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VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER

National Report
Nepal | 2024

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CIAA	Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ETA	Electronic Transaction Act
FNJ	Federation of Nepali Journalists
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ISPs	Internet Service Providers
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, and others
MuAN	Municipal Association Nepal
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PCN	Press Council Nepal
PSM	Public Service Media
RTI	Right to Information
USD	United States Dollar
VIBE	Vibrant Information Barometer

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Nepal

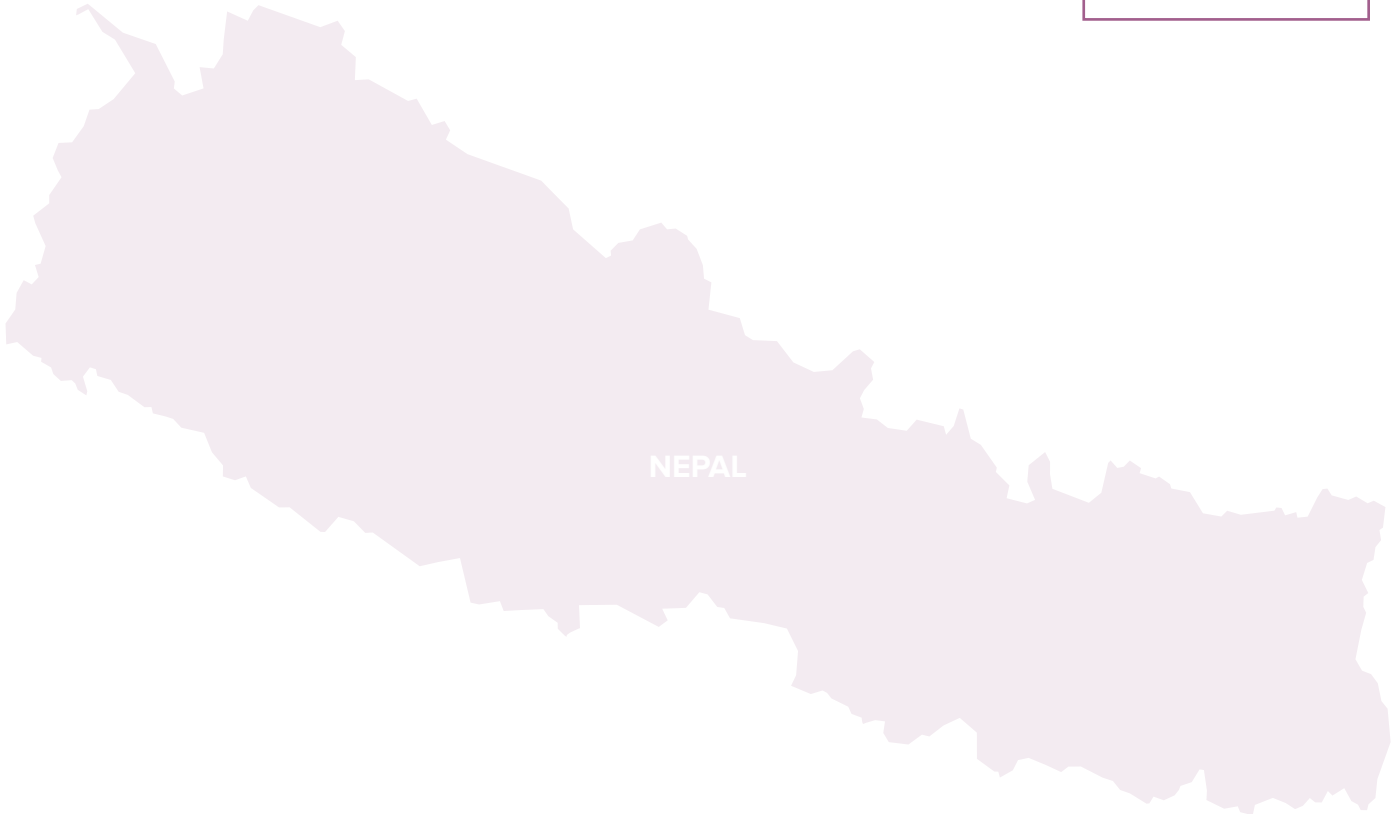
Overall Country Score: 23

NEPAL

Overall Score

23

out of 40



INTRODUCTION

Nepal's transition to multiparty democracy in 1990 marked a new era for politics and journalism in the country. Since then, Nepali journalism has undergone rapid growth. Currently, there are over 7,000 newspapers registered, which include 750 dailies, along with more than 1,100 radio stations, over 240 television channels,¹ and beyond 4,000 online news portals.² In addition, the 2015 Constitution of Nepal ensures “full freedom of the press,” while its articles secure citizens’ right to opinion and expression, press and publication, and information.³

“Currently, there are over 7,000 newspapers registered, which include 750 dailies, along with more than 1,100 radio stations, over 240 television channels, and beyond 4,000 online news portals.”

In 2022, Nepal held elections at all government levels: local, provincial, and

federal.⁴ This electoral cycle witnessed diverse media use, including misuse, the spread of misinformation, and occurrences of hate speech. There were also troubling incidents of harassment against media workers, which highlighted the complex relationship between the media and the electoral process.

Regarding the media economy, Nepal's media sector is facing financial challenges, largely due to a major decrease in advertising following the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past three years, there has been a staggering 50% to 55% percent decline, which has been mainly attributed to a liquidity crisis.⁵

In contrast, Nepal has made notable progress in improving information accessibility through advancements in information and communications

1 Press Council Nepal. (2023). *८८ औं वार्षिक प्रतिवेदन*. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/np/2023/09/25/7939/>

2 Press Council Nepal. (2023). *Enlisted online media till 2080-05-18*. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Enlisted-Online-Media-till-2080-11-14.pdf>

3 Law Commission. (2015). *Constitution of Nepal-2015*. <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

4 Gupta, A. (2023, February 13). *Assessment of the Nepal Elections 2022*. Vivekananda International Foundation. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/february/13/assessment-of-the-nepal-elections-2022>

5 The HRM. (2023, April 21). *The overall advertising market has decreased by almost 50-55% in the past 3 years*. The HRM. <https://thehrmnepal.com/interview/the-overall-advertising-market-has-decreased-by-almost-50-55-percent-in-the-past-3-years/>

technology (ICT) and mobile connectivity. According to a national news agency report,⁶ over 91% of the country's population now has Internet access, primarily through mobile devices. Consequently, this has led to an increase in bandwidth consumption.⁷

When considering the inclusion of women and marginalized communities in the news media, it is important to note that only about 15% of Nepali journalists are women. This shows a significant gender disparity. Additionally, the profession remains largely inaccessible to marginalized groups, and is reinforced by entrenched caste structures.

The safety of journalists remains a concern, although the situation has shown some improvement compared to previous years. According to the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), there were 55

incidents of media rights violations between May 3, 2022, and April 26, 2023, affecting 93 journalists and eight media houses.⁸

Between 2021 and 2023, the parliamentary agenda primarily focused on deliberating draft laws initiated in 2019. These included restrictive provisions that posed a threat to constitutional guarantees, potentially limiting press freedom, freedom of expression, and civic space.⁹ Among these legislative considerations was the proposed Information Technology Bill, which was aimed at replacing the National Transaction Act (NTA). Initially designed to combat cybercrime, the NTA has unfortunately been misused to target journalists and artists. Concurrently, the parliament was engaged in discussions regarding the Social Media Directive of

6 Online Khabar. (2021, July 29). *Nepal's 91% of population have access to the internet: Regulator*. Online Khabar. <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/nepals-91-of-the-population-have-access-to-the-internet-regulator.html>

7 Prasai, K. (2021, March 26). Broadband internet users rise by 10% points in one year. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2021/03/26/broadbandinternet-users-rise-by-10-percentage-points-in-one-year>

8 Federation of Nepali Journalists. (2023). *प्रेस स्वतन्त्रता र पत्रकार सुरक्षा, वार्षिक प्रतिवेदन*. [Press freedom and journalists' security, annual report]. https://www.fnjnepal.org/uploads/freedoms/freedom_1683106330.pdf

9 Pandey, L. (2021). Shrinking of civic Space: Drafting of CSOs policies in Nepal. *Policy Paper Series*, 18, 1-10. <https://nepalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Discussion-Paper-Shrinking-of-Civic-Space-Federal.pdf>

2021. Furthermore, in March 2022, the government published the controversial 11th amendment to the National Broadcasting Regulation 1997 in the Nepal Gazette. The amendment aims to regulate Over the Top, Video on Demand, and Internet television in the country.

Despite experiencing rapid quantitative growth, many media outlets have significantly reduced their content, with some even ceasing operations. Moreover, while corporate houses and advertisers wield greater influence on editorial decisions, journalists often struggle for fair wages and timely payments.¹⁰

“Moreover, while corporate houses and advertisers wield greater influence on editorial decisions, journalists often struggle for fair wages and timely payments.”

Politics also plays a major role in this sector, with many journalists being affiliated with unions or associations closely linked to political parties. These connections can sometimes lead to their recruitment as press advisors or communication experts for prominent political figures, primarily for public relations purposes. These dynamics have a detrimental impact on the quality of content and contribute to a negative portrayal of the media. Often, this leads to online harassment of journalists with the aim of undermining their credibility.

Lastly, as social media increasingly becomes the primary source for information, there is a rise in information disorder, including substantial misinformation, sporadic instances of disinformation, and hate speech.

10 Pandey, L. (2019). Implications of the corporate media politics in Nepal. *Neus Aus Der Forschung Research News*. <https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/de/newsletteriaaw/newsletter-4/pdf/iaawnewsletter-4-pandey.pdf>

METHODOLOGY



The **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** was created to assess a country's complex and multifaceted information ecosystem based on expert opinion. The vibrancy of an information ecosystem is based on four key principles: Quality of Information, whether that information is dispersed through Multiple Channels, whether citizens have the ability to Consume and Engage with the information, and whether citizens feel they can take Transformative Action with that information. These principles form the overarching structure used to determine the vibrancy of an information ecosystem. Each VIBE report serves as a snapshot of the country's information environment at a particular point in time. In 2023, the Nepal research team used

the VIBE methodology to evaluate the vibrancy of the country's information ecosystem. They selected 12 panelists from across Nepal, representing diverse identity backgrounds, including geographic regions, religions, genders, ethnicities, and languages spoken. The panelists were also chosen based on their roles as editors, media managers, civil society organization (CSO) members, reporters, educators, fact-checkers, bloggers, human rights activists, right to information (RTI) activists, LGBTQ+ activists, and advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities.

The panelists evaluated 20 indicators comprising a total of 167 sub-indicators, to determine an average score for the

four principles mentioned earlier (five indicators per principle). They were instructed to assign scores to specific indicators within designated ranges: zero to 10 for indicators categorized as ‘**Non-Vibrant**’, 11 to 20 for ‘**Slightly Vibrant**’, 21 to 30 for ‘**Somewhat Vibrant**’, and 31 to 40 for ‘**Highly Vibrant**’. The panelists were also asked to provide explanations for their assessments. The scores for each sub indicator were averaged to calculate the indicator score. The individual scores assigned by each panelist were then averaged to establish the official overall national score. Following the scoring process, moderators facilitated a panel discussion during which the panelists engaged in rigorous discussions on the indicators and sub indicators, and refined

their justifications for the scores they assigned to each indicator.

This research predominantly relies on the forms submitted by the VIBE panelists, with insights from the panel discussions integrated into the narrative section. Additionally, a desk study was carried out to supplement the given information. To improve readability, the authors have tried to limit repeated mentions of the word “panelists.”

In the following sections, after a brief synopsis of the overall principle score and its meaning, each indicator’s name is mentioned at the beginning, with detailed findings presented thereafter.

PRINCIPLE 1 Information Quality	
Score 21 out of 40	Somewhat Vibrant
	Strength of Evidence Rating: Strong
Indicator 1, which looks into the availability of quality information on various topics, achieved the highest score of 24 out of 40, suggesting a robust presence of quality information in this area. Similarly, Indicator 2, which evaluates adherence to factual content norms with minimal misinformation, received a score	of 23, reinforcing the reliability of the information. Indicator 3, which focuses on non-harmful content norms with minimal malinformation and hate speech, scored 22, indicating a reasonable level of adherence to these norms. However, Indicator 4, which examines inclusivity and diversity of content, received a lower score of 18,

highlighting the need for improvements in diversity and inclusivity within the Nepali media landscape. Lastly, Indicator 5, which evaluates the sufficiency of resources for content production, received the lowest score

not only within Principle 1 but also among all 20 indicators of the VIBE study, garnering only 16 points. This underlines the significant financial challenges faced by media sector.

INDICATOR 1

There is quality information on a variety of topics available

Nepal's media industry encompasses print, broadcast, and digital media platforms. According to the Department of Information and Broadcasting, there are over 7,000 newspapers, including 750 dailies, as well as more than 1,100 radio stations, and over 240 television stations. Additionally, the Press Council Nepal (PCN) reports that there are in excess of 4,000 registered online news portals. However, the panelists pointed out a noticeable rural-urban divide in terms of infrastructure accessibility and use. They noted that content producers in urban areas typically have better access to resources—such as studios, working spaces, and devices—compared to their rural counterparts. As an example, Rukamanee Maharjan, an assistant professor at Nepal Law Campus and an

RTI activist, mentioned that content producers in urban areas are discussing the adoption of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence chatbots to improve content production. In stark contrast, media operators in rural areas often face challenges due to poor infrastructure and limited resources. For instance, many newspapers in rural areas lack their own printing presses and rely on external service providers.

Tika Dahal, chairperson of the Nepal Disabled Women Association, stated that apart from radio, there are no media outlets producing content specifically tailored to the needs of visually impaired people. The panelists observed a failure on the part of the media to adequately represent marginalized communities and people with disabilities in their content.

Several institutions, such as Tribhuvan University, Purbanchal University, and Kathmandu University, as well as the Higher Secondary Education Board, offer academic programs in media and journalism studies. However, there has been a gradual decline in student enrollment in these programs. The panelists noted a gap between media education and the requirements of media houses, and emphasized the need for collaboration between classrooms and newsrooms. Furthermore, Dharmendra Jha, chairperson of the state-run news agency, Rastriya Samachar Samiti, pointed out a shortage of adequately trained personnel despite the presence of numerous media outlets. Still, a few media organizations do offer occasional mentorship to journalists, particularly to new recruits or trainees.

Professional content producers who prioritize ethical, evidence-based, and objective journalism typically gain trust from the public. According to the Nepal Media Survey conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal in 2022, a substantial

portion of respondents trusted print media (30%), television (32%) and radio (67%).¹¹ However, when it comes to social media and Nepali online news portals, the trust levels are considerably lower, at only five percent and eight percent, respectively. This is despite the fact that 41% of the population uses social media, as reported in a January 2023 survey.¹² This difference in trust levels highlights the continuing credibility of traditional media in Nepal, while digital media platforms face a more skeptical audience.

Nepal's media covers a wide range of topics but politics tends to be the dominant focus, often overshadowing critical issues like climate, development, gender, and marginalized communities. The panelists acknowledged the media's role in holding government officials and politicians accountable. For example, investigative journalists have uncovered various improprieties, such as the fake Bhutanese refugee controversy¹³ and the Lalita Niwas land grab scandal.¹⁴

11 Sharecast Initiative Nepal. (2022). *Nepal Media Survey*. https://radionepal.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Nepal-Media-Survey-NMS2022-Radio-Nepal_opt.pdf

12 Kemp, S. (2023). *Digital 2023: Nepal*. Data Reportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-nepal>

13 Neupane, P. 2023. "Bhutanese Refugee Scam Puts Nepal's Political Leaders Under Scrutiny." *The Diplomat*, May 17, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/bhutanese-refugee-scam-puts-nepals-political-leaders-under-scrutiny/>

14 Shrestha, P. M. (2023, August 28). 310 charged with forgery in Lalita Niwas land scam. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/08/28/310-charged-with-forgery-in-lalita-niwas-land-scam>

While mainstream media exhibits a degree of editorial independence, the panelists highlighted the influence exerted by media owners, advertisers, and politicians. State media outlets like Gorkhapatra, Radio Nepal, Nepal Television, and Rastriya Samachar Samiti face significant government censorship. Advertisers and business interests also often influence media content, leading to instances of self-censorship. The panelists concluded that striking a balance between providing comprehensive news coverage and spreading tailored information remains a persistent challenge within Nepal's media environment.

INDICATOR 2

The norm for information is that content is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal

Professional content producers across various mediums generally uphold high standards of factual accuracy, well-sourced material, and objectivity. But a study conducted in early 2021 found occasional instances of factual

inaccuracies, with almost four percent of news containing misinformation.¹⁵

As noted by the panelists, the rise of nontraditional news platforms like YouTube, blogs and personal websites, and social media poses a challenge to the dominance of traditional media outlets. These platforms often prioritize sensational content to attract more audiences for financial gain. Consequently, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, primarily originating from nontraditional media, present significant challenges to established journalistic norms in Nepal. This was especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 elections.

Likewise, there have been observations of politically biased reporting. For example, the PCN's 2022 local level election media monitoring report revealed that certain outlets, especially newspapers and online platforms, exhibited bias towards a specific political party. Sonia Awale, executive editor of the Nepali Times, pointed out that mainstream and

15 Media Action Nepal. (2021). *Misleading news in media*. <https://mediaactionnepal.org/report/misleading-news-in-media/>

government media also contribute to the spread of nonfactual information as they vie to be the first to report news and attract more online engagement.

Government officials, including spokespersons, typically share accurate information, but there have been instances of false information from government officials and political leaders, usually to portray a more positive image of government performance.

Penalties for spreading false information, such as reprimands, fines, or professional warnings, lack proper enforcement, despite the presence of some provisions. In 2022, the PCN¹⁶ issued warnings to certain news outlets for violating their code of conduct, but its ability to hold these organizations accountable is limited. Moreover, Nepali news media have not established internal ethics assessment mechanisms, such as ombudsmen or ethics committees, to address public grievances in a credible and transparent manner,¹⁷ and nonprofessional content producers are not held to minimum ethical

standards or sensitivity if they violate media ethics guidelines.

