the information has made it imperative that we not feel for calamities, deaths, and blights. Consequently, the vicarious human civilization as we knew it appears is on the brink of a great change if not collapse.

This loss of ability to respond on the part of the readers has ramifications for the media practices too. For example, online media usually use bold headlines. If you look at their sites, they always have one or two items on the bold. The headlines are not emboldened for no reason; they are used to mean that the items with the bold headings are the major news of the hour. These bold headlines aim at luring more people to read the news piece. But what happens when the audiences no longer find values in them or bold headlines have already started to pass on the readers? How do

they draw the audience now? They have to constantly invent new strategies (of course, these strategies too will be exhausted). For example, *setopati.com* had to use a black background to report about the Bomjan scandal dated Poush 11, 2075². The rationale behind this innovation appears to be the fact that they have already palled on the readers and they need something new to redraw their attention.

When money is at the center of a practice, the practitioner has to continuously invent new strategies. The above example is one such episode. Another episode can be the attempt made to make a piece of news viral, by sharing it, having it shared multiple times. Each writer, reporter has a social network account. So do the media houses. The reporters and the media have friends, friends' friends.

The clickbaits and virality of news items are proportional. The more sensational the title is, the more viral the news is likely to get. In fact, as American Journalist Ingrid Silalahi rightly observes in an online article titled, "Making news go viral" "The commercial aspect of online journalism is significantly influenced by the audience: their clicks and their shares" (n. pag), the success of a news item and its creator depends on the virality of the news. When a piece of news gets viral, its circulation becomes unstoppable. Even when the original creator brings it down, by the time they bring it down, thousands of new copies would have been created in multiple forms. For example, Pashupati Sharma's controversial look geet is still in circulation under the banner of several YouTube channels although Mr. Sharma claims in an online video that he has taken it down.

A viral news item has a great role to play because the virality of the news items makes money for the websites. The primary income sources of the online media are Facebook Instant Article, Google AdSense, and other native marketing platforms

² Picture in the appendix

like Taboola. While Facebook pays on the basis of impressions (views), Google AdSense and native marketing platforms like Taboola pays based on the number of clicks. Thus, the more visitors you have, the more lucrative your news venture is. This also substantiates why these media houses vie for more visitors with, in the word of Mark Dice, their “media circus”. He says “One reason the media circus has spiraled out of control in recent years is the constant pressure to get people’s attention. With countless media outlets and social media accounts competing for clicks and retweets, most ‘journalists’ put being first ahead of being accurate. This “being first” rather than “being accurate” will have consequences on the content they serve.

In fact, it looks as though information, as it happens, is not sufficient for them. There has to be some distortion, some decontextualization for a piece of news items to be viral. Trying to be the first already has some inadequacies. When you hear of something, you just run breaking news with the famous note: details will follow. You do not go into the depth of the event. When you go deep into the event, you have to appropriate the event to your end. This way you create a news item. It is, therefore, not surprising that *setopati.com* should run a piece of news titled “The President Said Indicating Deuba: I Do not Understand What Was Said,” or *Kantipur.com* should run the title “President Satire on Deuba’s Speech” while she was complaining about the technical glitch with the sound system. She says as recorded in the video provided by *setopati.com* in the same article, “You do not seem to hear what the speakers say on this stage. The leaders spoke excitedly. The audience clapped. So, I think they spoke well (n. pag).”

In this sense, the role of our online media (and possibly the print-based media too) is not limited to reporting information. They seem to have started to create news. This results in the practice of “Churnalism” as Nick Davis says. “Churnalism is

about” as Davis argues “journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether a real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or fake” (n. pag). Therefore, this kind of ‘churning’ reporting does not boast of any other politics other than the subjectivity of the reporter, advertent selection, and omission by the reporter. Also, imagination and interest play a dominant role in the creation of news items.

