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Country Paper : Nepal

By

Rasib Upadhyya
The broadcast media in Nepal has its roots in radio, which traces its history some four decades back. Broadcast journalism, or electronic journalism, as it is frequently referred to, however, began in Nepal, with the advent of television, a little over seven years ago. But that is not to say that radio does not dwell on the elements of journalism. But as far as electronic journalism goes, radio in Nepal has always depended for its news content on the National News Agency, which is primarily geared towards catering to the needs of the print media. Till today, Radio Nepal does not employ a single reporter of its own. Television, on the other hand, since its very inception, in realising the advantages of pictures as a tool to convey messages, sought to establish its own credentials in the field of Nepalese journalism. With its own news and current affairs operations, television only very recently opened up a new front in Nepalese mass media. As an alternative source of news, television still has a long way to go. Access to TV news among the vast majority of the Nepali people, is still minimal at best. The soaring costs of programming, as well as high investment at the receiving end, has limited the effectiveness of television. In its early days, news and current affairs programming over television, was not very different in journalistic terms, from the print media or radio. To meet its manpower needs, television naturally looked to the newspapers and radio for help. As a result, TV news came to be seen as little more than newspapers with moving pictures. Little attention was paid to writing for television.
It is only very recently that a measure of seriousness has been placed on writing and reporting skills, best suited to television. In the past seven years, we have only begun to achieve a vague semblance of electronic journalism, as it is known elsewhere.

As TV viewership grows, our experience has been that targeting specific audiences gets all the more difficult. Much as we would like to believe that TV is accessible to all classes of society, viewership statistics paint a different picture. The high initial costs of buying TV sets has restricted the growth of regular viewers to the semi-literate or educated elite, which make up barely seven to ten percent of the population. In such circumstances, it has been especially difficult to maintain consistently high quality programming. On the one hand, erratic sets of priorities have led to equally confused programs, while on the other, the ever more demanding regular viewership keeps up the pressure for programs suited to their tastes. In between, program planners and executors, have a hard time figuring out market needs.

The recent political changes in Nepal, have favoured the restructuring of priorities in programming. Where strict codes once justified media excesses, public expectations now reign supreme in all matters of propriety. As with other state owned media, TV programming today reflects such changes. Though the overall structure of control mechanisms over state owned media in Nepal remain intact, the frequency and extent its exercise has been greatly reduced with the restoration of democracy in April last year.
All state media, be it television, radio or print, are in one form or another placed directly under the Ministry of Communications which formulates policy guidelines and issues instructions to the individual medium. During the previous regime, it was not uncommon for ministers to personally call up the newsroom to let their displeasures known. Policy guidelines aside, journalists were more or less catering to the whims of individual ministers. With the restoration of democracy most matters of policy have been left to the media to decide.

To be very frank, for a while, the "couldn't care less" attitude of the interim government was rather unnerving and took some getting used to. For journalists working for state owned media, familiar with the dictates of the previous regime, it would be considered almost impossible that individual initiative on the part of the journalist could determine the quality of news and current affairs programming. When it came to deciding coverage and treatment, journalists would instinctively look up for directives. Journalists were prone to believe that as government employees, their professionalism demanded efforts towards the perpetuation of the regime. Whereas in the previous regime television served as a political tool, in today's democratic climate, efforts are earnestly directed towards reflecting reality as closely as possible. Today television faces difficulties of a different nature. With political parties having flourished in great numbers, and with no precedent to go by, television is often accused of highlighting the coalition partners presently in power, at the expense of other political forces.
Justified or not, that problem will possibly be resolved once an elected government takes office. Meanwhile, such accusations have served to demonstrate that the people now take the media seriously.

With this brief background on the recent history of television in Nepal, I shall now attempt to trace television coverage during times of national crisis. With only seven years of television history to trace, I can think of only three such national crises. In order of sequence they are the earthquake of 1988, the Nepal India trade and transit impasse of 1989 and events leading to the Popular Movement for the Restoration of Democracy of 1990, and the subsequent fall of the Panchayat regime.

