

# Potentials for rural mass media development in Nepal

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**Potentials For Rural Mass Media Development In Nepal**

**By**

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POTENTIALS FOR RURAL MASS MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

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N E P A L

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Experience has taught development planners and implementing agencies in developing countries that for any plan or programme to succeed in a sustainable manner active cooperation of the people to whom the programme is meant is a must. Unless we are able to communicate to them the rationale of such programmes in a form and language which they understand without difficulty, they are not to blame if they are callous or indifferent to such endeavours. At a time when so much of lip service is being paid to involve people in the development process of the country, the need for an effective medium to reach the rural masses with messages of relevance to them with a view to enlisting their cooperation need not be over emphasised.

In Nepal, with over ninety percent of her people living in villages, when one talks of mass media even from a national perspective, it would seem essentially to mean rural mass media. But, in reality, by and large mass media in Nepal are so far urban-based.

The rural folks are largely untouched by the print medium. Television is a very recent phenomenon serving the Capital and some parts of southern Nepal. The sole broadcasting organisation in the country, Radio Nepal, transmitting from Kathmandu has technically a nationwide reach but is inhibited in its effectiveness due to the low rate of ownership of receiving sets in rural areas.

Although there is a realisation of the need to develop mass media in such a way that not only do they reach the rural masses but also their contents cater to the rural interest, a visibly conscious effort on the part of the government or the private sector for that matter in this direction is not evident. Let me add, however, that this has to be viewed in the context of a nation with a multiplicity of financial and infrastructural constraints coupled with a situation where obviously more crucial sectors having immediate bearing on the basic needs of the people limit the government's leverage in the use of its resources and in the determination of priorities.

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In the light of the above, to talk of rural media in an exclusive manner, as is expected here, would, I am afraid, be unrealistic in the present context of Nepal. If I may, I would therefore like to deal with the various mass media that are in existence in the country and try to show their relevance in so far as rural communication is concerned.

The history of the print media in Nepal is yet to celebrate its centenary. To be precise, it was only in the latter half of the present century that when the country underwent a political change that the institution of private press came into being. But recent years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of publications of different hues and shades. Between 1982, when the press registration regulations were liberalised and now, there has been a four-fold increase in the number of newspapers in the country. The present figure stands at 450 of which as many as 270 are based in Kathmandu alone and the rest are published from other towns in various parts of the country.

This avalanche of new publications has however far from drowned the people. Although concentrated in Kathmandu, most of the private papers are irregular and command very limited readership. Even the newspapers in financially viable position on account of their relatively better circulation figure barely penetrate beyond the periphery of the town areas.

This is hardly surprising when considered that even a public sector newspaper like the Gorkhapatra, the largest and the oldest daily of the country, with a circulation of 30,000 has a long way to go before it finds way to rural readership. The only institutionalised mechanism through which Gorkhapatra percolates to the villages is through an arrangement introduced some years ago by the government to supply each of the 4,000-odd village Panchayats or Councils with a copy of the daily on a regular basis. The recipients of such newspapers are the village leaders, officials and schools teachers. The general mass is marginally benefited from them.



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Nepal's literacy rate has more than doubled in the past one decade and a half. Admittedly, a large percentage of the people falling in the 35 percent literate bracket in a total population of nearly 18 million form part of the urban or semi-urban population of one and a half million. But however small the rate of literacy in the rural areas, there exist a sizable potential readers of newspapers, provided they have an easy access to them.

It is therefore not the absence of readership or the lack of realisation of the need for the development of rural media that is wanting with regard to the print medium making its way to the villages. The viability of such a proposition is in fact restricted by the remoteness of the areas, the ruggedness of the topography, the inaccessibility due to inadequate transport network and lack of inputs like electricity, assured supply of newsprint, and qualified and dependable man-power. The hurdles are more severe in the hills with scattered habitations than in the plains known as the Terai. Furthermore, the purchasing power of the rural people, whether in the hills or the plains, is so low that for most it will be a luxury to spend on a newspaper. While on the one hand because of the added cost of transportation of inputs from the city, the unit production cost of a newspaper becomes higher especially in the hilly region, on the other, the limited readership that can afford to buy a newspaper provides little assurance to investors to register even a break-even. In short, to invest in the print media for rural masses is hardly attractive to entrepreneurs in the existing situation.

A recent development in rural media development has been the introduction of a wall newspaper as a pilot project. In this connection, I would like to quote from the Annual Report of the Nepal Press Institute for the year 1987-88. "Over a year ago Nepal's first wall newspaper began to be seen on the walls of village buildings. Twelve issues have subsequently been printed and distributed to Nepalese villages.

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As a joint effort of the Agriculture Development Bank, UNICEF and Nepal Press Institute the wall newspaper has become increasingly popular among rural literates. Containing only development information useful to the rural population the wall newspaper is printed every month. What has been often observed about the newspaper is its large, bold type-faces, attractive layout and abundance of pictures and graphic designs including occasional comic strips. Designed and produced with lot of care, the newspaper is gathering popularity in many areas of the country.

The successful result of the first year of publication has led all three cooperating agencies to continue the publication of the wall newspaper in future. Therefore, the thirteenth and fourteenth issues of the paper will soon roll out of the press. Presently, four to five thousand copies are printed and distributed through the Small Farmer Development Project to all the districts of the Kingdom.

An evaluation of the first year's performance will be made to decide what course the wall newspaper should take. In the meantime, the paper has been duly registered by the Kathmandu District Office."