The panelists concurred that there are systems for overseeing content, particularly in traditional media. However, social media platforms associated with mainstream media remain largely unmoderated and are frequently filled with misleading content and hate speech.

INDICATOR 3

The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

While there is no direct evidence of foreign governments or their representatives creating harmful content, there have been instances where they have disseminated content supporting their own positions. The panelists pointed out that U.S. media criticized China's Belt and Road Initiative,¹⁸ while Chinese media criticized the U.S. development grant assistance Millennium Challenge

16 Nepalnews. (2022, April 28). *Action against media violating election code of conduct*. RSS. Nepalnews.com. <https://nepalnews.com/s/politics/action-against-media-violating-election-code-of-conduct>

17 Media Foundation. (2012). *Media and Nepali public*. https://www.mfnepal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Research_report_Media_N_Public_ENG.pdf

18 Huang, J. (2023, October 8). *China and the Lessons Learned from a Decade of the BRI*. VOA News. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-and-the-lessons-learned-from-a-decade-of-the-bri-7301915.html>

Cooperation¹⁹ in Nepal. Furthermore, Indian media consistently produced²⁰ news stories about Chinese encroachment on Nepal's northern border, based on a government report dismissed by Nepali authorities as "fake." Indian media also spread misinformation regarding Nepal's western border and a new map approved by the Government of Nepal.²¹

Instances of misinformation and hate speech originating from the Nepal government are rare. But, although there have been occasions where political leaders have misled the public²², there is no official record of any politician issuing an apology for misinformation, malinformation and disinformation or resigning in 2022 and 2023.

Professional content producers generally uphold ethical standards and aim to avoid creating content that causes harm.

Still, there have been accusations against certain media outlets for intentionally harming individuals or communities. This often occurs through biased portrayals of marginalized groups, such as lower castes, religious minorities, and women. Religious conflicts that took place in Dharan, a city in eastern Nepal, in 2023 is a typical example.²³

When professional content producers engage in creating or disseminating harmful content, they may face consequences such as damage to their credibility and reputation. Nepal has media accountability mechanisms in place, including the PCN, which develops a code of ethics for journalists and media houses. The council investigates alleged violations and offers recommendations for corrective measures, although it lacks punitive authority.²⁴ Nonetheless, Kosh Raj Koirala, the editor of *myRepublica*,

19 Global Times. (2022, February 28). Nepal's MCC example of US maximizing leverage against small countries. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1253480.shtml>

20 Republica Correspondent. (2020, August 25). Nepalis surprised by Indian media's repeated romance with fake Nepal-China border dispute. *My Republica*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/many-are-left-surprised-as-news-dismissed-by-nepal-about-chinese-encroachment-of-nepali-territory-repeatedly-appears-in-new-avatars-in-indian-media/>

21 Shrestha, H. P. (2020). Controlled media in India spreading fake reports about Nepal. *South Asia Journal*. <https://southasiajournal.net/controlled-media-in-india-spreading-fake-reports-about-nepal/>

22 Sangroula, N. (2022, June 27). *Why do politicians in Nepal lie?* Onlinekhabar.com. <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/why-do-politicians-in-nepal-lie.html>

23 Upadhyay, N. (2023, August 29). Religious harmony key to peace. *The Rising Nepal*. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/31687>

24 Sharma, S., Acharya, B. B., & Koirala, S. (2022). Media accountability mechanism: A case of Press Council of Nepal. In B. B. Acharya & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Global perspectives on journalism in Nepal: Nepalese news media in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

pointed out that the PCN's impartiality has been compromised due to its political inclination and limited jurisdiction. The government provides funding to the PCN and appoints its board members, which restricts its ability to operate as an autonomous media watchdog.

Nonprofessional content producers often create and spread harmful content, such as hate speech and character defamation, especially on platforms like YouTube. Bhumika Shrestha, project manager of the Blue Diamond Society, an organization representing the LGBTIQ+ community, observed that YouTubers often portray the community in a bad light.

Although there have been instances where nonprofessional content producers faced consequences²⁵ for creating and sharing harmful content, the existing mechanisms for addressing such issues are inadequate. The Government of Nepal attempted to introduce a law that would impose fines and prison sentences for misuse of

social media, but the proposed draft faced public criticism over concerns of potential censorship and violations of freedom of expression, and was withdrawn.²⁶

INDICATOR 4

The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse

Nepal is culturally diverse, with 142 ethnic groups, 124 languages, and 10 religions. Nepali is the primary language for 44% of the population, followed by Maithili at 11%, and Bhojpuri, Tharu, and Tamang at roughly five percent each.²⁷ Despite this diversity, much of the media content is in Nepali, though some regional and community newspapers in the Terai region produce content in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, and other local languages. Similarly, in the hill region, several radio stations broadcast news programs in local languages alongside Nepali. Although state media like Radio Nepal²⁸ and Gorkhapatra newspaper produce content in various local

25 Nepal News. (2022, November 8). *Youth arrested for posting obscene pictures of unknown women*. Nepalnews.com. <https://nepalnews.com/s/nation/youth-arrested-for-posting-obscene-pictures-of-unknown-women>

26 Lama, S. (2019, February 13). Nepal government tightens screws on social media. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/02/13/government-proposes-law-to-punish-those-writing-improper-things-on-social-media>

27 The Kathmandu Post. (2023, June 3). Number of castes, ethnicities in Nepal increases to 142. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/06/03/number-of-caste-ethnicity-in-nepal-increases-to-142>

28 Bam, J. B. (2020). *Languages used in news bulletins of Radio Nepal*. (Unpublished MA Thesis). Faculty of Education, TU, Nepal. <https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/JQ99OgQlIZUxyjI9nB0on9OyLkqsGI4/api/core/bitstreams/9d18e612-6781-415d-9ae9-edb7f5be0b44/content>

languages, it remains insufficient. The panelists maintained that the language barrier limits access to information for a significant portion of Nepal's population, hampering their understanding of media content. This barrier also restricts the exposure of the general public to diverse ideologies and perspectives. While the panelists did not see this as a deliberate exclusion, they recognized it is a consequence of the exclusive nature of the Nepali media concerning linguistic representation in media content production.

Mainstream Nepali media frequently face criticism for favoring specific ideologies, excluding diverse perspectives, and marginalizing underrepresented groups. Jha pointed out the need to look into the representation of guests from religious and ethnic minorities, as well as Dalit communities, in televised interviews.

Although there has been progress in women's representation in the media industry overall, a noticeable gender gap remains among media professionals. Out of 13,077 journalists affiliated

with the FNJ, only 2,408 are women.²⁹ Women are more commonly found to be covering the entertainment sector rather than informational content. However, there are encouraging signs of increasing awareness regarding the importance of gender-friendly newsrooms. For instance, media houses, such as Kantipur Media Group, have implemented internal policies to address workplace harassment.³⁰ Nonetheless, leadership positions in editorial and management roles are still predominantly occupied by men, leading to a patriarchal influence on media content.

The representation of ethnic communities, religious minorities, and people with disabilities in leadership roles within the media industry is limited, which affects the inclusivity of media content. For example, according to the Media Advocacy Group,³¹ approximately 80% of journalists are from the Upper caste communities, leaving Dalit, Madheshi, and other marginalized groups widely underrepresented. Awale stated

29 Federation of Nepali Journalists. (n.d.). *Numbers of members*. <https://www.fnjnepal.org/np/page/members-data>

30 Aryal, I. (2019). Women in the newsroom in Nepal. *Center for Investigative Journalism*. <https://vikes.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Women-in-Newsroom-in-Nepal.pdf>

31 Media Advocacy Group. (n.d.). *Report on a GESI disaggregated database of journalists*. <https://mag.org.np/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Report-on-a-GESI-disaggregated-database-of-journalists.pdf>

that this demographic scenario often shapes news content, and plays up the victimization of marginalized groups rather than showcasing their achievements and positive stories. However, all panelists agreed that nonprofessional content producers, including social media users, offer a much more diverse perspective, an indication of the potential for greater diversity and inclusivity in content creation.

INDICATOR 5

Content production is sufficiently resourced

Indicator 5, scoring the lowest at 16 out of 40 in the VIBE study's comprehensive assessment, demonstrates the financial challenges confronting Nepal's media sector. This struggle is primarily attributed to a significant downturn in advertising revenue, estimated at around 50% to 55% over three years. This decline largely stems from a liquidity crisis affecting industries such as infrastructure,

manufacturing, and automobiles.³² State-run media outlets often receive preferential treatment in securing government tenders, announcements, and notices, leaving nongovernment media neglected. Additionally, international social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have absorbed a considerable share of advertising revenue,³³ worsening the economic crisis across print, radio, television, and digital news media. As a result, media owners have resorted to cost-cutting measures, including staff terminations and outlet closures. A few examples of such shutdowns are that of³⁴ Republica daily newspaper, Himal monthly magazine, Nepal weekly magazine, and Saptahik weekly newspaper, among others. In the middle of this economic downturn, reports have emerged of labor exploitation within media houses,³⁵ with journalists and other workers facing non-payment of their salaries, some for over six months,³⁶ citing the drastic reduction of

32 HRM Nepal. (2023, April 21). *The overall advertising market has decreased by almost 50-55 percent in the past 3 years*. HRM Nepal. <https://thehrmnepal.com/interview/the-overall-advertising-market-has-decreased-by-almost-50-55-percent-in-the-past-3-years/>

33 Republica correspondent. (2018, August 21). *Regulate social media advertising to boost revenue, government told*. *My Republica*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/regulate-social-media-advertising-to-boost-revenue-government-told/>

34 Pokharel, U. (2023, April 28). *Ensure labour rights of journalists*. *The Rising Nepal*. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/26029>

35 Pokharel, U. (2023, April 28). *Ensure labour rights of journalists*. *The Rising Nepal*. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/26029>

36 International Federation of Journalists. (2023). *Nepal: A watchful election year*. *South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-23*. <https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR22-23/nepal-2/>

advertising revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷

The panelists stated that this financial crisis has made it difficult for media outlets to allocate resources for field visits and research. While some outlets explore alternative revenue streams, such as organizing thematic events, pursuing YouTube monetization, and forming partnerships with local governments, the overall funding situation remains limited. The decline of traditional funding avenues like advertising and public service announcements has left many outlets financially vulnerable. However, Kamala Biswakarma, chairperson of Jagaran Media Center, an NGO focused on combating caste-based discrimination, cited Radio Madan Pokhara and Radio Palpa as examples sustained by donations from community members.

The panelists also highlighted a lack of transparency in government subsidies and advertising contracts, which have become increasingly politicized. Recently, the Advertisement Board of Nepal has taken a step towards transparency by requiring media houses to publicly disclose their

advertising rates, aiming to address the issue of inconsistent charges for different advertisers. While in line with the Advertisement Regulations of 2019, the full effects of these measures remain to be seen. Most panelists acknowledged that state media do not have exclusive access to specific information, but they are prioritized over other media outlets in accessing resources and information.

Additionally, journalists throughout the industry face challenges related to insufficient pay, frequently earning less than the national minimum wage (NRs. 24,600/month, approx. \$190).³⁸ Delays and non-payment of wages are common issues within Nepal's media sector. In the fiscal year 2021-2022, over 300 journalists across various media platforms reported instances of labor exploitation by their employers to the FNJ. During the same period, they engaged in dialogues with media management, organized advocacy meetings, and staged protests outside media outlets that were violating labor rights. This action led to the resolution of many cases. Later, in October 2023, Kantipur Media Group, Nepal's largest

37 International Federation of Journalists. (2023, October 20). *Nepal: FNJ protests non-payment of wages and illegal dismissals*. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/nepal-fnj-protests-non-payment-of-wages-and-illegal-dismissals>

38 Kathmandu Post (2018, July 9) FNJ wants Rs 40k as minimum wage for journalists. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2018/07/09/fnj-wants-rs-40k-as-minimum-wage-for-journalists>

media conglomerate, sent dismissal notices to nearly 80 journalists via email.³⁹ These letters failed to provide valid reasons for termination, and, thus, constituted a breach of Nepal's Working Journalist Act and other labor laws.

These incidents suggest that a substantial number of journalists and media personnel in Nepal have faced violations of labor rights, including salary reductions, unlawful terminations, insufficient pay, non-payment,

unauthorized dismissals, and delayed salaries.⁴⁰ Of particular concern is the gender pay disparity, which intensifies labor exploitation for female journalists. Such situations have pushed journalists to seek alternative sources of income beyond their primary profession, in the process compromising professional ethics and editorial standards. Furthermore, another consequence of the financial strain is that journalists dispatched overseas for reporting purposes choose not to return to the country.

PRINCIPLE 2

Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

Score
25
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Strong

The panelists scored many indicators and sub indicators under Principle 2 higher than those under other VIBE principles. Nepal has a vibrant media landscape, with over 11,000 news media outlets registered across the

country.⁴¹ The government also plays a significant role in the media sector by operating various news media, including a national news agency.⁴² The scores and evidence provided by the panelists suggest that Nepali

39 International Federation of Journalists. (2023, October 20). *Nepal: FNJ protests non-payment of wages and illegal dismissals*. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/nepal-fnj-protests-non-payment-of-wages-and-illegal-dismissals>

40 Pokharel, U. (2023, April 28). Ensure labour rights of journalists. *The Rising Nepal*. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/26029>

41 Press Council Nepal. (2023). *४८ औं वार्षिक प्रतिवेदन*. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/np/2023/09/25/7939/>

42 Pandey, L. (2022). Can state-owned media perform watchdog functions?: A case of Nepal. In B. B. Acharya & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Global perspectives on journalism in Nepal: Nepalese news media in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

citizens have the right to create, share, and consume information, albeit with some limitations. While the majority of the population can access various information channels, rural and marginalized communities face constraints in this regard. Government information dissemination channels are in place, but the government's

proactivity in disclosing information is limited. Additionally, a diverse array of channels delivers information to the public. They aim for editorial independence, but often face influence and pressure from the government, media owners, political parties, and corporate agencies.

INDICATOR 6

People have the right to create, share, and consume information

Nepal has strong constitutional and legal safeguards for freedom of speech and press freedom. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal ensures “full freedom of the press” in its preamble, covering the rights to opinion and expression (Article 17[2a]), rights to communication (Article 19), and information (Article 27).⁴³

This constitutional framework, as noted by Guna Raj Luitel, editor-in-chief of Nagarik daily newspaper, is seen as creating an environment conducive to the flow of information. However, the constitution also allows for laws to impose reasonable restrictions on several

grounds, including protecting “national interests,” a term that is legally vague.

While Nepal has sound legal measures in place, many panelists pointed out the challenges in the impartial enforcement of these laws. Koirala noted that while government attempts to limit freedom of speech and press freedom or censor media content are rare, there are instances of the Electronic Transaction Act (ETA) being misused.⁴⁴ The law, originally aimed to tackle cybercrimes, has been criticized for harassing journalists and restricting civic space. The panelists generally agreed that state agencies do not frequently pressure ICT providers to censor media. However,

⁴³ Constitution of Nepal. (2015). <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

⁴⁴ Electronic Transaction Act. (2006). Electronic Transaction Act-2006 (Amended in 2008). <http://www.tepc.gov.np/assets/upload/acts/12the-electronic-transaction-act55.pdf>

Umesh Shrestha, a blogger, online editor and multimedia trainer, cited examples of website blockages by the PCN in recent years.⁴⁵ He also argued that media individuals sometimes face backlash for commenting on influential figures.

Presently, Nepal experiences minimal self-censorship out of fear of retribution, except within state media, which echo government viewpoints.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the panelists expressed concerns about ongoing efforts through legislative acts, regulations, and directives to undermine constitutional rights. Awale highlighted the vagueness of provisions in the ETA, which could be used to prosecute media deviating from the official narrative. The government has also tried to bring several acts with restrictive measures, such as the Media Council Bill, which proposes substantial fines for violating ethical codes. Additionally, Maharjan emphasized the constraints on freedom of expression, especially regarding social media, despite legal protections for traditional media, and highlighted risks like cyberbullying.

Rajani Tamang, a journalist for Kantipur Television, stated that while mainstream media and professional content producers are not directly influenced by ownership, a degree of self-censorship does exist due to advertiser and corporate interests.

INDICATOR 7

People have adequate access to channels of information

Nepal has made significant progress in enhancing information accessibility by improving ICT and mobile connectivity. According to a report from a national news agency,⁴⁷ over 91% of the population has Internet access, primarily through mobile devices. Despite this, only 37% use broadband services.⁴⁸ The panelists drew attention to the availability of various information channels across the country, with the exception of a few remote areas, and acknowledged that ICT infrastructure generally caters to most people's information needs, offering open and equitable access for both users

45 Press Council Nepal. (2022). *Media year book 2021/2022*. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Media-Year-Book-2021-22.pdf>

46 Pandey, L. (2022). Can state-owned media perform watchdog functions? A case of Nepal. In B. B. Acharya & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Global perspectives on journalism in Nepal: Nepalese news media in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

47 Online Khabar. (2021, July 29). *Nepal's 91% of population have access to the internet: Regulator*. Online Khabar. <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/nepals-91-of-the-population-have-access-to-the-internet-regulator.html>

48 National Statistics Office. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021*. <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results>

and content creators. A majority of the population has the economic means to access at least some information channels. Gani Ansari, a reporter for the BBC's Nepali service, highlighted the role of remittances, which contribute nearly 20% of Nepal's gross domestic product,⁴⁹ in enabling Nepalis to purchase smartphones and access Internet services and various news platforms.

Moreover, the panelists acknowledged that there are no social norms and values explicitly barring specific communities or groups from accessing information. Nevertheless, in certain communities and areas, women, people with disabilities, and historically marginalized groups⁵⁰ still face challenges in accessing information. While a few television programs provide sign language translation for the hearing impaired, most news media and their content mainly cater to literate or privileged audiences. In this regard, Dahal expressed concerns, mentioning that neither information channels nor their content are designed to be user-friendly for people with disabilities.