Besides, as the primary interest is money, the media persons put their imagination into making more money. They are ready to do anything to make more money. For instance, a photo feature titled “Syria Turning into a Hell on the Earth- 10 Hearth Wrenching Pictures” run by *News24.com* on February 26, 2018, displayed 10 disturbing images and claimed, “...In the attack, at least 700 Syrian have been killed. According to the international media, one-fourth of the killed are children” (n. pag). The constructedness of this news item is reflected in the language of the feature. The feature uses phrases like “according to the international media (n. pag)”, “news has been received of” (n. pag), “it has been reported that” (n. pag), none of which seems to tell us what the sources of information were. Also, the images showcased in the articles have been taken from different sources. While www.snopes.com, the fact-checking website claims that the photos could have been rehearsed and shot, we cannot deny that these news items can be true. True or untrue, the problem with this reporting is that it uses unacknowledged contents and churns the contents in such a way that more money can be made, by appealing to the emotional world community.

Another issue is associated with the kind of practice news24 followed: the memory hole. This particular news piece was so viral that it had been shared 35300 times. There had been a lot of comments. In fact, when this feature was published, it

instantly became the news of the town. However, the comments have been deleted now. This means that the online media have this ability to create ripples in society and edit or delete the content. As a result, we have a strange situation; the impact has been made, but we cannot find the source of the impact. Mark Dice, borrowing a word from George Orwell calls this situation in which the journalists quietly delete or alter news stories in order to make it seem as if they were never changed, or never even existed in the first place- memory hole. He says:

The shift from print journalism to websites and Facebook pages doesn't just pose a danger to the distribution and verification of news, but it also puts our historical records at risk as well. Headlines and articles can now be changed without notice and information can vanish down a memory hole with little to no trace of its existence. With digital forgeries getting more sophisticated, how will we be able to verify that a document is actually authentic, especially if there are no physical documents anymore?(n. pag)

Therefore, anything can be done to make your news item viral. Once your mission is accomplished, you can delete or edit the web page. People can argue that given the limited webspace, it is not practical for us to keep everything. But if you are true media, it is inevitable that you keep documentation. However, several of our online media do not seem to create archives. For example, Setopati's search tab does not work. It looks as though they do not have any accessible archives.

There are other aspects to information manipulation too. While several smaller media do not have access to the realities, the larger media which have fairly greater access to the realities tend to manipulate the information either by omission or flattening. There have been several instances the media editing out what they think weakens their arguments.

For example, a few weeks back, there was an instance of a writer complaining about Kantipur media deleting some important aspects of his arguments from his article, and in his own words, “Sanctifying the congress.” The article by Chetnath Acharya ran by *kantipur.com* titled edits out significant arguments from the original version which he shares on Facebook. For example, in the original article Acharya explicitly blames the Congress for deteriorating relations with China. He writes, “When Girija Prasad Koilrala was the prime minister of Nepal, his private secretary Birendra Dahal illegally rode George Fernandes, the then Indian Defense Minister into Tibet on his bike” (n. pag). Also, Acharya, in his original write up, writes about the then prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai’s awareness and the ‘role of those in powers’ in Karmapa Lama’s successful flit to India via Nepal. However, in the article that the Kantipur ran, the incident of Fernandes has been reported as “The then Indian Defense Minster unauthorizedly got into Tibet via Tatopani” (n. pag). Furthermore, the printed version also edits out the episode of Karmapa Lama.

Of course, an editor has the right to tweaking some parts of our articles. But as New York Times’ op editor David Shipley argues in his article titled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Editing,” the editors should seek the permission with the writers before they edit out something. Shipley says, “Our most important rule, however, is that nothing is published on the Op-Ed page unless it has been approved by its author” (n. pag). In the above case, however, this common editorial ethics has been compromised. So, Mr. Acharya seems to be in the right when he claims that his article has been distorted.

It is not a minor thing. Editing out and asking the writers to edit out lies at the heart of the media practices of the present day. This is done to make sure that the media stays aligned with its agenda.