Television is the latest entry into the world of Nepalese mass media. Introduced towards the end of 1985, its present coverage is confined to the Kathmandu Valley and some parts of the Terai. According to a study done in March last year, only about 1.5 percent of the total population had access to television. The same study indicated that one in 680 persons owned a television set. Present estimate however places the figure at one television for 500-odd persons calculated on the basis of approximately 32 to 35 thousand TV set owners in the country. The study conducted in connection with the expansion of television in Nepal by Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has recommended a four phased expansion plan for Nepal Television. The population coverage in the four different phases is envisaged as 15%, 43%, 59% and 63% respectively. If poor reception area is also included the population covered by television will be 75% after the fourth phase.



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This is indeed an encouraging development. But the cost of a television set is going to remain prohibitive for most of the Nepalese people for a long time to come. In recent years, television assembly plants have been established in the country. It has brought the cost down a little, yet a television set is beyond the reach of a common man. However, under a scheme called Community Viewing Centre, villages in areas within the reach of television have been supplied with television sets under the care of the local village leaders who arrange to show the villagers Nepal Television programmes on a regular basis. There are 167 such centres at present and 300 more are being added soon. A recent survey has however shown that there are no permanent viewing centres in many villages where people could freely avail themselves of the benefits of the transmission. In most cases, it was found that the sets were kept in a room in the village leader's own home which naturally inhibited the flow of people as against in a public place. Because of the low purchasing power of the rural Nepalese, it is through the expansion of service area by the construction of 16 repeater stations and increase in the number of community viewing centres that the target of reaching the 63% of the population by television is expected to be met. It is therefore important that adequate attention is paid to setting up effectively working viewing centres. Of course, suitable programmes tailored according to the needs and interests of the rural community are a necessity if the rural folks are to be attracted to viewing and thereby benefitting from them. Equally important is to time the telecast so as not to compel the villagers to compromise on his or her domestic chores.

Since the Television Network Development Plan envisages an investment of huge sum of money (over 120 million U.S. dollars), it will be a long time before we can mobilise on such a scale. Nevertheless, Nepal Television is going ahead with the construction of a transmitting station in eastern Nepal, after the completion of which later this year, its coverage will extend up to the eastern border of Nepal benefitting an estimated 34% of the population.

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Obviously, for Nepal the best suited medium of communication to penetrate the rural masses is broadcasting. Radio Nepal, theoretically speaking, covers much of the country. But this is so on short-wave which has not proved very reliable. Besides, short-wave radio receivers are more expensive than the medium-wave ones which reach only about fifty percent of the population currently. Radio ownership in Nepal today is estimated to be two million.

Ongoing plans to improve the medium-wave coverage are encouraging. On a phase-wise basis, relaying stations are being set up in the five regions of the country targetted to be completed by the end of 1990 with assistance from the Government of Japan. Works on two of these are already afoot. It is also planned to turn the relaying stations into regional stations in due course. Four of these stations will be equipped with 100 kilowatt transmitters, and one with 10 kilowatt. There is also provision for one fill-in station of 10 kilowatt in the eastern region. But it is far from certain that merely reaching all the corners of the country through medium-wave transmission would automatically raise ownership of radio sets to a considerable extent because even a medium-wave receiver would remain a costly luxury item to most rural folks.

Against this background, benefitting the rural masses with the expansion of medium-wave broadcast in rural areas would hinge on an arrangement to produce on a mass-scale cheap receiving sets not costing more than a few dollars. The programmes to be effective and attractive, as with those on television, must also be such that they suit the rural audience in terms of their contents, language and presentation.

Today, Radio Nepal broadcasts 14 hours a day in its three transmissions. Forty-five percent of the air time is allotted to commercial broadcasts consisting of music and songs -- Nepali, Hindi as well as western. Nearly sixteen percent is devoted to news and the rest a little less than forty percent to assorted programmes which among others include programmes meant for the rural audience on such areas as agriculture, health and family planning, education, cottage industry, afforestation and religion.



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In conclusion, it can be said that both the existing print and electronic media have the potential to reach the rural masses of Nepal. But that potential remains to be tapped. Although even in the absence of any deliberate effort, it seems that some form of rural mass media is evolving in the process of developing and expanding mass media in general, it is difficult to discern any trend as such in rural media development in Nepal. But, clearly, it is time for the government to prospect this domain with a clear-cut policy and guidelines.

In the ultimate analysis, given Nepal's situation, the broadcast media deserves priority over the print media. And in the broadcast media, it is radio that scores over the television for easy expansion, given the socio-economic parameters of the country. Availability of cheap radio receivers within the means of rural folks is, however, a must. Secondly, to ensure that villagers tune to radio, programmes must accord with their needs. The print medium has its own role and importance in rural communication. The impact of messages in black and white cannot be underestimated, especially in the context of an audience whose audio and visual literacy is pitifully low. But the question is one of priority. And in prioritization from the point of view of practicality, radio has a strong case for speedier expansion.

In the case of print medium itself, the advent of new technology has opened up possibilities for its development with an eye on rural people. The concept of wall newspapers which has been quite successful must and can be disseminated more widely. We have to remain content with such arrangement at least for the time being because the emergence of viable rural print media is beyond the realm of realisation in the foreseeable future.

As to television, there does not seem to be any alternative to community viewing centres for villagers for a long time. The planning of such centres has to go hand in hand with the expansion of the reach of the television. Here, it goes without saying that people would go to the centres only if the fare on the screen is attuned to their interests.

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Nepal in recent years has embarked on a programme to provide her people with minimum basic needs in such vital areas as food, clothing, health, education, housing and security by the turn of the century. One cannot ignore the fact that rural communication can greatly contribute to the success of such a major programme. It is only in the fitness of things therefore to formulate a well-defined comprehensive plan of action on rural media development borrowing from the experience gained at similar setting elsewhere and implement the same with the rural masses as the main focus of attention.