Despite the public's lack of trust, social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook play a pivotal role in disseminating information due to their accessibility and popularity. Online news portals, blogs and personal websites, and social media have filled the gaps left by traditional media outlets, in the process promoting diverse perspectives and voices. However, the panelists also highlighted the potential risk for users of these platforms to be exposed to misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation. The panelists also stressed the significance of FM radio as an alternative information source in ensuring continuous access to essential information nationwide, especially in cases of service disruptions of other media.

INDICATOR 8

There are appropriate channels for government information

Nepal excels in ensuring information accessibility, with the panelists awarding this indicator their highest average

49 Karki, U. (2023, August 28). Remittance: A key element in Nepal's socio-economic landscape. *New Business Age*. <https://www.newbusinessage.com/Articles/view/18851>

50 UNDP. (2015). नया संविधानमा सीमान्तकृत समुदाय. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/np/UNDP_NP-Marginalized-communities-in-the-new-constitution.pdf (The term "marginalized" describes individuals or groups facing political, economic, and social disadvantages due to factors like displacement, discrimination, or geographical isolation within a federal system. It includes those falling below the legally defined threshold of human development and encompasses vulnerable communities at risk.)

score (29) in the entire VIBE study. This achievement is ascribed to Nepal's recognition of RTI as a constitutionally guaranteed fundamental right. Nepal took a pioneering step in the region by enacting and implementing the RTI law in 2007,^{51 52} and established the National Information Commission to enforce it. However, debates continue as some argue that the RTI framework does not fully meet the highest international standards.

Spokespersons and information officers serve crucial roles in disseminating government-related information, including organizing press conferences, issuing press releases, and providing updates through various media platforms, including social media. They are generally considered reliable sources. But there are instances where information, especially regarding contentious or crucial decisions, is deliberately withheld. Despite provisions for proactive disclosure of state information, many important cabinet decisions only become public knowledge days or even weeks later. This disparity between intended transparency and actual practice was pointed out by Babita Basnet, a member of the media

reform recommendation committee, who highlighted the need for active pursuit of information as it often remains undisclosed otherwise.

Despite having a strong legal framework, Nepal faces hurdles in fully and promptly implementing its RTI provisions. Jha, whose mother tongue is Maithili, noted the language barriers in accessing public information, as officers primarily communicate in Nepali. Maharjan added that many citizens struggle to utilize the RTI law due to a lack of awareness and the complex process of obtaining public information through it. There is a widespread belief that the RTI Act mainly benefits journalists and is less accessible to ordinary citizens. While most individuals are willing to seek information, some may fear the potential consequences of making inquiries.

INDICATOR 9

There are diverse channels for information flow

A notable gap in Nepal's regulatory framework lies in the absence of specific

51 Clarification: The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 initially guaranteed RTI as a fundamental right (Article 16). However, it was not implemented until 2007 due to the lack of appropriate legislation.

52 The Rights to Information Act. (2007). <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/right-to-information-act-2064-2007.pdf>

laws regulating transparency in media ownership, whether domestic or foreign. While the National Mass Communication Policy of 2016⁵³ addresses foreign investment, it lacks provisions concerning ownership transparency.

Cross-media ownership too poses a significant concern, as media conglomerates control various channels of communication. Jha highlighted that media distribution channels in Kathmandu are largely monopolized, with many media houses operating in print, radio, television and online domains. For example, Kantipur Media Group⁵⁴ holds a diverse portfolio, including two daily newspapers, broadcasting networks, and a prominent online platform. Likewise, the government manages several media outlets, including two news dailies, broadcasting networks like Radio Nepal and Nepal Television, along with their online platforms, and a leading national news agency. Even so, Koirala remarked that traditional media's influence and market share are dwindling due to the rise of streaming services and social media platforms. The panelists also expressed

concerns regarding net neutrality and the potential presence of hidden investors in media companies, which pose significant regulatory challenges.

The panelists generally agreed that spectrum allocation, broadcasting frequency distribution, and licensing practices are conducted fairly and transparently. They also noted that most ISPs demonstrate non-discriminatory practices by not showing bias according to user, content, source, or destination addresses.

Although Nepal has a vast state media network, it lacks a dedicated framework for public service media (PSM). The panelists observed that state media channels are closely linked financially and editorially to the government. Nonetheless, since 2020, the government has taken steps to establish a framework for PSM, with plans to merge Radio Nepal and Nepal Television. This legislative proposal has been under parliamentary consideration since its introduction. In the absence of a formal PSM framework, some panelists, such

53 The Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Government of Nepal. (2016). *National mass communication policy*. <http://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/npolicy/Communication/राष्ट्रिय%20आमसंचार%20नीति%20२०७३.pdf>

54 Previously privately-owned, KMG has recently been converted into a public company, although it has not yet become publicly traded. In Nepal, privately-owned media outlets are generally seen as independent.

as Awale, argued that community radio currently fulfills some aspects of this role.

INDICATOR 10

Information channels are independent

The panelists highlighted the constrained freedom and independence of information channels in Nepal, attributing this condition to several factors, notably ownership. They offered diverse explanations for how these influences affect editorial stances, content priorities, and political leanings. Basnet argued that the vested interests or political affiliations of media owners have compromised the objectivity and independence of both privately owned and state media.

The influence of funding sources and advertising revenue extends to shaping editorial stances and news content. There is often reluctance among media outlets to report on matters that could affect the interests of their funding sources. For example, several panelists, such as Tamang, called attention to the media's hesitancy to report on telecommunication giant Ncell's tax evasion case,⁵⁵ citing concerns about potential loss of advertising revenue. Umesh Shrestha

noted a similar absence of negative news about commercial banks in online media, crediting it to banks being major advertisers.

The government provides subsidies and allocates advertising to various news media outlets. While this financial support aids media in overcoming financial crises, it also raises concerns about the potential impact on their editorial freedom. Koirala mentioned that media outlets may be reluctant to report on matters that could affect their funding sources, such as advertisers and government subsidies. But he also added that some media outlets receiving such subsidies could still criticize government performance.

In general, the panelists concurred that larger media organizations, mainly in the country's capital, maintain a separation between newsrooms and business operations. Yet, they observed a growing trend where this distinction is becoming less clear across various media outlets. Koirala pointed out that the situation has been worsened by journalists transitioning into media ownership roles as the advancement of ICT has encouraged numerous journalists to launch their

55 Shrestha, P.M. (2019, December 26). What Ncell tax dispute is all about. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://tkpo.st/377Layl>

own news portals or YouTube channels, blurring the lines between journalism and business.

Nearly all VIBE panelists, with the exception of Jha, who chairs the state media Rastriya Samachar Samiti, contended that government influence extends over state media outlets, despite ongoing efforts to rebrand them as public service broadcasters. Regulatory bodies are usually led by individuals appointed by the government, often based on their

political or social connections to the ruling party or its leaders.⁵⁶ As a result, media oversight mechanisms such as the PCN are not always politically neutral, according to Luitel. While many panelists agreed that state media do not hold exclusive access to specific information, Maharjan highlighted disparities in access to equipment and resources. For example, she noted variations in acquiring frequencies and obtaining tax subsidies for equipment purchases between state- and privately-owned media.

PRINCIPLE 3 Information Consumption and Engagement	
<div>Score</div> <div>21</div> <div>out of 40</div>	Somewhat Vibrant
	Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong
<p>Indicator 11, which focuses on Internet safety through privacy protection and security tools, obtained a score of 17, the lowest among the five indicators. This shows the urgent need for enhanced measures to ensure safe Internet usage. Indicator 12, which examines media literacy skills and available resources for individuals, received a score of 17, highlighting</p>	<p>the crucial need to strengthen media literacy initiatives, provide digital security training, promote good digital hygiene practices, and enhance overall digital proficiency. Indicator 13, which evaluates how effectively people engage with available information, achieved a score of 22, indicating the potential for increased engagement with information. Indicator 14, which</p>

56 Pandey, L. (2022). Can state-owned media perform watchdog functions?: A case of Nepal. In B. B. Acharya & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Global perspectives on journalism in Nepal: Nepalese news media in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

assesses how media and information producers address the needs of their audiences, received a score of 21, suggesting opportunities for improvements to ensure media outlets are responsive to their audience base. Lastly, Indicator 15, which focuses on

the role of community media, garnered the highest score of 27 among the principles, indicating that community media platforms are performing relatively better compared to other media outlets.

INDICATOR 11

People can safely use the Internet due to privacy protections and security tools

The panelists unanimously agreed that Nepal lacks a comprehensive data privacy and security law. Instead, they cited specific laws that cover aspects of data privacy and digital security: the Individual Privacy Act of 2018, the Individual Privacy Regulation of 2020, the National Civil Code of 2017, and the National Criminal Code of 2017. These laws are largely guided by Article 28 of Nepal's 2015 Constitution, which guarantees the right to privacy and the protection of personal information.⁵⁷ In line with this constitutional provision, Nepal enacted

the 2018 Individual Privacy Act and the 2020 Individual Privacy Regulation.⁵⁸ Additionally, provisions for privacy and data protection are integrated into the National Penal Code of 2017. While the Individual Privacy Act includes prohibitions on activities such as eavesdropping, disclosing confidential information, and unauthorized searches,⁵⁹ it lacks essential elements found in the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union (2016).⁶⁰ For instance, it does not include provisions granting individuals the right to access, correct, and delete collected data or seek compensation for violations. Similarly, there are no provisions addressing data retention periods, penalties for

57 Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2016). The Constitution of Nepal (First Amendment), 2016 (2072). https://www.moljpa.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Constitution-of-Nepal-English-with-1st-Amendment_2.pdf

58 The Privacy Act, 2075. <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Privacy-Act-2075-2018.pdf>

59 Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2017). National Penal Code. Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2017). National Penal Code. <https://www.moljpa.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Penal-Code-English-Revised-1.pdf>

60 GDPR Summary. (n.d.). https://www.gdprsummary.com/gdpr-summary/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwsp6pBhCfARIsAD3GZuZFOiVb-BdFfYyIbAyaUB93XfH_zgkyEVdd7c-paS6YGXglxVawCwaAkx5EALw_wcB

unauthorized use, or protocols for compromised personal information held by public organizations.⁶¹

The panelists highlighted that the Government of Nepal has recently endorsed a National Cyber Security Policy.⁶² However, civil society has criticized this policy for its perceived threat to individual liberties, such as freedom of expression and privacy. The panelists expressed concern that its implementation could lead to the unauthorized disclosure of personal information, which is a violation of international human rights agreements. During Nepal's 2022 local elections, stakeholders raised alarm about personal data, which was publicly available, being potentially misused for surveillance purposes.⁶³ In response, digital rights organizations advocated for the safeguarding of voter data.

Access to digital security training and tools for media outlets and content producers in Nepal remains limited, rendering them vulnerable to cyber threats. Despite some training initiatives on digital security, journalists often find themselves lacking the necessary skills to both safeguard themselves and their digital assets. Instances of digital security breaches among journalists and content users persist, with many news media websites still lacking adequate security measures. Strengthening digital hygiene practices and enhancing website security is still a pressing concern. Online gender-based violence too has become widespread, with the cyber bureau of the Nepal Police receiving 3,747 complaints between January to June 2023. The panelists also put the spotlight on a shortage of digital tools to counter distributed denial-of-service and other cyber-attacks and threats, even within government pages. This security deficit resulted in the shutdown of nearly 1,500 government websites in January 2023.⁶⁴

61 Maharjan, H.M. (2023, March 27). *Nepal needs robust data protection legislation*. Martin Chautari. <https://www.martinchautari.org.np/blogs/nepal-needs-robust-data-protection-legislation>

62 Government of Nepal. (2023). *राष्ट्रिय साइबर सुरक्षा नीति*. [National cyber security policy]. https://api.giwms.gov.np/storage/22/posts/1691665949_27.pdf

63 Ghimire, A. (2022, April 28). Public availability of electoral roll data raises privacy concerns. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/04/28/public-availability-of-electoral-roll-data-raises-privacy-concerns>

64 Shrestha, P.M. (2023, January 30). Singha Durbar server continues to face cyberattacks. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/01/30/singha-durbar-server-continues-to-face-cyberattacks>

By the start of 2023, Nepal had nearly 16 million Internet users (51% of the national population). This figure includes approximately 12 million social media users and 42% of the population actively using mobile phones.⁶⁵ However, digital literacy, especially in rural areas of Nepal, is lacking. This knowledge gap exposes individuals to cyber threats, as many are unaware that their online interactions are monitored and analyzed.

INDICATOR 12

People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate

All panelists unitedly agreed that media literacy has not received adequate attention from all three tiers of government. The absence of media literacy exposes the audience to the potential adverse impacts of media consumption.⁶⁶ To address this gap, organizations like the PCN and the Department of Information and Broadcasting, as well as the federal parliament, and some municipalities, have

incorporated media literacy content into their regular training sessions, according to the panelists. However, they perceived this not as a high-priority agenda but rather as filler material. Besides, media organizations such as the FNJ have also contributed to media literacy training initiatives.⁶⁷

Nepal's secondary-level education system includes subjects such as media introduction, communication significance, media and entertainment, information technology, digital technology, and cyber-security,⁶⁸ with journalism education offered as an optional subject. However, Kosh Raj Koirala, who has a background in media education, argued that while including topics on media literacy in school curricula is a positive step, it is not sufficient. Media and information literacy, along with critical thinking skills, are alarmingly low among the general public. Many individuals find it challenging to differentiate between media outlets with similar names, and some even mistake official and unauthorized news channels

65 Datareportal. (n.d.). *About*. <https://datareportal.com/about>

66 Aryal, K. (2022). Media literacy crucial to enhance trust in media. *Media Year Book 2021/22*. Press Council Nepal.

67 Online Khabar, (2023, June 22). *पत्रकार महासंघले सुरु गर्‍यो मिडिया साक्षरता अभियान*. [FNJ begun media literacy campaign]. Onlinekhabar.com. <https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2023/06/1326198>

68 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2021). *माध्यमिक शिक्षा पाठ्यक्रम, २०७८ (कक्षा ९ र १०)* [Secondary education curriculum, grade 9-10]

on YouTube. Despite this situation, the government has not yet made media literacy and critical thinking training a priority.⁶⁹

The panelists also noted a limited use of fact-checking tools, although they are being increasingly utilized by urbanites and social activists, according to Umesh Shrestha. But they make up only a small section of the population; a majority are unable to distinguish between high- and low-quality news, with many struggling to differentiate between true and false information. Ansari pointed out that even educated individuals often share or endorse fake news on platforms like X and Facebook. A study backs Ansari's observation, showing that a school head teacher displayed only a moderate level of media literacy by sharing baseless information on social media platforms.⁷⁰

“A majority are unable to distinguish between high- and low-quality news, with many struggling to differentiate between true and false information.”

INDICATOR 13

People engage productively with the information that is available to them

In 2015, Nepal's new constitution, notably Article 17(2a), enshrined the right to freedom of expression for all citizens. Still, expressions that could undermine national security, communal harmony, or promote discrimination may face legal restrictions.⁷¹ Additionally, Article 27 guarantees the right to information, allowing citizens to request and receive information on matters of public interest. Furthermore, Article 19 safeguards press and publication rights, prohibiting pre-censorship, protecting communication equipment, and ensuring freedom from interruption. Despite these provisions, Article 17(2a) lacks a clear framework for regulating opinion or communications that may incite violence, presenting challenges in holding individuals accountable for such actions.⁷²

69 Republica. (2022, August 12). Nepal press freedom under threat as disinformation and fake news erode media credibility. *Republica Daily*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-press-freedom-under-threat-as-disinformation-and-fake-news-erode-media-credibility/>

70 Dhital, G. (2022). *Media literacy among head teachers: A case of community schools in Kathmandu valley* [Doctoral dissertation, Kathmandu University]. School of Education. <https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/JQ99OgQIizUxyjI9nB0on9OyLkqsGIf4/api/core/bitstreams/86391413-1cec-442f-83a5-045da9eac65b/content>

71 Dhital, G. (2022). *Media literacy among head teachers: A case of community schools in Kathmandu valley* [Doctoral dissertation, Kathmandu University]. School of Education. <https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/JQ99OgQIizUxyjI9nB0on9OyLkqsGIf4/api/core/bitstreams/86391413-1cec-442f-83a5-045da9eac65b/content>

72 Acharya, U., Sigdel, S., & Sigdel, S. (2016, September 19). *Press freedom in Constitution of Nepal 2015*. Center for Media Research. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3306052>

The panelists pointed out the active exercise of freedom of speech and information rights by journalists and civil society members. They emphasized the dynamic nature of CSOs, the decreased harassment of journalists, improved access to information, and the vibrant public discourse as key indicators of how these rights are being leveraged. One illustrative example is journalist Makar Shrestha of Kantipur newspaper, who uses RTI to obtain attendance records of parliamentarians for his news reports.

Organizations like Freedom Forum Nepal and Digital Rights Nepal actively advocate for freedom of speech and the right to information. But, as noted by Jha, challenges remain in fully exercising these rights, with legal provisions sometimes conflicting with individual privacy. The absence of a clear liability act creates uncertainty and can threaten freedom of speech. Despite the existence of these rights, many individuals do not fully exercise their right to freedom of speech and information due to limited awareness. Though there are some instances of people

in rural areas using RTI, most of the rural population, according to the panelists, are reluctant to seek information from government offices due to the fear of being ignored, mocked, or scolded. There have even been cases of attacks on information seekers—in October 2020, Binod Kumar Yadav, a resident of Bara district in Madhesh, was assaulted for seeking information about the progress in road construction at a rural municipality.⁷³

Nepal provides several platforms for public debate, including chautaris (rest stops) in rural areas, community halls, and formal or informal meetings organized by community groups. In urban areas, radio talk shows and television programs held in public spaces are also available for public discourse. However, it is important to recognize that these platforms may not be entirely inclusive.

Instances of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech are prevalent in Nepal.⁷⁴ It is therefore important to promote media literacy to combat misinformation, and ensure that

73 Freedom Forum Nepal. (2020, October 9). *Local municipality chief attacks information seeker*. Freedom Forum Nepal. <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-single/1232#>

74 Shrestha, P.M. (2023, February 19). No policy to counter disinformation. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/02/19/no-policy-to-counter-disinformation>

platforms are accountable for content moderation. There is also a need for improvements in addressing complaints related to the aforementioned issues. Public councils, ombudsmen, or platform moderators should handle complaints fairly to maintain public trust and preserve freedom of speech and the right to information.