In fact, agenda-setting is a dominant media practice of the present day. While the biggest motivating factor for an agenda happens to be more money, the popular online media silences an alternative viewpoint. Mark Dice says, “The mainstream media often steers the public conversation by giving constant coverage to certain stories which reinforce the ideologies they are trying to promote” (n. pag). The ideologies such as democracy, freedom of expression that are promoted tend to suppress the alternative viewpoints. For example, in Nepali media, the news about deceased monarchy does not get as much as leverage as it deserves. Or the Nepali media does not want to talk about regulating the so-called freedom of expression.

Therefore, it can be claimed that in the age of agenda-setting, no omission, distortion, or manipulation is technical or inadvertent. They are purely intentional. The liberal media practices do not endorse something that they find despotic while there are pros and cons for all the systems of the government. The liberal media do not see, do not want to see even any other alternatives because the journalists school on liberal ideas such as free press, democracy.

To be more succinct, “media omission” is one of the most important aspects of Nepali media practices. All of the Nepali media is silent about certain aspects of their practices. For example, they do not write anything about how they make money in spite of the fact that they are making a great amount of money from the audiences they have. One of the online media’s income sources is Facebook’s Instant Articles. Facebook pays on the basis of the impressions an article creates. Usually, 1000 impressions (views) are worth \$3 on average.

To elaborate it, if the article from setopati is viewed 5000 times, it will generate \$15 a day. The amount will go high if the news item is viral and the audience is from the developed world. We also need to take into account the number of articles

created every day. The media recycle a lot of information every day, creating as many articles as possible. For the purpose of estimation, let us suppose setipati.com writes about 15 articles every day, and each article has an average impression of 5000 a day. Their income from instant articles would be \$225 a day and \$81000 a year (about 8 million Nepali rupees). This income is generated by bringing people to their sites. The income will grow manyfold if the audience clicks on the ads displayed there.

There are other sources of income too like Google Ad-sense (for English version publications), native marketing(for the publications with a large audience), etc. Google AdSense, for example, is the platform that allows Google to place its ads on various publications. If an audience goes to the page and clicks on one of the ads placed there, Google charges money on the advertisers. The publications on which the ads are placed will share revenue with Google. According to an America based tech site Income Activator (<https://www.incomeactivator.com/>), about 40,000-page views or 400 clicks will earn \$100 a day. If we were to take this as a standard, we can assume the online news portals of big media houses perform much better.

The case is similar to native marketing. According to Johnson Michael, a blogger at www.monetizepros.com, per million-page views earn \$270 to \$1,120. This means that the time we spend reading articles makes money for the websites. Popular news websites like ratopati.com, www.pahilopost.com, mysansar.com, ujyaaloonline.com, hamrakura.com, setopati.com have subscribed to native marketing. For media businesses to be able to regularly get money from native marketing platforms, they have to regularly create contents. So, they are even found to use Facebook statuses as the articles. However, no online news sites tell us that they make money this way, nor do they share revenues with the writers who write for them.

One reason for this omission could be that they do not want new competitors in the field. This revenue platform is an easy deal; Facebook instant article or native marketing does not care for the originality of the content. If this knowledge is shared with the people, anyone with technological know-how can easily compete with the large corporations.

Another reason behind this omission could be the media's inclinations not to pay fair remuneration to the writers and the taxes to the government. Incomes come with tax liabilities. If the media talk about new income-generating platforms, they too will be in tax brackets. So, staying silent about their own practices and being verbal about other embezzlements is an explicit feature of Nepali media. Needless to say, Nepali tax authorities are too weak to detect this kind of income as they do not know how the technology works.

The media's inefficiency, if not failure, is also reflected in how it mixes discourses. Earlier, the media did not have access to the internet. So, the size of their publications was predominantly smaller and the content local. However, with the advent of internet technology and new publication platforms, the sizes of the publications have grown while the ratio of the local vs international content is almost one to one now. It is presumed that something that gets space in a publication is worth reading. In the past, the size of characters of the titles was used to distinguish a piece of important news from less important ones. Now, this distinguishing feather has gone. Everything is a headline. If we observe a news portal for a day, we will notice that there will be several headlines, many of which are about international happenings. In other words, several read-worthy news items are created every day. In essence, however, these creations are devoid of native values and are intended as the tools to keep the audience engaged.