INDICATOR 14

Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs

Nepal's media and content creators are realizing the significance of understanding their audience's preferences and requirements more than ever. Still, financial and time limitations hinder media houses from conducting extensive audience research. The panelists pointed to reports from [Sharecast Initiative Nepal](#) and the Center for Media Research-Nepal as examples of quantitative and qualitative research aimed at understanding the audience. However, there is still room for improvement in research regarding audience size, access patterns, and habits.

While audience research remains limited, Nepal has a tradition of valuing in-person

feedback, whether it is through letters to editors or curated online comment sections. However, a majority of the panelists noted that media organizations often fail to respond appropriately to audience feedback. They observed that not all letters addressed to the editors are published, and not all comments on their websites or social media are made public. Such actions can lead to reduced audience engagement. Instead, most media outlets tend to prioritize letters or comments that portray the organization positively or neutrally while disregarding critical opinions about the media. Additionally, concerns were raised regarding the social media platforms of certain media houses hosting hate speech and uncivil language due to a lack of comment moderation.

But efforts are being made to build trust with the audience, and this is particularly evident among community radio stations. Transparency in news reporting, such as providing bylines, has become standard practice. There is also a growing trend of acknowledging and incorporating feedback, with the media being more open to constructive criticism and correction. In the past, such responses were seen as a compromise, stated Umesh Shrestha.

INDICATOR 15

Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, community radio is distinguished by three essential characteristics: operating for social benefit, being accountable to the community, and fostering community cohesion and development.⁷⁵ With nearly 400 community radio stations spread across all 77 districts of Nepal, they serve as essential communication channels for local communities. These stations broadcast in over 70 languages, and address various social issues.⁷⁶ The roots of community media in Nepal date back to 1993, with the establishment of Gaunle Deurali newspaper in Palpa, Lumbini, and Radio Sagarmatha in 1997, the first independent community radio station in South Asia.⁷⁷

However, the panelists observed that community radio stations, which initially served as inspiration for their entry into journalism, have struggled to uphold their

previously esteemed reputation. Concerns were raised about the performance of these stations, with some duplicating programs from commercial counterparts and airing content produced in Kathmandu. Additionally, there have been issues with some community stations failing to involve local community members in their planning and content strategy development. This lack of local participation may affect the stations' ability to fulfill their original mandate, noted Luitel.

Community media platforms generally excel in providing locally relevant information, bridging the gap between national media and community needs, and addressing issues that may not receive adequate coverage in national media. Despite that, some panelists argued that community radio stations have not effectively distinguished themselves from commercial radio. This suggests that they have failed to address grassroots issues as intended.

75 World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). (n.d.). *What is community radio?*. <https://amarc-ap.org/about-us/what-is-community-radio/>

76 Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal. (n.d.) *About us*. <https://www.acorab.org.np/page/about-us>

77 Radio Sagarmatha. (n.d.). *About Radio Sagarmatha*. <https://radiosagarmatha.org.np/about/>

Most panelists agreed that community radio often serve as problem-solvers by addressing issues that directly impact their communities. For example, Radio Melamchi in Sindhupalchowk, Bagmati, asserts that its regular alerts about the water level of Melamchi River was instrumental in saving numerous lives during the 2021 Melamchi flood.⁷⁸ Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indigenous Community Radio Network collaborated with Indigenous advocacy organization, Cultural Survival, to broadcast health messages in various Indigenous languages, benefiting isolated communities.⁷⁹

A majority of community media outlets provide reliable information. Still, some may inadvertently spread misinformation due to inadequate training. Luitel emphasized that community media platforms generally prioritize the welfare of their communities and are seldom involved in spreading misinformation or harming public interest. Nevertheless, ensuring financial sustainability poses a big challenge. Initially funded by community contributors, community radio now relies more on support from advertisers, NGOs, and local governments. This shift towards donor funding raises questions about the long-term viability of community media.

PRINCIPLE 4 Transformative Action

Score
25
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong

The panelists highlighted the presence of nonpartisan news media and information sources, which promote diverse citizen engagement with various media platforms. A notable indicator is the effective use of reliable

information by CSOs, which scored higher than the others. CSOs employ quality information to guide their decision-making, shape policies, and advocate for policy reforms, all of which depend on the available

78 Satyal, U. (2021, August 2). 18 houses swept away in Sindhupalchowk. *The Himalayan Times*. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/18-houses-swept-away-in-sindhupalchowk>

79 Sunuwar, D. (2020, August 17). *United Nations praises community media in Nepal for COVID-19 response*. Cultural Survival. <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/united-nations-praises-community-media-nepal-covid-19-response>

resources. Additionally, the panelists underlined the pivotal role played by both media and CSOs in uncovering instances of corruption and human

rights violations, even though the government does not duly credit these efforts.

INDICATOR 16

Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines

The panelists acknowledge the existence of nonpartisan news sources in a media environment where political affiliations of journalists, media personnel, and management often sway organizational stances. Nonpartisan media outlets have a large audience base, although they struggle against politically motivated platforms, stated Awale.

But while claiming ideological independence, media outlets may still exhibit biases influenced by owners' interests or editorial team alliances. This is particularly evident in political weeklies and certain online news portals. However, audiences increasingly seek nonpartisan sources to access diverse perspectives. Both Koirala and Awale noted a significant increase in audience engagement with the rise of digital platforms but emphasized the importance

of consulting multiple news sources for accurate information. Many panelists, including Basnet, acknowledged this trend, which encourages individuals to seek trusted news outlets for authenticity and reliability. The panelists also highlighted the indirect influence of political entities on radio and online media, especially during election periods, which has led to a growing preference for nonpartisan sources as a countermeasure.

Content producers and distribution channels play a crucial role in promoting ideological diversity. Despite ideological differences, people engage in information exchange and discussions both online and offline. Some panelists shared instances where these exchanges turned contentious due to political differences, with social media discussions occasionally being weaponized against political opponents. While readers' participation in news content has been relatively low historically, it has significantly improved with the proliferation of digital media platforms. In this context, panelists

expressed concerns about the formation of public opinions and perspectives that may not always be based on factual information and mainstream news content. Bishwakarma and Maharjan cautioned against the formation of echo chambers in public discourse, which could hamper openness to diverse viewpoints. Maharjan pointed out that with the increasing trend of political parties establishing cyber wings, social media platforms are now inundated with ideological debates and attacks, all of which show a coordinated approach to commenting and debating.

INDICATOR 17

Individuals use quality information to inform their actions

A 2023 media landscape study conducted by the Center for Media Research-Nepal found that social media serves as the main channel for spreading misinformation.⁸⁰ Additionally, a 2022 survey by Sharecast Initiative Nepal showed that 76% of the respondents relied on family or friends as their primary sources for local news and information, while 50% relied

on the same sources for national and international news.⁸¹ Dependence on non-news sources increases the risk of being misinformed on critical issues. The panelists often cited the debate surrounding the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Corporation development grant in Nepal as an example of misinformation propagated by social media. Despite the government endorsing the \$500 million grant in 2022, there are continuing misconceptions about whether the project is part of the U.S. strategy to encircle China, among others.⁸²

In the midst of widespread misinformation and disinformation, individuals' sociopolitical views are vulnerable to manipulation, particularly during election periods. Several panelists expressed concerns about whether people base their election decisions and interactions with elected officials on factual and unbiased information. However, they unanimously observed that people continue to value quality information over misinformation. Basnet, Jha, and Umesh Shrestha provided examples where misinformation campaigns against certain parties and

80 Center for Media Research-Nepal. (2023). *Misinformation landscape study-2023*. (Unpublished report).

81 Nepali Times. (2023, May 5). Monopoly on Information. *Nepali Times* <https://nepalitimes.com/editorial/monopoly-on-information>

82 Khatiwada, N. (2022, February 10). *Politics of smokescreen: How the MCC debacle exposes a crisis of credibility in Nepali politics*. Nepal Live Today. <https://www.nepallivetoday.com/2022/02/07/how-the-mcc-debacle-exposes-a-crisis-of-credibility-in-nepali-politics/>

candidates did not impact voting decisions and election outcomes. Basnet highlighted the victories of two independent mayoral candidates in the 2022 local elections, Balendra Shah in Kathmandu and Harka Sampang in Dharan, despite substantial misinformation targeting them. She stated that individuals tend to prioritize candidates' qualifications, policies, and track records, relying on trusted sources rather than being influenced by false or misleading content.

There is a general inclination among people to rely on fact-based information for their health and safety measures. However, exceptions can arise, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic when misleading information influenced health decisions. The panelists recalled instances where many people rushed to acquire Vitamin D capsules, giloy herbs (gurjo in Nepali), and turmeric, believing they could combat the virus. This trend gained momentum when then- Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli suggested the efficacy of these herbs.⁸³ Ansari reiterated that many individuals, especially political cadres and their supporters, blindly follow

their leaders' proclamations. Moreover, there are frequent reports of individuals taking health-damaging actions based on misinformation.

INDICATOR 18

Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

Nepal has a diverse and vibrant civil society, with an estimated 300,000 CSOs by 2019, each with its own distinct focus and mission.⁸⁴ According to the panelists, these CSOs strive to base their mission, vision, goals, strategies, and action plans on evidence and factual data. Panelists with backgrounds in CSOs stated that these organizations refine their approaches using both qualitative and quantitative information obtained from feasibility studies, baseline surveys, mid-project evaluations, and final assessments. Moreover, they conduct research tailored to their areas of operation, using the findings to support their programming activities. Even so, CSOs in Nepal often face criticism for being driven by ideology and lobbying for agendas

83 Pandey, P. (2020, June 19). Oli continues to downplay Covid-19 and propagate home remedies, earning ridicule on social media. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/19/oli-continues-to-downplay-covid-19-and-propagate-home-remedies-earning-ridicule-on-social-media>

84 The British Council. (2019). *Civil society in Federal Nepal: A landscape study*. https://www.britishcouncil.org.np/sites/default/files/nepal_cso_landscape_study_final_report.pdf

aligned with their political interests.⁸⁵ Furthermore, there are reports of bias in their selection of beneficiaries, target areas, and populations.⁸⁶

Despite this, experts and practitioners attest to the commitment of CSOs to transparent and open communication. To ensure transparency, these organizations employ various social accountability tools, including public hearings, public audits, and social audits.⁸⁷ They also actively issue press releases and share information about their activities through social media. However, it is important to note that there have been instances where CSOs may have presented information that potentially exaggerated their achievements. Umesh Shrestha highlighted specific cases where certain CSOs were reported to spread misinformation, citing the Nirmala Panta rape and murder case as a notable example. In this instance, misinformation circulated widely, leading to a focus on an alleged culprit who turned out to be

the son of a police officer, while diverting attention from the actual perpetrator.⁸⁸ Shrestha's series of reports helped debunk many assumptions and misleading narratives surrounding the case.⁸⁹

The panelists concertedly agreed that CSOs in Nepal generally maintain responsible and ethical practices in information dissemination. These organizations undertake initiatives to educate the public and raise awareness about various issues. Although only a few CSOs have a specific mandate to combat misinformation, they are actively engaged in this activity. The panelists highlighted a positive trend where media outlets collaborate with civil society to address social issues. For instance, there was extensive collaboration between CSOs and mainstream media during the impeachment motion against Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana, as cited by Tamang. Biswakarma reiterated that collaboration between media and CSOs is driven by mutual interests, and stated

85 Bhatta, C.D. (2016). Interface between the state and civil society in Nepal. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 10, 63-91.

86 USAID. (2017). A Survey Report on The Public Perception of the Role of Civil Society Organizations and Media in Nepal. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00SZXB.pdf

87 CUTS. (2013). Understanding the Context of Nepal for Social Accountability Interventions. <http://www.cuts-international.org/CART>

88 Shrestha, U. (2020). Satya bichara, chhayama sahid [Pursuit of truths in the shadows]. *Sanhita*, Press Council Nepal. https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/inside_page_-ashar-45_final.pdf

89 Shrestha, U. & Dhakal, S. (2018, November 28). *Re ma rumalliyeko Nirmala Prakaran [Nirmala case entangled in hearsay]. Who Killed Nirmala (Series-5)*. Pahalopost.com. www.pahalopost.com/content/20181128192346.html

that the lack of CSO perspectives in media content is puzzling. An editor from an English-language daily newspaper pointed out that CSOs desire positive coverage, while journalists may seek financial support from them. Thus far, their association has mainly been defined by these dynamics.

Nevertheless, some panelists acknowledged that this partnership has resulted in notable achievements, such as substantial political shifts like the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006.⁹⁰ They also noted that besides traditional media, other information sources also collaborate with CSOs to address social issues. Feedback from contributors highlights Nepal's active civic participation in key decisions, such as policy formation and legislative change. CSOs are instrumental in mobilizing and empowering citizens to participate in these critical processes.

INDICATOR 19

Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions

Nepal has a longstanding discourse surrounding the cooperation and interface between CSOs and state agencies.⁹¹ Often, both parties express concerns about the lack of attention to each other's issues and concerns. The panelists shed light on the intricate relationship dynamics between government agencies, civil society, and the media. They commonly acknowledged occasional collaboration between government bodies and CSOs, but noted the absence of a consistent mechanism for continuous engagement.

These occasional engagements, however, may result in potential gaps in information flow and policy development. Bishwakarma pointed out the lack of discussions involving parliamentarians, experts, and stakeholders, including CSOs, during policy formulation. This gap could limit the range of perspectives considered in the policymaking process, and potentially impact the efficacy of decisions. Nonetheless, the government

90 Conciliation Resources. (2017). Civil society's role in Nepal peace. *Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue*. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/comment/civil-societys-role-nepal-peace>

91 Bhatta, C.D. (2016). Interface between the state and civil society in Nepal. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 10, 63-91.

employs various channels to disseminate information, with press conferences being the preferred method. Government decisions are typically communicated through press releases, statements, and official social media platforms. Officials generally rely on credible sources and evidence, although occasional misinterpretations may occur. Jha stressed that government entities prioritize factual communication, despite limited engagement with the media. While the government primarily depends on reliable information, Koirala mentioned instances where unverified data influenced ad hoc decisions, such as imposing stringent nationwide COVID-19 lockdown measures in March 2020, even though there were only two reported confirmed cases and no fatalities.⁹²

Political discussions sometimes lack a solid foundation in factual information. When political leaders intentionally or unintentionally spread distorted facts, it can fuel discussions and contribute to misinformation. Ansari underscored concerns that political parties and leaders often distort facts to fit their narratives, thus influencing public discourse. While

policymakers usually depend on verified information when crafting policies, there are instances where parliamentarians and bureaucrats may be swayed by unverified rumors or incomplete data.

INDICATOR 20

Information supports good governance and democratic norms

Government agencies usually give high importance to reliable news and information related to corruption and human rights violations. Numerous media investigations into various scandals have prompted responses from the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), an anti-corruption body. The panelists mentioned various bribery and corruption cases involving prominent politicians and bureaucrats, including recent ones like the fake Bhutanese refugee and gold smuggling⁹³ scandals.

However, state agencies often disregard news covered by local, small-scale outlets unless it gains significant attention on social media. The CIAA

92 Sharma, K., Banstola, A., & Parajuli, R. R. (2021). Assessment of COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal: A lockdown scenario analysis. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.599280/full>

93 Shrestha, P. M. (2023, December 13). Recent hauls affirm Nepal's image as a gold smuggling hub. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/13/recent-hauls-affirm-nepal-s-image-as-a-gold-smuggling-hub>



has drawn criticism for being selective in pursuing corruption cases against influential politicians and bureaucrats. For instance, the panelists highlighted the case of former finance minister Bishnu Poudel, who was not charged in the Lalita Niwas land purchase scandal. Likewise, they mentioned another case involving prominent political leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara, where he and his son were allegedly involved in gold smuggling but received immunity from police investigation despite media reports. It should be noted that Mahara was finally arrested in connection with the scam in March 2024.

The media undoubtedly plays a crucial role in uncovering irregularities, corruption, and examining transparency

and governance practices. The enforcement of the RTI law is equally important for making informed decisions and combating corruption and misappropriation. But according to Bishwakarma, the impact of media coverage on prompting governance reforms and fighting corruption relies heavily on how authorities receive and respond to media reports.

In instances of human rights violations, credible news and information have played a critical role in urging the government to take action. Ansari cited an incident involving mistreatment by metropolitan police towards street vendors in Kathmandu. Following public outcry, authorities intervened and instructed the police to rectify their behavior. Still,

Bhumika Shrestha voiced apprehensions regarding several influencing factors, such as political pressures on news media, which may compromise journalistic ethics in reporting.

Quality news and information are crucial for ensuring free and fair elections. Following Nepal's successful conduct of its three-tiered elections in 2022, several panelists, including Basnet and Umesh Shrestha, stressed that accurate and balanced reporting helped in countering misinformation during the polls.⁹⁴ Dahal suggested that quality information not only promoted voter education and the

importance of voting rights but also brought attention to important issues through media debates. Despite various misinformation and malinformation campaigns targeting specific candidates and political leaders, Umesh Shrestha pointed out that the election results demonstrated the importance of reliable information in shaping voter decisions and aiding them in choosing better candidates. Additionally, Maharjan cited the #NoNotAgain campaign, which contributed to the election of numerous independent candidates in both local and national elections as another example.

94 Shrestha, U. (2022, December 23). *निर्वाचनमा फैलिएका मिथ्या सूचना* [Fake news circulated during election]. Kantipur. <https://ekantipur.com/opinion/2022/12/23/167175931594428802.html>



Lumbini Province
Overall Provincial Score: 24

LUMBINI

Overall Score

24

out of 40

Lumbini Province

List of Panel Participants

Aryal, Indira - Teacher, Devdaha Secondary School/Former radio journalist
Bishwakarma, Deepak - Member, Campaign for Human Rights and Social Transformation
Chaudhary, Narsingh - Former chair, Nepal Bar Association, Rupandehi
Chaudhari, Pabitra - Reporter, Tilottama Television
K.C., Sher Bahadur - Editor, Dainik Lumbini newspaper
Khanal, Krishna - Sub-editor, Butwal Today
Kunwar, Sumina - Op-ed writer/columnist
Pandey, Krishna - Manager, Mission Media Pvt. Ltd.
Rana Mager, Aanik - LGBTQ+ activist, chair of Sahasi Kadam Nepal
Sharma, Samjhana - Managing director, Bhairahawa Television

List of Moderators and Editors

Pandey, Lekhanath - Researcher, author, assistant professor, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
Pokharel, Umesh - VIBE lead researcher and author, Kathmandu
Acharya, Bhanu Bhakta - Report editor, faculty of professor of journalism, communication, and media studies, University of Ottawa, Canada

INTRODUCTION



Lumbini province, situated in western Nepal, is divided into 16 administrative districts, with a population totaling 5.12 million.⁹⁵ It has numerous information outlets, including 326 newspapers,⁹⁶ 152 radio stations, 23 television channels, and 234 online news portals.⁹⁷ However, according to a report by the Press Council Nepal, only

one-third of the registered news outlets operate regularly and, among them, nearly one-third are located in Rupandehi, the most populous of Lumbini's districts. The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the overarching body for journalists in Nepal, has 1806 members working in Lumbini.⁹⁸ Many journalists even operate without FNJ membership, and the number

95 LGIS Nepal. (n.d.). *Lumbini province: Introduction*. <https://lgisnepal.com/en/province/5>

96 Press Council Nepal. (2022). *Media year book 2021/2022*. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Media-Year-Book-2021-22.pdf>

97 Center for Media Research Nepal. (2022). *Pradeshma media*. https://research.butmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MediaInProvince_2022-1.pdf

98 Federation of Nepali Journalists. (n.d.). *Numbers of members*. <https://www.fnjnepal.org.np/page/members-data>

has been on the rise with the growth of online news portals. But despite a greater female population in the province, the media landscape is predominantly male-dominated, with 1462 male journalists compared to 344 of their female counterparts.⁹⁹

Since 2017, Lumbini has undergone two provincial elections, but without clear political mandates. Consequently, this has resulted in a hung provincial assembly and government instability. Since the most recent election, which took place in November 2022, the chief minister position has changed thrice. The liberal Nepali Congress currently leads the province in coalition with left-wing and democratic parties.

Economically, Lumbini contributes 14% to Nepal's gross domestic product of USD 42 billion. In 2021, it was the second fastest growing province and the third highest contributor to the national economy.¹⁰⁰ Regarding infrastructure, 91% of Lumbini's population has access to electricity, slightly lower than the national average of 93%, and

approximately 47% of its households own a television.

Lumbini has yielded an overall average score of 24 in the Vibrant Information Barometer, indicating a 'Somewhat Vibrant' information ecosystem. It slightly surpasses the national score of 23, suggesting a marginally more dynamic information landscape. The province's news media prioritize factual content to minimize misinformation, yet occasional instances of misleading news emerge due to inadequate editorial oversight. Occurrences of hate speech are rare and primarily originate from nonprofessional sources. While the majority of individuals have access to various information sources, rural and marginalized communities encounter obstacles. Lumbini's news media strives for inclusivity and diversity, covering issues related to ethnic and religious minorities, but there is a need for increased resources for content production. Media outlets generally maintain editorial independence, although some influence may stem from the government, owners, and the corporate sector. Despite the existence of

99 K.C., D. L. (2022). Prospects of journalism in Lumbini Province. *Media year book 2021/22*. Press Council Nepal. <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Media-Year-Book-2021-22.pdf>

100 Ministry of Finance. (2021). *Economic Survey 2020/21*. [https://www.mof.gov.np/uploads/document/file/1633341980_Economic%20Survey%20\(English\)%202020-21.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.np/uploads/document/file/1633341980_Economic%20Survey%20(English)%202020-21.pdf)

legal measures for data privacy, there is a lack of a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy, though this issue extends throughout the country. Digital security knowledge is limited among stakeholders, including journalists. Additionally, there is a deficiency in media literacy and civic education. Social media platforms are the preferred medium for free expression, although doubts persist about content reliability. Local issues are covered by community radio stations, which

broadcast in local languages and serve as community information sources, despite resource constraints. Civil society members and government agencies largely rely on quality information for decision-making and policy formulation. News outlets frequently expose corruption and human rights violations, but the response to such news depends on the integrity of the source and public pressure.

PRINCIPLE 1 Information Quality	
<div>Score</div> <div>24</div> <div>out of 40</div>	Somewhat Vibrant
	Strength of Evidence Rating: Strong
<p>The majority of Lumbini’s media outlets prioritize editorial independence and factual content, with the aim to prevent harm. While the spread of misinformation by professional sources are rare, occasional instance of false or misleading news occur due to insufficient editorial scrutiny. Instances of hate speech are also infrequent and primarily originate from nonprofessional sources. Although most individuals have the rights, means, and ability to access a variety</p>	<p>of information, there are exceptions. Generally, the public can identify and reject misinformation, although some may encounter difficulties. Overall, the media is making efforts to be more inclusive and diverse in both content and structure, using local languages, and covering issues pertaining to ethnic and religious minorities. However, increased resource allocation for content production is necessary to support this progress.</p>

INDICATOR 1

There is quality information on a variety of topics available

Media outlets in Lumbini often lack the essential infrastructure and resources for producing diverse and high-quality content. Indira Aryal, a former radio journalist, noted that numerous broadcasting networks and online portals operate without adequately equipped studios and designated offices. Additionally, there is a significant urban-rural disparity in access to digital facilities and connectivity—urban content producers often have better access to resources such as studios, workspaces, computers, and cameras as compared to their counterparts in remote villages.

A few colleges in Lumbini offer journalism programs but practical training for journalists is sporadic and often irrelevant due to funding being allocated to other priorities. There are also evident disparities between academic programs and actual demands of the market. Professional media outlets typically provide accurate information based on facts and data, and rarely spread false information with malicious intent. They generally acknowledge and correct inadvertent mistakes. While media outlets

cover a wide range of topics, political news tends to receive more emphasis. There are instances of media reports holding government officials accountable for their actions, but their effectiveness largely depend on the quality of the news report. Editorial independence is a concern, as indicated by most panelists who cited a wide range of influences on news channels, including media owners, political figures, the corporate sector, and advertisers.

INDICATOR 2

The norm for information is that content is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal

Professional media outlets and content producers typically prioritize accuracy, balance, and objectivity in their work. Still, instances of false or misleading information are also observed due to insufficient editorial scrutiny. Nonprofessional content producers use platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and unregistered news portals, focusing on sensationalized content to attract subscriptions, comments, and shares, often for financial gain. The spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech is primarily attributed to these content producers. Panelists, including

Narsingh Chaudhary, an advocate and former chairperson of the Nepal Bar Association, Rupandehi, highlighted instances of distorted information spreading through social media during the 2022 elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted widespread misinformation about health and safety issues during the pandemic.

While professional content producers adhere to ethical standards, nonprofessionals often disregard such ethics, often failing to recognize the consequences of their actions. Generally, the Lumbini government does not disseminate false or misleading information, but several panelists noted instances of government agencies making misleading claims to highlight their achievements. Sher Bahadur K.C., editor of Dainik Lumbini newspaper, pointed out that media and fact-checkers frequently question such claims, and those responsible are obligated to rectify them.

INDICATOR 3

The norm for information is that content is not intended to be harmful. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal

The panelists noted multiple instances of disinformation spread by Indian news channels,¹⁰¹ particularly in areas of Lumbini bordering India. They highlighted events related to India's blockade of Nepal¹⁰² and the Tikapur incident.¹⁰³

The panelists acknowledged that local and provincial governments generally avoid creating or spreading hate speech or misinformation. The repercussions of such behavior often hinge on public responses, sometimes leading to protests and subsequent apologies or even resignations. While professional content producers generally uphold ethical standards and steer clear of harmful content, the panelists noted occasional instances where mainstream media intentionally harmed individuals or communities. In such cases, content

101 Himalayan Tribune. (2020, August 24). Indian media churns out fake news on Nepal-China border disputes. *Himalayan Tribune*. <https://himalayantribune.com/2020/08/24/indian-media-churn-out-fake-news-nepal-china-border-dispute/>

102 Karki, T. (2022). Political blackmailing: A case study of India's unofficial blockade on Nepal. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4197326> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4197326>

103 LAHURNIP. (2016). *Tikapur incident human rights monitoring report*. <https://www.lahurnip.org/uploads/publication/file/tikapur-incident-human-rights-monitoring-report-eng.pdf>

producers may have been compelled to issue apologies and face credibility or reputational losses.

Nonprofessional content producers often generate and circulate harmful and hateful content, particularly through YouTube channels. Aanik Rana Magar, an LGBTIQ+ activist and chair of Sahasi Kadam Nepal, shared her experiences of facing derogatory comments directed at her and the LGBTIQ+ community through social media. She expressed frustration over the lack of response despite her efforts to address the issue through various media outlets.

Regarding addressing harmful content or hate speech, Krishna Khanal, sub-editor for Butwal Today, highlighted the absence of mechanisms and policy interventions to moderate such content in the province's media outlets.

INDICATOR 4

The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse

Lumbini exhibits significant diversity in ethnicity and spoken languages. Approximately 51% of the population speaks Nepali, followed by Tharu

(13%), Bhojpuri, and Avadhi, both at 11%.¹⁰⁴ Regarding ethnicity, the Khas/ Arya community constitutes roughly 29% of the population, while Indigenous nationalities make up about 20%, and the Tharu and Dalit communities account for 15% each. A significant portion of the media content is produced in Nepali, with limited efforts made for local languages. Khanal, a member of the disabled community, emphasized the neglect of the issues and voices of marginalized communities by professional media, especially the lack of content catering to persons with disabilities.

Lumbini's citizens typically encounter various ideologies and perspectives through information channels, regardless of political or demographic backgrounds. However, Sumina Kunwar, a columnist, noted that non-Nepali speakers may have limited access to Nepali language content. Marginalized groups, including the LGBTIQ+ community, Dalits, Madhesis, and people with disabilities, are often underrepresented in the media. In addition, although the number of women in newsrooms is increasing, there remains a noticeable gender gap in content creation. Among the 1,806 journalists

104 Nepal in Data. (n. d.). *Overview*. <https://nepalindata.com/overview/province/>

affiliated with the FNJ in Lumbini, only 344 (19%) are women.¹⁰⁵ Men predominantly hold editorial leadership positions, and limited representation from ethnic communities, religious minorities, and people with disabilities affects media inclusivity.

However, all panelists observed that the emergence of digital media platforms has provided marginalized and minority groups with a powerful forum to voice their perspectives. While many panelists expressed the view that nonprofessional content producers are primarily motivated by the pursuit of viral content, Aryal stressed that the increased participation of various ethnic groups on social media may contribute to addressing the diversity gap in media content.

INDICATOR 5

Content production is sufficiently resourced

The news media in Lumbini is grappling with a severe financial crisis, which has been aggravated by a significant decrease in advertising revenue, particularly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in revenue sources has

made it challenging for news outlets to maintain quality content. Khanal pointed out that numerous media outlets are facing imminent closure, leading to salary cuts and journalist layoffs. Consequently, numerous programs, mainly those aimed at local audiences, have been discontinued. Moreover, there is an unequal distribution of government advertising, which tends to favor pro-state media outlets. While some community media operate with support and participation from local communities, the panelists observed a lack of alternative funding sources from both the private and public sectors. Additionally, Kunwar noted that journalists often seek secondary jobs to fulfill their personal or family needs. The panelists also highlighted the practice of media houses directly engaging with advertisers, leading to unhealthy competition among outlets and affecting the quality of content.

Conventional funding sources like advertisements are declining in newspapers, radio, and television due to the popularity of social media platforms, where advertisements can be more precisely targeted, thus posing a threat to the existence of traditional media. To

¹⁰⁵ Federation of Nepalese Journalists. (n.d.). *Numbers of member*. <https://www.fnjnepal.org/nep/page/members-data>

make matters worse, major industries in the province tend to favor big media outlets headquartered in Kathmandu, leaving provincial or local media struggling for resources. The panelists

also noted the influence of intermediaries on government advertising, leading to higher commissions and lower payments to media houses.

PRINCIPLE 2 Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

Score
25
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong

The people of Lumbini have the right to create, share, and access information, albeit with certain limitations. While the majority of the population can avail themselves of various information sources, rural and marginalized communities face difficulties in accessing these channels. The panelists observed that even though the government uses various

methods to spread information, they generally do not facilitate two-way communication. Many of the media outlets maintain editorial independence, although there may be some influence from the government, owners, and corporate sector. Additionally, there is scope for enhancing the diversity and independence of these information channels.

INDICATOR 6

People have the right to create, share, and consume information

Nepal's constitutional and legal framework provides robust safeguards for freedom of speech and the press. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal guarantees

“full freedom of the press” in its preamble, covering the rights to opinion and expression (Article 17(2a)), press and publication (Article 19), and information (Article 27).¹⁰⁶ The Constitution grants concurrent powers to both the federation and the province on “matters related to the means of communication.” These

106 Constitution of Nepal-2015. (2015). <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

legal measures secure citizens' rights to create, share, and consume information, with some restrictions to safeguard national interests. Despite this strong legal foundation, the panelists highlighted the challenges in implementing these laws. Moreover, the Electronic Transaction Act¹⁰⁷ has drawn criticism for being misused to harass journalists and limit civic spaces.¹⁰⁸ The panelists expressed concerns about ongoing national efforts, such as legislative acts, regulations, and directives, that undermine constitutional rights.

Currently, journalists in Lumbini are not often subjected to legal action for their reporting. However, the panelists reported instances of harassment by the police and intimidation from interest groups. For example, Krishna Pandey, manager of Mission Media, mentioned that the media face threats if they publish reports involving allegations of corruption. Pabitra Chaudhari, a reporter for Tilottama Television, revealed that journalists often self-censor due to fear of possible retaliation, especially regarding controversial issues or high-

profile figures. Kunwar even cited an example of a Lumbini-based journalist who is currently imprisoned for criticizing former president, Bidhya Bhandari. In such cases, journalist trade unions like the FNJ often advocate for journalists' rights.

INDICATOR 7

People have adequate access to channels of information

While the information and communications technologies (ICTs) vary across the province due to its diverse geography, the panelists agreed that most areas have access to information channels, including radio, print, television, and the Internet. Still, in remote locations with limited electricity, Internet access is a challenge. However, FM radio is available even in regions with limited Internet access, with each district hosting at least one radio station. Despite these efforts, limitations persist in network coverage and data accessibility, which can impede the flow of crucial information.

Even though the majority of the population can access information

107 The Electronic Transaction Act, 2006 (Amended in 2008). <http://www.tepc.gov.np/uploads/files/12the-electronic-transaction-act55.pdf>

108 Pandey, L. (2021). Shrinking of civic space: Drafting of CSOs policies in Nepal. *Policy Paper Series*, 18, 1-10. <https://nepalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Discussion-Paper-Shrinking-of-Civic-Space-Federal.pdf>

channels, financial constraints remain a significant barrier for low-income groups. There are no prevailing social norms that specifically hinder specific communities from accessing information, although some panelists, such as Rana Magar, suggested that religious factors may affect access, particularly for Muslim women. Nonetheless, certain communities, geographic regions, individuals with disabilities, and linguistic minorities still encounter barriers to accessing information. Sign language translation for the hearing-impaired is generally lacking in broadcasting programs, and much of the news media primarily caters to literate and privileged groups. One notable exception, according to Kunwar, is Radio Devdaha, which airs programs tailored to the needs of people with disabilities.

Online platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook play a crucial role in information dissemination, filling gaps left by traditional media outlets, and promoting diverse perspectives and voices.

INDICATOR 8

There are appropriate channels for government information

Nepal constitutionally guarantees the right to information (RTI) as a fundamental right.¹⁰⁹ Yet, ongoing debates question whether the RTI framework actually meets international standards. Many panelists shared that while the RTI law aligns with international norms, concerns arise regarding its comprehensive execution. K.C. highlighted that many are unaware of the RTI law, and the government has not taken adequate measures to educate citizens about its importance.

Spokespersons and information officers play a vital role in disseminating official information. Despite that, numerous panelists mentioned instances where officials either refused to provide information or offered incomplete details, especially regarding sensitive matters or critical decisions. Chaudhary cited examples of both federal and provincial governments keeping many investigating reports confidential. He stated that successfully obtaining such documents

109 The Rights to Information Act, 2007. <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/right-to-information-act-2064-2007.pdf>

through RTI requires determination and consistent follow-up.

While most individuals are willing to seek information, some may have concerns about potential consequences. Several panelists emphasized that no specific groups were systematically excluded from exercising their right to information. However, Rana Magar recounted her experience as an LGBTIQ+ member in obtaining her citizenship certificates from the District Administration Office, where she had faced disrespect and discrimination. Determined to seek justice, she had to turn to the National Human Rights Commission for support, after which she finally received the document.

ownership. While federal laws related to the media also apply in the provinces, some municipalities in Lumbini have formulated policies to regulate local radio stations.¹¹⁰ The National Mass Communication Policy-2016¹¹¹ briefly addresses foreign investment in the media sector but overlooks ownership transparency.¹¹² Moreover, the enforcement of existing media-related laws is inconsistent. For example, although policies stipulate that media ownership should be transparent, many outlets keep their ownership undisclosed due to the potential involvement of politicians and other interest groups. Kunwar stated that while establishing a media outlet is relatively straightforward, challenges emerge in its operation and sustainability.

INDICATOR 9

There are diverse channels for information flow

Lumbini has a diverse media landscape, but the province does not have a specific law regulating transparency in media

Public service media is typically established by legal mandate and funded by the state or government. It is usually nonpartisan and maintains editorial independence, setting it apart from state media, which is subject to both financial and editorial control by the government.