It is assumed that a news item should have leverage, some values. It should be more than a piece of information. According to an article titled “What Makes a Story Newsworthy?” published in <https://www.mediacollege.com/>, for a piece of information to be news, it should have contemporariness, significance, proximity, prominence, and human interest. However, most stories run in the Nepali online media do not live up to this benchmark. Some of the stories run are ludicrous even. We have online news portals writing about a journalist having a baby. An article run by *Hello Punar basis* titled, “Patrakar Sunil Aaujilai Putra Lav (Journalist Sunil Aauji has become a father)” as though being a father is a newsworthy thing.

It is not that only the small media are content hungry. Big media such as *Kantipur.com* too have failed us when it came to reporting. For example, a story run by *the Kantipur* on its online portal titled “Jhamsikhelma Rukh Dhalyo” is nothing more than a piece of information. According to the article, a tree inside the Ganesha temple has fallen off. The article further reads, “The front wall has been damaged. No human damage has been reported. There has been minor damage to the scooter (n. pag).”

Let us take another similar example from *onlinekhabar.com* published on March 20, 2019. The title of the news item is “Mukeshlai Anilko Maya Kina Lagyo”. From the title, nobody would know who Mukesh is and who Anil is. When we read through the ‘news’, we will discover that ‘Mukesh’ and ‘Anil’ in the question are Ambani brothers. The news is about the family feud. The news is irrelevant for the Nepali audience nonetheless.

This researcher does not intend to say that only *the Kantipur* and *Onlinekhabar* run these kinds of news pieces. All the media- small or large, print-based, or online do this. At the cursory glance, it might look like a simple journalistic

failure. However, if we give it a serious thought, we will see its ramifications. These deviations, on one hand, intend to show that the media are always busy creating news items. They, on the other hand, weaken the really significant news. They also overwhelm the audience, thereby rendering them incapable of discriminating between news and facts.

Often the media is said to be the fourth estate because it has, as Kathy Gills, professor at the University of Washington suggests “a responsibility to be the people's watchdog” (n. pag). As the fourth estate, the media has to advocate for the unheard and the marginalized. Advocating for the unheard requires the media persons to be cynical about government policies and castigate the state's aberrations. In fact, this is precisely why we advocate for the free press. The free press can question government policies and make people aware of the loopholes. At the same time, it lauds the good tidings.

In the context of Nepal, however, the free press, rendered free on the pretext of it being the fourth estate, seems to set agendas. The primary agenda of the media seems to be its opposition to the government. When a government is formed, the media stands against it.

The media also appears to be interested in the destabilization of the nation so that the media can always cash on the chaos, lack of trust, and anarchy. While it is justified when the media strikes government follies such as the inauguration of the ship office and ilk of the jobs, it is not justified when the media objects to everything the government does.

We can see a lot of examples of media being unfair about the government. On December 13, 2018, *Annapurna Post* ran an article titled “Tuin Kahile Hatchha Pradhanmantri Jyu”. In the article were a photograph and 59 words that condemned

the government for its inability to displace tuhins despite the claim made by KP Sharma Oli to remove all the tuhins from the country. Interestingly, the photograph is not the property of this media. In the photograph, a tractor is being propelled across the river in a tuin, and there is a suspension bridge in the background. The caption reads, “When KP Oli became the prime minister in 2072, Ashoj, the council of the minister had declared that they are going to remove the tuins from all over the country in one year. It is about one year since Oli became the prime minister the second time, tuin has not been removed from several places” (n. pag). The article is true about the presence of the tuins still. However, the argument put seems to be ludicrous. When we look at the picture minutely, we will see that it is not possible to take the tractor across from the suspension bridge. Thus, the news means to say that the tuin should be demolished even if it is serving us.