110 Nepal: Media Policy Hub. (2021). *लुम्बिनी प्रदेश सञ्चार माध्यमसम्बन्धी व्यवस्था गर्न बनेको विधेयकको समीक्षा र सुझावहरू*. [Review and recommendations on the bill addressing media in Lumbini Province]. <https://mediapolicy.org.np/2021/06/media-policy-reviews-recommendations/3036/>

111 The Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Government of Nepal. (2016). *National Mass Communication Policy*. <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/npolicy/Communication/राष्ट्रवि%20आमसंचार%20नीति%20२०७३.pdf>

112 The Constitution of Nepal-2015. (2015). Article 19 (2). <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

The panelists contended that national-level state media in Lumbini, such as Radio Nepal and Nepal Television, operate under government oversight, both in terms of finances and editorial content, and often fail to provide impartial and independent services.¹¹³ On the other hand, Internet service providers (ISPs) generally treat the public in a fair manner, but they may still prioritize individuals with legal or political influence.

INDICATOR 10

Information channels are independent

This indicator received a score of 23, below the provincial average of 24, denoting a significant obstacle to accessing independent information in Lumbini. While falling within the ‘Somewhat Vibrant’ category, it suggests challenges to media freedom. The panelists cited various factors hindering media freedom, including ownership structures, advertising influences, and corporate and political connections. These factors shape editorial stances, content priorities, and political inclinations.

Although panelists differed in their views on the most influential factors, the majority highlighted funding sources as the primary determinant of media performance. According to Samjhana Sharma, managing director of Bhairahawa Television, editorial teams often cannot defy the will of the ownership due to financial or other pressures. Likewise, the interests of the advertisers frequently sway editorial decisions. For example, local cement factories, a major revenue source for news outlets in Lumbini, seldom face critical coverage regarding their contribution to air pollution.

Chaudhary highlighted the undue political interference that can impact media content. Government subsidies and advertising contracts, while financially supporting the media, may compromise their independence as the government may expect more favorable coverage in return. Moreover, the political affiliations of the leaders of regulatory bodies, usually appointed based on ties to the ruling party, could affect their impartiality.

113 Pandey, L. (2022). Can state-owned media perform watchdog functions?: A case of Nepal. In B. B. Acharya & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Global perspectives on journalism in Nepal: Nepalese news media in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

PRINCIPLE 3 Information Consumption and Engagement

Score
22
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong

Nepal, including Lumbini province, has established legal measures for data privacy, but lacks a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy. There exists a considerable gap in digital security knowledge among stakeholders, including journalists. The general public also possesses limited understanding and skills in digital security, media literacy, and civic education. The panelists observed that the government has not given priority to media literacy in its plans and programs.

Social media platforms are the preferred medium for free expression. But there is a lack of comprehensive research by media houses on audience needs, expectations, and size. While some panelists mentioned that radio content is adjusted based on feedback from various sources, there is scope for more structured audience research. Despite facing resource constraints, community media outlets deserve commendation for their dedication to reporting on local issues, broadcasting in local languages, and serving as community information centers.

INDICATOR 11

People can safely use the Internet due to adequate privacy protections and security tools

The panelists highlighted the importance of implementing legal measures for data privacy and digital security in Lumbini.

The 2015 Constitution guarantees the right to privacy and protection of personal information as a fundamental right, covering various aspects of individuals' lives.¹¹⁴ The Electronic Transaction Act-2007 aims to establish reliable data generation, communication, and transmission.¹¹⁵ In spite of that, the

114 Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2016). The Constitution of Nepal (First Amendment), 2016. https://www.moljpa.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Constitution-of-Nepal-_English_-with-1st-Amendment_2.pdf

115 The Electronic Transaction Act, 2006 (Amended in 2008). <http://www.tepc.gov.np/uploads/files/12the-electronic-transaction-act55.pdf>

panelists observed these legal measures as insufficient in addressing the evolving challenges posed by ICTs and social media.

Deepak Bishwokarma, a member of the [Campaign for Human Rights and Social Transformation](#), emphasized the gap between the existing legal framework for digital security and its actual implementation. There is a lack of tailored digital security training for journalists and content creators, leaving them vulnerable to potential misconduct when relying on ISPs. K.C. shared a personal encounter with fake social media profiles, highlighting how digital illiteracy exposes individuals to hackers and cybercriminals.

The panelists noted a scarcity of digital tools to combat distributed denial-of-service attacks, along with other cyber-attacks and threats, including within government agencies. This lack of digital literacy impacts different facets of society, such as education, healthcare, business, and government. While youth in urban areas may have some familiarity with digital tools and technologies, digital literacy is low in the province, especially its rural areas. This knowledge

gap contributes to the spread of misinformation and exposes individuals to cyber threats because many are unaware that their online activities are monitored and analyzed by platforms or related agencies.

INDICATOR 12

People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate

This indicator shows a troubling score of 15, indicating a widespread deficiency in the essential skills and resources needed for media literacy in Lumbini. This shortfall leaves individuals unprepared to confront the challenges brought about by information disorder. Unfortunately, the promotion of information literacy has not garnered sufficient attention from both provincial and local governments in Lumbini.

Still, the panelists highlighted a positive development: the integration of media and digital literacy topics into the national curriculum for secondary-level students (Classes nine to 12). These subjects encompass various aspects, such as media fundamentals, communication significance, entertainment media, information technology, digital

proficiency, and cyber-security.¹¹⁶ However, skill-oriented training opportunities in the province's media sector are sporadic and often reliant on funding availability. K.C. emphasized the disparities, noting that journalists in Kathmandu have better access to such opportunities compared to their counterparts outside the capital, especially in regions like Lumbini. While a few media-related civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the FNJ's provincial branch, have initiated efforts to narrow this gap through short-term specialized training programs, addressing this issue requires government intervention and continuous support, including increased funding.

According to the 2021 National Population and Housing Census, Nepal's overall literacy rate stands at 76%.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, the panelists noted that the general public lacks standard fact-checking practices when consuming information, leaving them susceptible to the growing threat of misinformation. Khanal provided cases of fact-checking

by social media users in Lumbini regarding content from traditional news media. Although this trend is commendable, it is not accessible to all users and media consumers. Educated individuals tend to verify information from alternative sources and reliable news sites when encountering dubious content, unlike the general public, who often accept information without verifying its accuracy.

INDICATOR 13

People engage productively with the information that is available to them

The 2015 Constitution ensures the fundamental rights of citizens, including freedom of expression, protection of press and publication rights, and access to information on matters of public interest.¹¹⁸ The panelists commended journalists and members of civil society in Lumbini for actively exercising these rights, thus contributing to a vibrant public discourse. However, there is a general lack of awareness among the public regarding RTI. Pandey pointed out

116 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2021). *माध्यमिक शिक्षा पाठ्यक्रम, २०७८ (कक्षा ९ र १०)* [Secondary education curriculum, 2022 (Classes 9 & 10)]

117 National Statistics Office. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021*. <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/national>

118 Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2016). *The Constitution of Nepal (First Amendment), 2016 (2072)*

the misconception that RTI is primarily a tool for journalists rather than the wider public. Moreover, Bishwokarma cited instances of misconduct by information officers who failed to comply with the RTI law when journalists or other individuals requested information from government agencies.

Lumbini provides ample opportunities for debates and discussions in public spaces and academic institutions on pertinent sociopolitical issues. Rural areas also host various platforms for cultural and social gatherings, and political discussions. Chaudhari highlighted the role of community radio for such debates and discussions. However, Aryal and Rana Magar observed that public discourse on mediated platforms lacks inclusivity in terms of gender, social status, and cultural and political factors. Despite the daily consumption of online and offline information, many individuals do not prioritize factual content. The panelists stated that reporting misinformation, malinformation, or hate speech to public councils or ombudsmen is uncommon, and even if done, actions primarily depend on the individual's follow-up, access, and level of influence.

INDICATOR 14

Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs

The panelists unanimously agreed that amidst the media industry's struggle for survival, there is minimal qualitative research conducted to assess audience size, access, and preferences, and are primarily reliant on donor funding. Although a few NGOs and policy research institutes like the Center for Media Research-Nepal have undertaken some studies,¹¹⁹ media outlets and content producers themselves seldom engage in such research. However, Pandey mentioned informal efforts by media houses to gather data on audience size, access patterns, and market potential, while nonprofessional content creators tailor their material to attract and retain audience interest.

Community radio stations excel in broadcasting content aligned with audience needs, offering programs in local languages and covering local issues. For instance, Radio Madan Pokhara in Palpa district specializes in agricultural topics. Nevertheless, there is still a need for more comprehensive research to understand

119 Nepal: Media Policy Hub. (2021, June 23). लुम्बिनी प्रदेश सञ्चार माध्यमसम्बन्धी व्यवस्था गर्न बनेको विधेयकको समीक्षा र सुझावहरू. [Review and recommendations of the Bill to regulate media in Lumbini Province]. <https://mediapolicy.org.np/2021/06/media-policy-reviews-recommendations/3036/>

audience preferences and demands. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vital role of radio in education, with stations launching programs specifically for students unable to attend physical or virtual classrooms.

The panelists noted that while media outlets provide avenues for audience feedback, such as letters to the editor, they lack effective online comment moderation. Although producers generally welcome constructive criticism and rectify inadvertent errors, they often fail to address deliberate content manipulation. Such instances are primarily prevalent in news portals influenced by interest groups and political actors, especially during election periods. K.C. recalled numerous instances when news portals in Lumbini showcased similar headlines, either favoring or opposing specific political parties or candidates. Moreover, events aimed at community engagement or enhancing transparency in authorship and reporting methods are rare. An exception that Rana Magar recounted was a contentious debate held between media and local stakeholders over the location of the provincial headquarters.

INDICATOR 15

Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

The inception of community media in Nepal can be traced back to 1993 with the establishment of Gaunle Deurali newspaper in Lumbini's Palpa district. This indicator scored an impressive 31, surpassing the provincial average of 24, underlining the widespread presence of community radio stations across all districts of Lumbini province. Community radio has emerged as an indispensable platform, give voice to marginalized sections of the populace and playing a crucial role in informing, educating, empowering, and mobilizing local populations. They address grassroots issues in local languages and provide insights often overlooked by higher echelons of governance. Furthermore, they have made significant contributions to conflict resolution and peace-building endeavors.¹²⁰

Nonetheless, some panelists noted blurred lines between community and commercial radio. Criticisms have been leveled against certain community radio stations

120 Mainali, R. (2021). *Nepal: Community radio, conflict resolution and peace building*. AMARC-Asia Pacific. https://amarc-ap.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/VersionF2021.02.16.small_.pdf#page=87



for replicating commercial content, lacking local involvement in planning, and deviating from their original mandates.¹²¹ Concerns were also raised about content duplication and the airing of material produced outside the province.

Despite these issues, most community media outlets strive to serve the public interest and avoid disseminating biased or harmful information. However, the panelists underscored the limited community support, whether through volunteerism or donations, for community media in Lumbini.

121 Pandey, L. (2019). Implications of the Corporate-Media-Politics in Nepal. *Neus Aus Der Forschung Research News* <https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/de/newsletteriaaw/newsletter-4/pdf/iaawnewsletter-4-pandey.pdf>

PRINCIPLE 4 Transformative Action

Score
25
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong

Lumbini has a diverse range of mainstream news and information sources but even though they cover a wide spectrum of topics, the reliance on high-quality information for decision-making is limited among individuals. Still, civil society members and government agencies effectively leverage quality information for decision-making, policy formulation,

and advocacy efforts, with the extent of their use depending on resource availability. The panelists cited several instances where the media played a pivotal role in uncovering corruption and human rights violations, and emphasized that the public response to such revelations hinges on the integrity of newsroom leadership and level of trust in the media outlet.

INDICATOR 16

Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines

This indicator achieved a score of 26, exceeding the provincial average of 24. It signifies the existence of information sources that transcend partisan divides and have the ability to disseminate content across ideological spectra. Several panelists highlighted the presence of independent and nonpartisan news outlets, which have substantial audiences and uphold a high level of credibility, despite the prevalence of ideologically-driven information sources. Nonetheless, a subset of the panelists voiced

concerns regarding the proliferation of misinformation stemming from the over-dependence on social media for news consumption, as well as the political biases of media professionals.

Despite differing ideological perspectives, individuals in the province actively exchange information and engage in both online and offline discussions. Some panelists provided examples where these exchanges turned contentious due to political differences, with social media discussions occasionally weaponized against political opponents. Many panelists expressed concerns about the quality of public discourse and the formation of opinions that may not always

be grounded on factual information. A significant proportion of these discussions originate from social media, where unverified and provocative statements are shared on platforms like Facebook. Sharma highlighted the case of Bhim

Prasad Upadhayay, a former secretary, who frequently spreads fake or misleading content through his widely followed Facebook page, inciting unnecessary public debates.

INDICATOR 17

Individuals use quality information to inform their actions

The panelists underscored the importance of reliable information in shaping public opinion. However, there is growing concern regarding the abundance of misinformation circulating on social media platforms that pose challenges for individuals to form informed views and opinions. The panelists cited contentious debates, such as those related to the spread of COVID-19 and the Millennium Challenge Corporation development grant, as notable examples of misinformation amplified by social media.

The panelists further emphasized the pervasive influence of misleading information and personal biases on people's interactions with elected officials and their voting decisions. K.C. provided instances where fake news and

misinformation significantly swayed individuals' choices during the last local, provincial, and federal elections. While people typically seek evidence-based information for health and safety measures, the COVID-19 pandemic left many vulnerable to information disorders. The panelists recalled how people, spurred by misinformation spread both online and offline, hastily turned to alternative remedies like the giloy herb (gurjo in Nepali), turmeric, ginger, and garlic in an effort to combat the coronavirus. Conversely, Rana Magar called attention to people's reliance on factual information for their health and safety, such as wearing face masks and maintaining social distance.

INDICATOR 18

Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities

The panelists underscored the vital role of CSOs in advocating for policy changes based on fact-based, high-quality information. CSOs in Lumbini occasionally challenge authorities when they provide misleading information. While such organizations rarely engage in spreading misinformation, they have been less proactive in addressing the issue. Instead, they often rely on reputable news sources and reports to advocate for policy changes and corporate reform.

Nevertheless, some panelists pointed out the presence of political alignments and ideological biases among civil society members in Lumbini. Khanal cited instances of certain non-registered CSOs often disseminating misleading information. Additionally, the distinction between CSOs and the media can become blurred, as many journalists are active in CSO activities. Furthermore, nonprofessional content producers, especially on social media platforms, often prioritize virality over engaging with stakeholders, including CSOs, when covering important issues. While civic participation in critical decisions

has increased in recent times, it remains relatively low at the provincial level.

INDICATOR 19

Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions

During the panel discussion, the complex dynamics between the government, CSOs, and the media in Lumbini province were deliberated. While collaborations do take place between the government and CSOs, there is a noticeable absence of a consistent mechanism for such engagement. Chaudhary remarked that CSOs and other stakeholders often engage in policy discussions driven by mutual interests.

The government employs various channels for information dissemination, including press conferences, press releases, and social media, but the efficacy of such methods was questioned by some panelists. Aryal argued that they often lacked in-depth interactions through critical question and answer sessions. Although government actors typically rely on sources and evidence, there are cases where information may be misinterpreted for personal or professional gain.

Political discussions frequently lack factual grounding, with political leaders, opinion makers, and social media influencers spreading distorted facts or misinformation. The role of fact-checkers

is pivotal in debunking misinformation, yet the panelists expressed concern over the absence of dedicated fact-checking organizations in Lumbini.

INDICATOR 20

Information supports good governance and democratic norms

Government responses to corruption cases are often selective, influenced by officials' ranks and power dynamics. In this backdrop, quality information has been proven effective in deterring or mitigating corruption, instilling a sense of accountability in wrongdoers, and holding authorities responsible. K.C. recounted a case of misappropriation during vehicle procurement for the Lumbini Provincial Assembly, prompting investigations by the Provincial Assembly's Public Accounts Committee and the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority.

Exposing human rights violations through the media exerts pressure on the government to take action and prevent such abuses. Rana Magar shared her experience of how quality information positively altered public perception after a local newspaper reported her advocacy efforts for LGBTIQ+ rights. When it comes to elections, while quality information contributes to free and fair ballots, the panelists noted that various factors like proximity, ideology, and employment opportunities may influence voting decisions.

“Government responses to corruption cases are often selective, influenced by officials’ ranks and power dynamics. Exposing human rights violations through the media exerts pressure on the government to take action and prevent such abuses.”



Madhesh Province

Overall Provincial Score: 22

MADHESH

Overall Score

22

out of 40



List of Panel Participants

Mandal, Aarti - Reporter, Mithilanchal FM, Janakpur
Ansari, Akwar - Field officer, Municipal Association Nepal (MuAN), Madhesh and Koshi province
Thakur, Binita - Lecturer, Ramsworup Ramsagar Multiple Campus, Janakpur
Mahara, Binod - Team leader, Safe Nepal, Dhanusha
Jha, Chandani - Reporter, Times Television, Janakpur, Dhanusha
Karki, Dipika - Secretary, Women Human Rights Defender, Janakpur
Karna, Rajesh Kumar - Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists, Madhesh Province
Thapa, Rajiv - Marketing representative, Nayapatrika Daily Newspaper, Siraha
Singh, Rupesh Kumar - Managing director, Colors FM, Janakpur
Yadav, Shyam Sundar - Chairperson, Madhesh Province Mass Communications Authority

List of Moderators and Editors

Pokharel, Umesh - VIBE lead researcher and author, Kathmandu
Pandey, Lekhanath - Researcher, author, assistant professor, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
Acharya, Bhanu Bhakta - Report editor, faculty of professor of journalism, communication, and media studies, University of Ottawa, Canada

INTRODUCTION



Madhesh, situated in the southeastern part of Nepal, is the country's second most populous province, with over six million people. Its male and female populations are nearly equal, each comprising approximately 50% of the total.¹²² The people of Madhesh speak 89 languages as their mother tongue. Maithili is the most widely spoken, followed

by Bhojpuri. Bajjika ranks third, with Nepali coming in fourth. Urdu, Tharu, and Tamang occupy the fifth, sixth, and seventh positions, respectively.¹²³ Multilingualism is, therefore, common in the region.