While the above news item boasts of a factual error, it is not a judgmental error. It is, in fact, a part of agenda-setting. In the context of Nepal, the media almost always castigates the government whether it is a government of NC or NCP. It seems they found this picture while the media persons were looking for the vital parts of the government. To them, the government failed to deliver what it once had promised. True enough, the government seems to have failed as well. But at the same time, this failure seems to be beneficial and the government decision to remove tuins did not seem to be right as the tuin seems to be able to serve as an alternative transport medium for goods.

The media also creates experts, use them as long as the new experts serve their purpose and give up on them. In more clear words, the media gives too much exposure to some people while sidetracking others. Also, there is a powerful user group of Media, i.e. PR which in the word of Nick Davies, “also produces pseudo-

experts” (n. pag). These experts are weaponized in such a way that they are used to corroborate the claims made by the media or the agendas sponsored by the PR.

Interestingly, the doors of the media are always open to these experts, who as Davies says, “have simply promoted themselves and skewed news coverage even though they have no compelling qualification in their chosen subject” (n. pag).

The experts created thus stay loyal to the agenda the media has set and vice versa. It is not, therefore, surprising that the media and the experts share a give and take relationship. When the media sets agendas and wants its endorsements, it quotes the pseudo-experts. The media person reaches the person who would endorse the idea, not of the one who has a different voice. This suppresses other voices. We can take the example of Govinda KC’s case. An external look into the whole coverage would convince anyone that all large online media of Nepal except for *Onlinekhabar* are anti-government. Like in previous hunger strikes (where *onlinekhabar* too was with KC), they created an atmosphere that KC is going to die anytime. To substantiate their claims, they quoted “the leaders of civil society” such as Sushila Karki, etc while ignoring and even suppressing the voice of opposition. For example, a majority of the media, except for *Prime Time TV* ignored Dr. Bhagawan Koirala who objected to KC’s continued obstinacy, despite the fact that he was a member of the Mathema Commission.³

The experts quoted to endorse that Govinda KC was right were Sushila Karki, Krishna Pahadi, etc. They were merely pseudo-experts, who were ranting about what they did not know or for what they represented. “The consequences of allowing pseudo-experts to hold forth and pontificate about things outside their domain can be

³ In the interview Dr. Koirala thinks that Dr. KC’s obstinacy is a hurdle stopping the way out.

devastating” (n. pag), as Denial J. Levitin suggests as they give the tilted views of the world, thereby fostering the sponsored agendas.

The Agenda-setting has other nasty facets too. When the media sets an agenda and dedicates itself to it, it boycotts and ignores other important social tidings and development. Let us take an example of Nirmala Pant. The rape was a heinous crime. It should have got as big leverage as it got in the media. But there were other equally heinous crimes, which went unnoticed or underreported when Pant’s case was on the top. For example, the rape case of Shreya BK was underreported. While it can be argued that Nirmala’s case was representative, being a case representative should not mean that it represents all the instances under one category. As a critical audience, we often wonder why Nirmala’s case was hyped to the extent that it became an international sensation while other similar cases appeared and disappeared.

One explanation for this could be the virality of the news items. Another could be the people’s (in)accessibility to the media. True enough, not everyone has access to the media and the one who has access to the media seems to be able to use the media to their ends. If we were to measure the gravity of accessibility, we would see the media is more accessible to the rich particularly because, as Noam Chomsky argues in “What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream” says, “... the press is owned by wealthy people who only want certain things to reach the public” (n. pag). It is therefore apparent that the rich own and control the press. “The ownership and control of media institutions,” as Johnson et al argue in their important work *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, “do have palpable effects on media products in terms of pressures to generate profit or competitive advantage, while the specific interests of owners and producers will influence agenda” (234). The owners of the media and those who have access to it, therefore, can do anything to use the media to their ends.

We can call this weaponization of the media. Noam Chomsky has made an interesting observation about how the media can be weaponized and capitalized by the rich. He thinks that the media which is after more income and good advertisers cannot be disinterested. He says, “the mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per se” (n. pag) on whom they can cash by selling them to the advertiser. He adds, “With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The advertisers' choices influence media prosperity and survival” (n. pag). We can say that the media cannot only be used to the political end. In the modern-day era, it is being used to the commercial end- the ads.