The province consists of eight districts, with Janakpur serving as its capital.

122 National Statistics Office. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021*. Provincial Report (Madhesh Province). https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/province/Madhesh_Province_census_report.pdf

123 Bhramar, R. K. (2021, March 4). प्रदेश २ मा भाषाको बहस [The language debate in Province 2]. *Ekantipur*. <https://ekantipur.com/opinion/2021/03/04/161486077996656119.html>

In terms of literacy, Madhesh has an overall literacy rate of only 63%, well below the national average of 76%. Of particular concern are gender disparities in literacy—the male literacy rate is 72%, much higher than that for females (54%).¹²⁴

Despite these challenges, the province has a substantial media presence, with 734 newspapers¹²⁵, 116 radio stations, 12 television channels, and 159 registered online news portals.¹²⁶ Furthermore, the Press Council Nepal's report shows that Madhesh ranks second in terms of newspaper registration (15%) following Bagmati (55%).¹²⁷ However, the representation of women in journalism remains low, with only 107 out of 799 journalists being female, according to the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ).¹²⁸

Madhesh scored an average of 22 out of 40 in the Vibrant Information Barometer

(VIBE), indicating a 'Somewhat Vibrant' information ecosystem. Principle 1, which evaluates information quality, received a score of 21, slightly below the provincial average. This suggests that media outlets in Madhesh generally provide high-quality information with a focus on factual content and editorial independence. Professional content producers occasionally inadvertently spread misinformation due to limited scrutiny, whereas most incidents of misinformation and hate speech involve nonprofessionals. Despite access to diverse information, some individuals struggle to differentiate between misinformation and facts. Efforts to promote inclusivity in media, such as the use of local languages and coverage of minority issues, are progressing, but a gender gap persists in content production. Similarly, Principle 2, which evaluates the plurality of channels, scored highest with 26 points, indicating a 'Somewhat

124 National Statistics Office. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021*, Provincial Report (Madhesh Province). https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/province/Madhesh_Province_census_report.pdf

125 Press Council Nepal. (2023). *४८ औं वार्षिक प्रतिवेदन* [48th Annual Report] <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/np/2023/09/25/7939/>

126 Center for Media Research Nepal. (2022). *Pradeshma Media*. https://research.butmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MediaInProvince_2022-1.pdf

127 Press Council Nepal. (2023). *४८ औं वार्षिक प्रतिवेदन* [48th Annual Report] <https://www.presscouncilnepal.gov.np/np/2023/09/25/7939/>

128 Federation of Nepali Journalists. (n.d.). *Numbers of members*. <https://www.fnjnepal.org/np/page/members-data>

Vibrant’ scenario. This demonstrates that while people in Madhesh have the right to access and share information, there are limitations to exercising this right. Although most individuals can access information, rural and marginalized groups face barriers due to financial constraints and lower prioritization of media. Government-established communication methods lack two-way engagement, despite the presence of various independent channels for information dissemination.

However, these channels may be subject to some influence from the government, owners, and the corporate sector. Principle 3, which focuses on information consumption and engagement, registered the lowest score at 19, signifying ‘Less Vibrancy’. This suggests that while legal provisions for data privacy exist in Nepal, including Madhesh, there is a lack of a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy. Similarly, there is a notable deficiency in digital security knowledge among journalists and stakeholders, with limited understanding of digital security, media literacy, and civic education among the wider population. Moreover, the government’s focus on media literacy

is inadequate. Freedom of expression and access to information are generally exercised without major consequences, although there are cases of limitations as well. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of comprehensive audience research by media outlets. Rural issues are addressed by community media, but it faces limitations in reaching broader rural areas.

The final principle, Principle 4, which focuses on transformative action, achieved a score of 22, categorizing it as ‘Somewhat Vibrant’. This means that mainstream nonpartisan news sources are easily accessible, and aim to cover diverse ideological perspectives. Even so, barriers such as language issues impede effective information uptake. Individuals exhibit a relatively low reliance on high-quality information for decision-making, but civil society and the government effectively utilize quality information despite limitations, integrating it into decision-making, policy formulation, and advocacy efforts, all of which are contingent on available resources. The panelists underscored the vital role of the media in exposing corruption and human rights violations, stressing that responses hinge on the integrity of the leadership.

PRINCIPLE 1 Information Quality

Score
21
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Strong

Under Principle 1, Indicator 3, which assesses whether the norm for information is harmless and whether malinformation and hate speech are minimal, achieved the highest score of 24. Conversely, Indicator 5, which evaluates whether content production is sufficiently resourced, received the lowest score of 16. Similarly, Indicator 4, which examines the inclusivity and diversity of the content body, fell below the principle average with a score of 20. On the other hand, indicators 1 and 2, which assess the availability of quality information on various topics and the prevalence of fact-based information, both scored slightly higher than the principle average, achieving 22 and 23 respectively.

Madhesh offers access to reliable information through various media outlets, with the majority maintaining editorial independence and prioritizing factual reporting. While rare, occasional cases of

unintentional misinformation by professional content producers occur due to insufficient editorial scrutiny. In contrast, nonprofessional content producers are more prone to spreading misinformation.

Instances of hate speech are minimal and generally unintentional, although nonprofessional content creators may be more likely to engage in such behavior. While most individuals have the rights and means to access diverse information, some exceptions exist. Not everyone possesses the ability to discern and dismiss misinformation, despite notable advancements in this area over time.

Efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within the media sector are evident through the use of local languages and coverage of issues relevant to ethnic and religious minorities. However, there remains a significant gender gap in media content

production, as highlighted by panel members. Areas requiring serious attention include resource allocation for content production, digital media

literacy, and the public's utilization of the Right to Information Act. These aspects are currently less vibrant and need focused efforts for improvement.

INDICATOR 1

There is quality information on a variety of topics available

Media outlets in Madhesh face infrastructure limitations, with many operating in settings that lack essential equipment. Some television stations resort to using YouTube for broadcasting, which restricts their capacity to produce diverse and high-quality content. According to Rupesh Kumar Singh, managing director of Colors FM, there are instances where newspapers have copied content from other local and national publications. Singh also added that some radio stations have been operating from modest two-room offices.

The panelists highlighted that training opportunities for content producers are insufficient and do not offer the depth required for ethical and evidence-based reporting. They also remarked on the absence of a journalism university in the region and the lack of private sector institutes providing journalism training.

Consequently, many reporters rely on a learning-by-doing approach to develop skills. Although occasional training and fellowships by different nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) do take place, they are irregular, limited in scope, and less effective. Additionally, some journalists receive training from national-level establishments such as the [Nepal Press Institute](#) and universities based in Kathmandu, as mentioned by the panelists.

Ethical standards and accountability in content production vary, with advertisers, political parties, and other groups sometimes exerting undue influence over editorial decisions. Some media organizations prioritize investor interests, thereby compromising journalistic standards and values. The Press Council Nepal, responsible for media monitoring in the country, has been criticized for its leniency, according to the panelists. Singh emphasized that although there may be informal peer pressure within the professional community to uphold

journalistic standards, formal intervention from regulatory bodies such as the Press Council Nepal and the Department of Information remains limited. This lax oversight is especially evident in the operation of unregistered television channels in Madhesh province, he added.

Furthermore, the media in the province often focuses more on political news, sometimes overlooking important topics like human rights, disasters, and climate change. The specialized reporting that do exist are not very strong. Dipika Karki, secretary of the Women Human Rights Defenders, noted that national events receive more coverage than local or regional ones. In addition, despite journalists' efforts to hold government actors accountable¹²⁹ for their actions, there are cases where the media has faced backlash for their critical reporting.

INDICATOR 2

The norm for information is that content is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.

In Madhesh, consistency in providing fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information differs, as pointed out by the panelists. While there are instances

of accurate reporting, misinformation is widespread and often motivated by a desire for online engagement. Generally, professional content creators uphold integrity and refrain from intentionally spreading false information. However, capacity constraints, such as limited copyediting resources, sometimes result in unintentional misinformation. Journalists covering complex topics may encounter challenges in verifying content, which can inadvertently contribute to misinformation. The most significant role in disseminating misinformation is played by nonprofessional content producers, particularly on social media.

The Madhesh government strives to uphold integrity in its information-sharing practices, emphasizing accuracy and transparency. Rajesh Karna, chairperson of Madhesh's FNJ chapter, acknowledged that the government has corrected errors on a few occasions. However, the province faces a shortage of fact-checking resources, both online and offline, leaving the public more susceptible to misinformation. Media outlets and digital platforms have limited systems in place to moderate content and address misinformation. Chadani Jha, a

129 Press Trust of India. (2020, July 13). Fake, abusive reports by Indian media will hurt ties: Nepal tells India after banning channels. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/nepal-indian-media-broadcast-anti-nepal-content-channels-1699865-2020-07-12>

reporter for [Times Television](#) in Janakpur, criticized the practice of media platforms deleting unfavorable comments from their social media pages.

INDICATOR 3

The norm for information is that content is not intended to be harmful.

Malinformation and hate speech are minimal. Most panelists agreed that the Madhesh government and its representatives are not major contributors to harmful content. Instead, Jha suggested that foreign news channels sometimes portray Nepal inaccurately, especially regarding issues like Nepal-China relations¹³⁰ and border disputes with India. The panelists recalled an incident in 2020 when Nepal sent a diplomatic note to India, alleging that certain Indian media outlets spread fake and insensitive news about Nepal and its leadership, offending the sentiments of the Nepali people.¹³¹ Governmental entities in the province consistently prioritize accuracy and truthfulness. The panelists noted a number

of instances where prominent politicians faced defeat due to their failure to deliver on promises made to the electorate. Rajeev Thapa, a marketing representative at Naya Patrika Daily newspaper, pointed out that while independent research has yet to establish a direct correlation between the two, he contends that the electoral losses of leading political figures like [Upendra Yadav](#) are likely connected to their unfulfilled commitments.

Professional content producers in the province usually maintain factual accuracy, and although sporadic instances of misinformation do take place, they rarely spread content that incites hatred, noted Karna. However, he also referenced biased reporting during the 2007 Madhesh revolution.¹³² Nonetheless, such occurrences are uncommon. Malinformation and hate speech in Madhesh appear to originate primarily from political motives rather than coordinated efforts by nongovernmental entities, such as extremist groups.

130 Pandey, S. (2020, June 2). Watching Indian primetime TV news from Kathmandu. *Newslaundry*. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/06/02/watching-indian-primetime-tv-news-from-kathmandu>

131 Giri, A. (2020, July 13). Sending diplomatic note to complain about Indian private media an immature and wrong approach, experts say. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/2/2020/07/13/sending-diplomatic-note-to-complain-about-indian-private-media-an-immature-and-wrong-approach-experts-say>

132 Chamlagai, A. (2020). Nepal: Tarai/Madhesh movements and political elites. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 56(4), 949-963. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620954881>

INDICATOR 4

The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse

Madhesh has an array of languages, with Maithili being the most prevalent at 45%, followed by Bhojpuri at 18%, and Bajjika at 14%. Ethnically, the province comprises 116 distinct groups, with Yadav being the largest at 14%, followed by Muslim at 11%, Tharu and Teli each at five percent, and Koiri/Kushwaha at four percent. Hinduism is the predominant religion with 82% adherents, followed by Islam at nine percent, Buddhism at four percent, Kirat at three percent, and Christianity at one percent.¹³³

The panelists highlighted a shortage in information in newspapers that meets the linguistic and format preferences of the population. While local radio stations have made efforts to provide content in various languages—including Maithili, Bhojpuri, Nepali, Urdu, and Hindi—the exposure of citizens to a diverse range of ideologies remains limited. According to Binita Thakur, a lecturer at Ramsworup Ramsagar Multiple Campus, this

exposure is limited to only around 20% of the population. She attributes this shortfall to factors such as the unfamiliarity of the language and the preference for entertainment-related content.

Despite a growing trend of women joining the field of journalism, their representation remains insufficient, as they constitute only 107 out of the 799 journalists affiliated with the FNJ.¹³⁴ The participation of women as nonprofessional content producers is similarly low. Additionally, while media content typically reflects inclusivity across diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, there are instances where the festivals of minorities receive less attention.

INDICATOR 5

Content production is sufficiently resourced

The news media in Madhesh is facing a severe financial crisis, worsened by a sharp decrease in advertising revenue, especially due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result,

133 Nepal Outlook. (n.d.). *Madhesh province: A data overview*. <https://nepaloutlook.com/province-2/>

134 Federation of Nepali Journalists. (n.d.). *Numbers of members*. <https://www.fnjnepal.org/np/page/members-data>

journalists often receive low salaries, and are compelled to seek alternative sources of income, as pointed out by Shyam Sundar Yadav, chairperson of Madhesh Province's Mass Communications Authority. Aarati Mandal, a reporter at [Mithilanchal FM](#) in Janakpur, shared that her relatives have suggested she consider opening a beauty parlor instead of pursuing a career in media.

There are limited funding sources available for content production in the media sector. Media outlets usually rely on advertising and government support through public welfare advertisements, tender notices, and announcements. However, the transparency of government advertising is sometimes questioned—

the panelists noted a tendency for government advertisements to favor news outlets that align with specific political lines or have favorable relations with government offices. Additionally, although government offices in Madhesh have a policy against granting advertising contracts to national and international platforms,¹³⁵ local advertising revenue, particularly from the private sector, often benefits national or international companies, such as social media advertising platforms.¹³⁶ Furthermore, radio stations in the province used to receive Indian advertisements, but this practice was discontinued following the Nepal government's decision to prohibit Nepali media from doing so.¹³⁷

PRINCIPLE 2 Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

Score
26
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Strong

Principle 2 obtained the highest average score of 26 among the five principles of VIBE. Within Principle

2, Indicator 8, which assesses the presence of appropriate channels for government information, achieved the

135 Sah, A.K. (2023, June 24). *मधेश प्रदेश सरकारद्वारा आव ०८०/८१ का लागि ४४ अर्ब ११ करोड ४६ लाख ३२ हजारको बजेट प्रस्तुत* [A budget of 44 billion 11 million 46 lakh 32 thousand for the year 080/81 has been presented by the government of Madhesh province]. Shirish News. <https://shirishnews.com/2023/06/16/41204/>

136 Republica. (2018, August 21). Regulate social media advertising to boost revenue, government told. *Republica*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/regulate-social-media-advertising-to-boost-revenue-government-told/>

137 Center for Media Research Nepal. (2022). *Pradeshma media*. https://research.butmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MediaInProvince_2022-1.pdf

highest score of 28, while Indicator 10, focusing on the independence of information channels, received the lowest score of 23. Indicator 6, which evaluates peoples' right to create, share, and consume information, scored 25, while indicators 7 and 9, which gauge peoples' access to information channels and the diversity of information flow channels, both scored 27.

Individuals in Madhesh have the right to create, share, and access information, though certain limitations exist. While most people can access various information sources, rural

and marginalized communities face challenges due to financial constraints and low priority given to media consumption. Although the government has established mechanisms for information dissemination, panelists noted a lack of engagement in two-way communication. Information is spread to the public through various channels, many of which maintain editorial independence. However, there may be some influence from the government, owners, and corporate sector. There is, therefore, a need to enhance the diversity and independence of these information channels.

INDICATOR 6

People have the right to create, share, and consume information

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal guarantees robust protections for freedom of speech and press freedom. It ensures “full freedom of the press” in its preamble, encompassing the rights to opinion and expression (Article 17[2a]), press and publication (Article 19), and information (Article 27).¹³⁸ While legal

safeguards are in place, challenges persist in their effective implementation. During the study period (2022), the panelists noted that, to their knowledge, the general public did not utilize their right to information (RTI). Further, they criticized the Nepal government's misuse of laws like the [Electronic Transaction Act](#) to [arrest](#) journalists for their reports, and argued this trend suppresses journalism and civic spaces. The panelists also denounced attacks on journalists by

¹³⁸ Constitution of Nepal-2015. (2015). <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

various groups: the police, political leaders, local government representatives, sand miners, perpetrators of domestic violence, and other individuals.¹³⁹

The panelists observed that there is no systematic government pressure on information and communications technology providers to censor media content. Although there have been incidents of harassment against journalists, as previously mentioned, most journalists in Madhesh continue to work without fear of imprisonment, fines, or physical harm. Moreover, there are no other forms of retaliation for covering controversial or sensitive issues. The panelists also noted that measures to

safeguard the confidentiality of journalistic sources are consistently applied in the province.

INDICATOR 7

People have adequate access to channels of information

Madhesh has 734 newspapers, 116 radio stations, 12 television channels, and 159 online news portals registered, although the actual number of operational media outlets may be lower.¹⁴⁰ The widespread availability of Internet services, made easier by the prevalence of mobile phones with data access, is notable.¹⁴¹ Many families even in rural regions, with members [working](#) in India and other countries, can afford mobile phones. However, there is still a noticeable digital divide between urban centers and rural areas. Akwar Ansari, a field officer at the Municipal Association of Nepal in Madhesh and Koshi provinces, remarked that individuals in rural areas often do not engage with media content due to reasons such as lack of interest, language barriers, and illiteracy. Instead, they rely on word-



139 Freedom Forum. (n.d.). *Madhesh province: List of issues*. <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-province/2>

140 Center for Media Research Nepal. (2022). *Pradeshma media*. https://research.butmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MediaInProvince_2022-1.pdf

141 The Himalayan Times. (2020, February 6). NT rolls out 4G in all 77 districts. *The Himalayan Times*. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/nt-rolls-out-4g-in-all-77-districts>

of-mouth for information. Certain media formats are also not easily accessible for individuals with disabilities.

While social norms are not identified as a major barrier to access to information channels, financial factors and individual interests do play a significant role in this regard. Most households have mobiles, especially those using the Android platform, which ensure access to information during disruptions. However, economic accessibility to information channels, particularly in rural areas, remains a concern. Individuals in these places may encounter financial barriers in affording newspapers, mobile phones, television sets, and Internet data.