The media run two varieties of ads; paid ads and pseudo-news which actually are ads. Publishing paid ads is one thing, manipulating the news agencies to create the adverts in the guise of news is entirely another thing. For example, let us have an example of a recent business news item published in *setopati.com*. The article titled “Sujal Fudsko Chocofun Rolls Bajarma” has 38 words: “Sujal Foods has introduced a new product to the market. The company has introduced Chocofun Rolls to the market. The company has informed that it has brought the baked wafer rolls, produced for the first time in Nepal to the market. The company has clarified that the product has been launched to the market fulfilling all the quality standards” (n. pag). These kinds of news come every day.

If we were to analyze the value of these news items, we would see the news does not interest many. But what it does is it informs people about the new arrival, thereby doing a marketing function. There is nothing wrong with it, of course. But is it possible for the common man, says a new writer, to have similar access so that she could inform the people about her book? It cannot be. The media are closed to the

general people if their presence in their output does not yield them any money. So, it will be safe to assume that the media is pro-rich.

If we analyze some of the news items and feature articles, we will see that the media advocate for the rich. For example, an article titled “Videshma Lagani Kina Rokne” by Sujeeb Sakyan published in the Kantipur goes on to claims that investment into the foreign countries should be allowed, for as he suggests, “The returns the investment made overseas by Nepali will help solve the problem of liquidity to a great extent” (n. pag). The truth, however, is likely to be different. If the rich people of a poor country invest in a foreign land, the trade balance gets upset. Employment is created in a foreign land. In such a case, the talk about the requirement for liquidity does not hold valid.

In addition, the Nepali online media boasts of another serious problem; it practices plagiarism as a means to collect information. Given that the media is supposed to keep the masses engaged so that they can keep reaping benefits from their practices, they have to constantly create content. However, these media do not seem to have adequate and competent manpower to create original content. So, they end up copying the contents from other sources. Copying is not bad as long as there is an acknowledgement that states where the content is copied from. However, in our context, there is no acknowledgment, or the acknowledgment they provide does not specify where the content has been copied from. The most honest acknowledge we can see in Nepalese media practices is that they quote the sources as agencies while, in truth, they have copied from a source particularly *BBC*, *the New Yorker*, *The Guardian*. However, Nick Davies work has problematized the legitimacy and authenticity of these media outlets.

The most striking facet this trend sheds light on is inadequacy on the part of the media persons. They do not have many people working for them. These people work from a room, meaning that they do not go to the field they write about. As a result, they have to use Facebook statuses as news items, and that too, without proper acknowledgment and revenue sharing. There are several consequences related to the inadequate number of scribes. One is that you have to rely on the internet for content. Another is that you do not see what is happening in your country while you seem to see everything that is happening in the USA.

In conclusion, the media too is a business-like other business. News is only a means of earning more money, just as dealing in hemp is a means of making money. Journalism, therefore is not simply a service to democracy and civil rights. As a business, the media is destined to manipulate the markets like other businesses have to, sell false claims. Because of the fierce competition, the media industry is undergoing, a particular media has to do everything it can to present itself differently.

Also, based on the instances I have analyzed here, it can be said that the media is failing the populace, has failed them. Although there can be an argument that we cannot blame the media on the basis of a few judgmental errors or fallacies on their parts, I believe the instances I have discussed are not judgmental errors. Nor can we ignore the impact the fallacies have made, are making given the ever-propagating nature of the media. The media is a sensitive practice. A piece of misinformation can trigger a great disaster in society. We can only imagine a world where misinformation is deliberately created, where ignorance is a new normal and where misrepresentation is digested as truths.

We have an insurmountable amount of information nowadays. We are being handicapped by the very information we have created. We have subjective, multiple

interpretations of everything. However, we severely lack an essential thing- the truth.

The truth is dying. The truth is being killed for money by the very people who claim to profess in truth and impartiality.

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