INDICATOR 8

There are appropriate channels for government information

While the 2015 Constitution guarantees the [right to information](#) as a fundamental right, there are discussions about whether the RTI framework actually meets global standards. Several panelists expressed concerns about the implementation of RTI. Government officials in Madhesh

are particularly reluctant to implement the RTI Act compared to the national level. This fact is highlighted in a report by the Freedom Forum, which states that RTI implementation is weakest in this province.¹⁴²

Government spokespersons and information officers are responsible for sharing government information, primarily through press conferences and releases. However, there are [instances](#) where officials refuse to provide information or only offer partial details, especially regarding sensitive issues or critical decisions.

Singh pointed out the difficulties people encounter when trying to obtain information from local governments or agencies, citing potential delays and barriers. There have been cases where government officials ridicule those who seek information, which discourages people from making requests. The panelists also raised concerns about limited public awareness, particularly among Dalit and marginalized communities, regarding accessing government information from local and provincial authorities.

142 Freedom Forum. (2018, April 11). *People's representatives still reluctant to implement RTI Act: Study shows*. Freedom Forum Nepal. <https://freedomforum.org.np/peoples-representatives-still-reluctant-to-implement-rti-actstudy-shows/>

INDICATOR 9

There are diverse channels for information flow

Madhesh has a diverse media landscape but lacks a specific law regulating transparency in media ownership. While federal media laws are applicable, certain municipalities have formulated local policies to regulate radio stations.¹⁴³ Despite the National Mass Communication Policy of 2016¹⁴⁴ briefly mentioning foreign investment, it fails to address ownership transparency.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the enforcement of existing media-related laws is inconsistent.

There are indications suggesting potential monopolization or control of specific media distribution channels by politically influential entities, which could limit diversity. In terms of setting up media outlets in the province, individuals meeting specific criteria can do so without hindrance. Nevertheless, the process may be expedited for some while others may

experience delays. Ansari highlighted that having influence and political connections facilitates the acquisition of radio frequencies and television licenses.

Madhesh has a notable absence of public service media. During discussions, some panelists initially confused state-owned media outlets like Radio Nepal, Nepal Television, publications from Gorkhapatra Corporation and Rastriya Samachar Samiti (National News Agency) with public service media. Upon consulting the UNESCO definition of Public Service Broadcasting¹⁴⁶—broadcasting created, financed, and controlled by the public for the public—they evaluated indicators related to public service media as ‘Not Applicable’. This distinction highlights media that is independent of commercial interests and state ownership, free from political interference, and unaffected by commercial pressures.

With regards to Internet service providers in Madhesh, although they generally

143 Nepal: Media Policy Hub. (2021). *लुम्बिनी प्रदेश सञ्चार माध्यमसम्बन्धी व्यवस्था गर्न बनेको विधेयकको समीक्षा र सुझावहरू*. [Review and recommendations on the bill addressing media in Lumbini Province] <https://mediapolicy.org.np/2021/06/media-policy-reviews-recommendations/3036/>

144 The Office of the Prime Minister & Council of Ministers. 2016. *National Mass Communication Policy-2016*. Kathmandu. <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/npolicy/Communication/गणद्वयि%20आमसंचार%20नीति%20२०७३.pdf>

145 Constitution of Nepal, 2015. <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

146 Banerjee, I., & Seneviratne, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Public service broadcasting: A best practices sourcebook*. UNESCO <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141584>



serve the public impartially, there may be instances where requests from individuals

with legal or political sway are given priority.

INDICATOR 10

Information channels are independent

Instances of influence from owners and advertisers on editorial content have been observed in Madhesh's media outlets. Karna stated that various funding sources, including government grants and advertising, hold the potential to sway editorial decisions. Furthermore, media houses often blur the line between editorial and sponsored content, thus potentially compromising the integrity

of journalistic values. The panelists unanimously concurred that there is an absence of public service media outlets in the province. They also noted that appointments to regulatory bodies are impacted by political affiliations. As a result, self-regulatory mechanisms may lack neutrality, posing a risk to the independence of information channels.

PRINCIPLE 3 Information Consumption and Engagement

Score
19
out of 40

Somewhat Vibrant

Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong

Principle 3 obtained the lowest average score (19) among the five principles of VIBE. Within this principle, Indicator 11, which assesses the safety of Internet usage through privacy protections and security tools, achieved the highest score of 23. Conversely, Indicator 12, focusing on the availability of necessary skills and tools for media literacy, received the lowest score of 12. Indicators 14 and 15, evaluating engagement with audience needs and community media's provision of relevant information for community engagement, respectively, both obtained a score of 19. Additionally, Indicator 13, which assesses productive engagement with available information, received a score of 20.

Nepal has established legal safeguards for data privacy, yet it lacks a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy. This situation is clearly also applicable

to Madhesh, which has a noticeable deficiency in digital security knowledge among journalists and stakeholders, and the broader population has a limited understanding of digital security, media literacy, and civic education. The panelists highlighted the provincial government's insufficient focus on media literacy, although some local governments have incorporated journalism training into their annual plans. Generally, freedom of expression and access to information are exercised without major consequences, including through social media engagement. Despite this, there is a lack of comprehensive research on audience needs, expectations, and size conducted by media outlets. The panelists also noted that while community media outlets are relatively better at addressing rural issues, their reach is limited to the central areas of rural regions.

INDICATOR 11

People can safely use the Internet due to adequate privacy protections and security tools.

Article 28 of the 2015 Constitution guarantees the right to privacy and protection of personal information. This constitutional assurance is further reinforced by the Individual Privacy Act, 2018, and Regulations, 2020, alongside provisions in the National Penal Code, 2017, and the recently endorsed National Cyber Security Policy 2023. Despite these legal frameworks, Madhesh experiences occasional disruptions to personal freedom due to cybercrimes, such as online harassment and identity theft. These instances highlight the difficulty of enforcing legal safeguards without accidentally infringing on personal liberties. Furthermore, the province grapples with a lack of tailored digital security training for journalists and content creators, potentially leaving them vulnerable to the risks associated with using the Internet. The panelists also called attention to the shortage of digital tools to combat cyber threats. They stated that only 10% to 15% of total social media users possess awareness of digital algorithms and how they are used to target people online.

INDICATOR 12

People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate

The panelists commended the government on the inclusion of media and digital literacy topics in the secondary-level curriculum, covering key areas like media fundamentals, communication, entertainment, information technology, digital proficiency, and cyber-security. However, the Madhesh government's efforts to promote media literacy are limited and unevenly implemented—its few initiatives at the local level fail to reach all segments of society. Despite the efforts of certain NGOs, including FNJ branches, to address this issue, a clear gap persists in structured media and information literacy training. Given the province's [overall literacy rate of 63%](#) for individuals aged five years and above, the general population's use of fact-checking tools is limited. Therefore, the panelists underlined the difficulty faced by the general populace in distinguishing between high- and low-quality information due to inadequate media literacy skills.

INDICATOR 13

People engage productively with the information that is available to them

Journalists and civil society activists in the province firmly advocate for their rights to freedom of speech and access to information. On the other hand, there is a widespread sense of hesitation and fear among the general population to also assert these same rights, possibly due to a lack of awareness or past incidents of intimidation. Karna highlighted the problems journalists face when reporting critically about certain government officials, and suggested that it is even more challenging for common citizens to demand crucial information.

Although platforms for public debate exist, they tend to be dominated by specific caste communities, leading to a sense of exclusion for others. It is essential to maintain inclusivity in these forums. In Nepal, open digital communications face challenges of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech, which undermine information integrity and public discourse.

Unfortunately, the panelists noted that community members in the province often resort to personal attacks instead of reporting such instances to the appropriate government authority.

INDICATOR 14

Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs

The panelists concurred that Madhesh's struggling media industry lacks comprehensive research to effectively understand audience size, access, and preferences. Although occasional studies are conducted by NGOs and policy institutes, media and content producers rarely engage in such research endeavors. There is also a noticeable political bias in coverage, despite sporadic reporting on issues of public interest. Live interviews with local representatives aim to promote community engagement, yet biases related to caste, ethnicity, and gender may hinder a genuine understanding of audience needs.

Thapa pointed out the decline in the publications of letters to the editor, which were once considered valuable contributions. He noted that only a few content producers are receptive to criticism and willing to rectify mistakes. Furthermore, collaborative information sharing among journalistic media, content producers, civil society organizations (CSOs), and government institutions is not yet a standard practice. Jha observed that relationships between journalists,

civil society, and government actors are often driven by personal interest rather than consistent collaboration. Although feedback is acknowledged to some extent in the province, structured discussions between civil society and media regarding content and data are deemed necessary.

INDICATOR 15

Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Madhesh's Mass Communications Authority reports a total of 53 community radio stations across various districts: six in Saptari, eight in Siraha, nine in Mahottari, five in Dhanusha, five in Sarlahi, and eight in Rautahat.¹⁴⁷ These stations, broadcasting in languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu, and Nepali, have played significant roles in raising awareness on various social issues, including¹⁴⁸ harmful traditional practices, promoting gender equality, disaster risk reduction, local empowerment, and sharing inspirational stories. Community media outlets have also been instrumental

in shedding light on local issues such as the prevailing dowry system, thereby contributing to broader societal conversations. They serve as essential platforms for empowering marginalized groups and ensuring their perspectives are represented in public discourse.

But some panelists expressed concerns that, in terms of content production, community radio in the province is not distinct from its commercial counterpart. Many community radio stations are criticized for airing commercial advertisements and promoting the content of business houses.

Moreover, there are accusations of ignoring local involvement in planning and deviating from their original mandate.¹⁴⁹ Concerns also arise regarding content duplication and broadcasting material from outside the province. Yadav highlighted that not all registered community radio stations are operational.

On the positive end, community media outlets generally have low instances of

147 Kamat, R. K. (2023). Declining advertising revenue adversely impacts journalism in Madhes. *Media Year Book 2022/23*, 3(3). Press Council Nepal

148 Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal. (n.d.). *About Us*. <https://www.acorab.org.np/page/about-us>

149 Pandey, L. (2019). Implications of the corporate media politics in Nepal. *Neus Aus Der Forschung Research News*. <https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/de/newsletteriaaw/newsletter-4/pdf/iaawnewsletter-4-pandey.pdf>

false information dissemination, showing a commitment to factual reporting. Yet, despite being established by community members, the sustainability of these outlets is challenged by a lack of active community support. Encouragingly,

as a response to advocacy efforts by the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal and other radio activists, the Madhesh government has allocated a budget to bolster community radio stations.¹⁵⁰

PRINCIPLE 4 Transformative Action	
<div>Score</div> <div>21</div> <div>out of 40</div>	Somewhat Vibrant
	Strength of Evidence Rating: Somewhat Strong
<p>Principle 4 obtained an average score of 23. Indicator 17, pertaining to individuals using quality information for decision-making, and Indicator 20, focusing on the role of information in supporting good governance and democratic rights, both received a lower score of 22. Conversely, Indicator 16, relating to the facilitation of information sharing across ideological lines by producers and distribution channels, Indicator 18, concerning civil society’s use of quality information to improve communities, and Indicator 19, emphasizing government reliance on quality information for public policy decisions,</p>	<p>all received a higher score of 24.</p> <p>Mainstream nonpartisan news and information sources are readily available in the province. Most media outlets make an effort to present a wide range of information and opinions from diverse ideological perspectives. However, barriers exist on the part of the audience, such as language issues and other factors, which hamper the uptake of effective information. The panelists pointed out that the inclination to rely on high-quality information for decision-making is relatively low among individuals.</p>

150 प्रदेश सभाको बैठकमा २०८० असाढ १ गते शुक्रबार अर्थमन्त्री संजय कुमार यादवले प्रस्तुत गर्नुभएको आर्थिक वर्ष २०८०/८१ को बजेट, मधेश प्रदेश सरकार, अर्थ मन्त्रालय, जनकपुरधाम, २०८०, <https://mof.madhesh.gov.np/np>

On the other hand, CSOs and government entities are praised for their effective use of quality information, despite facing some limitations. These organizations are noted for integrating quality information into their decision-making processes, policy formulations, and advocacy efforts for policy reforms. It is important to note that the extent of their utilization depends on the

resources available to them, as emphasized by certain panelists.

Furthermore, the panelists provided several examples to call attention to the crucial role played by the media in exposing corruption and human rights violations. They stressed that the response to such revelations depends heavily on the integrity of the leadership.

INDICATOR 16

Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines

In Madhesh province, the existence of unbiased information sources faces obstacles due to the influence of politics, advertisers, and influential figures. Despite this, nonpartisan sources still succeed in reaching a broad audience, demonstrating an openness to different viewpoints, though many struggle to distinguish between factual reporting and biased news.

Informal settings like tea shops and social gatherings serve as focal points for political discourse. Despite being insightful, the panelists cautioned that

these conversations may not always rely on factual information. Additionally, the rapid spread of political content via digital platforms poses the risk of misinformation.

INDICATOR 17

Individuals use quality information to inform their actions

People's perspectives on political and social matters are greatly shaped by the information they receive. However, some panelists warned against trusting all information indiscriminately.

There have been instances where misinformation, especially regarding health-related decisions, has led to harmful consequences, such as relying on unproven remedies for COVID-19. On the

positive side, the panelists acknowledged the media's constructive impact in certain cases, particularly in influencing family planning practices within Muslim communities.

The relationship between Madhesh's citizens and elected officials is complex, and are determined by financial considerations, caste, and party affiliations. These factors also shape election results. Mandal highlighted that individuals with ample financial resources, belonging to privileged castes, and affiliated with favored parties are more likely to be trusted, even if they provide misleading information.

INDICATOR 18

Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities

The panelists noted that Madhesh's CSOs typically rely on truthful, accurate, and authentic information when crafting their mission, vision, plans, goals, and strategies, but some organizations tend to align themselves with political parties. Binod Mahara, team leader of Safe Nepal, a CSO registered in Dhanusha district, observed that numerous CSOs are divided along political lines, and frequently

disseminate biased content to further their own interests.

In a demonstration of their commitment to evidence-based advocacy, CSOs often rely on investigative reports to support their calls for policy changes and corporate reforms. Still, obtaining comprehensive investigative reports, particularly in areas like climate change, corruption, good governance, and gender-based violence, can be difficult.

Interactions between media outlets and civil society in crucial social issues do not occur frequently or extensively. Some panelists viewed this relationship as mainly driven by shared interests. Similarly, engagements between nonprofessional information producers and civil society do not occur as regularly or comprehensively as necessary. Although some instances of civic involvement in major government decisions are evident in the province, there is room for further improvement.

“The panelists noted that Madhesh's CSOs typically rely on truthful, accurate, and authentic information when crafting their mission, vision, plans, goals, and strategies, but some organizations tend to align themselves with political parties.”

INDICATOR 19

Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions

During the discussion, the panelists explored the complex relationships between the government, CSOs, and the media. The government engages actively with civil society and the media through platforms like press conferences, which enable stakeholders to seek clarifications, express concerns, and participate in policy dialogues. While political discussions may involve both evidence-based arguments and instances of hearsay and misinformation, Thapa observed that discussions on diplomatic matters often stress on the use of evidence.

Recognizing misinformation as a potential challenge, there is a collective effort to mitigate its impact on political discussions. Government officials consistently turn to reliable news sources and information provided by civil society to explain their decisions, showcasing a collaborative approach to governance.

Overall, Madhesh government officials base their explanations on facts and evidence. Although occasional misinformation may arise, there is a collective effort to maintain transparency and accuracy in communication.

INDICATOR 20

Information supports good governance and democratic norms

As per the panelists, the media in Madhesh province does contribute to uncovering irregularities and corruption while scrutinizing governance, with certain limitations. Factual reporting has been effective in preventing or mitigating corruption, instilling fear in wrongdoers, and holding authorities accountable. They pointed out that media coverage of irregularities in the ‘Beti Bachau-Beti Padhau’¹⁵¹ campaign—an insurance scheme promoting girl education—resulted in the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) filing a case at the Special Court against several officials, including the then-province secretary, Yam Prasad

151 Rai, S. (2019, January 16). State 2 kicks off ‘Beti Bachau-Beti Padhau’ campaign. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/01/16/state-2-kicks-off-beti-bachau-beti-padhau-campaign>

Bhusal.¹⁵² However, some panelists noted that the government's response to media coverage of corruption cases tends to be selective and influenced by factors like the ranks of officials, power dynamics, civil society interest, and media follow-up.

The government's reaction to reports about human rights violations in Madhesh province varies, as highlighted by the panelists. While there are instances where appropriate action is taken, there are also situations where the response is delayed or inadequate. For example, despite reports of an elected representative in Siraha district being involved in violence against citizens,¹⁵³ the police hesitated to file a case, and no prosecution took place.¹⁵⁴ Some panelists blamed political factors, bureaucracy, and lack of resources for these instances, and concurred that consistent reporting can significantly reduce human rights violations.

In the past, reports of civil rights violations, whether through the media or other channels, have spurred the public to pressure the Madhesh government to address and rectify such issues. Thapa provided an example of such pressure on the local government following news in July 2023 about middlemen compromising the quality of service in distributing citizenship certificates. This resulted in increased vigilance by a CIAA team.¹⁵⁵ But the intensity and effectiveness of such pressure may vary from one district to another. While access to quality information does contribute to promoting free and fair elections at both local and national levels to some extent, voting decisions are influenced by various factors, including proximity, ideology, promises of employment, financial influences, and intimidation during the election period.

152 Singh, S. (2019, November 14). Beti Bachau-Beti Padhau campaign fails to take off this year in the absence of employees. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-2/2019/11/14/beti-bachau-beti-padhau-campaign-fails-to-take-off-this-year-in-the-absenceof-employees>

153 ACLED, COCAP, & CSC. (2022, May 5). *Monitoring disorder in Nepal: A joint ACLED, COCAP, and CSC Report*. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2022/05/05/monitoring-political-disorder-in-nepal/>

154 Yadav, M. (2020, September 15). *सार्वजनिक पोखरीमा माछा मार्दा जनप्रतिनिधिबाट कुटपिट*. *Nagarik News*. [Local leader attacked while fishing in public pond]. <https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/social-affairs/336191-1600223245.html>

155 The Rising Nepal. (2023, July 9). Brokers meddle in citizenship distribution in Parsa. *The Rising Nepal*. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/29168>



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