Television in Nepal got its first taste of a national crisis in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 1988. With instant coverage and the power of pictures, television was among the first to reveal the magnitude of the destruction in the wake of the earthquake. With hardly any previous experience in covering disasters, television did its best to portray a picture of the destruction, the plight of the victims as well as relief operations. Typical of the previous regime, however, television was used over and over again to highlight the participation of politicians in the relief operations. Most of the time, viewers only saw the positive side of relief operations, while corruption along the distribution line was often sidelined. Television pictures of the aftermath of the earthquake, transmitted around the world, brought in huge sums of assistance and relief material.
But when it came to monitoring whether the assistance was going into the right hands, television was kept away at a safe distance.

The second national crisis that television in Nepal went through was the Nepal-India trade and transit impasse and the resulting hardships faced by the Nepali people. Once again television was often used to show to the citizens and the rest of the world that Nepal was the aggrieved party. During the early days of the crisis, it was more a war of words, with television often portraying tiny, landlocked Nepal suffering without any wrong doing on its part at the hands of big brother and bully India. But as the situation grew from bad to worse, the Nepali press, including television, maintained a more aggressive posture. To the furthest possible extent, television was employed as a tool to influence public opinion and to draw sympathy.

While the basic facts related to the crisis were kept away from public scrutiny, even the vaguest of support for Nepal's stance by foreign governments, obscure personalities and foreign public figures were highlighted in the press. The slightest hint of criticism was conveniently edited out. Hitherto unknown personalities were suddenly described as experts and given costly airtime if they had any arguments to forward in support of the government's position. But as paranoia set in, TV journalists were told to keep away from all Indian nationals just in case they may turn out to be spies. The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu was strictly off limits, and we were told that Nepalese agents were taking photographs of everybody entering the embassy premises.
In the meantime, television was busy refuting reports of malintent on the part of the Nepalese government, which appeared in great frequency in the Indian press.

It was not too long before relations soured to a point that charges and counter-charges became the basic staple for the news bulletins. As the crisis worsened, and consumer supplies became ever more scarce as a result of the closure of transit points along the Nepal India border, television was used to project the government's efforts at easing the situation. TV crews were sent out to report the supply situation in different parts of the country. Where consumers complained of shortages, by the time their stories were aired, after various stages of censorship, they would often seem to suggest that all was well on the supply front. Much later when it was perhaps realised that things were getting nowhere, a subtle shift in stance could be detected, particularly in the TV news. Special emphasis was being laid on the fact that Indian nationals working in Nepal were not being discriminated against, as charged by the Indian government. By showing pictures of pilgrims and devotees from India visiting places of worship in Nepal, the age old ties between the people of the two countries were being reiterated. Students and journalists from India, talking about centuries of friendship between the two countries made it to TV programs. The stage was being set for the normalisation of relations. Normalisation, however, was not to be so easy. It took a change in government in both countries before relations could be fully restored.
One of the more poignant lessons from this crisis was that mistrust and mutual suspicions were much easier to foster than to relieve when the media was used as instruments of state propaganda.

By far the gravest crisis of national proportions covered by television in Nepal were the events and circumstances that led to the Popular Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, and the subsequent fall of the Panchayat regime last year. It is often said today that by using the state owned media in attempting to perpetuate the regime against the will of the people, the panchayat government burnt its own fingers. By then television was all too often treated as a political organ of the former regime. TV was soon to be perceived as an accessory to the government and co-conspirator against the people. Overall credibility of the organisation nosedived and morale among employees reached an all time low. For the first time in TV history, staff members were publicly ridiculed and even manhandled. In blatant disregard for public sentiments, coverage during the crisis was virtually one sided. Public opinion of television news suffered, and everyone was tuning into foreign media to get their facts. One of the more serious miscalculations of the former regime was the assumption that all news media could be kept in check in order to disinform the public. Of course, most local and foreign newspapers were banned, but to the consternation of the former regime, nothing could be done about foreign radio and television broadcasts, which grew all the more popular.
The role of the state-owned media, and particularly television in those days, was basically to dissuade opposition to the panchayat system of rule through all available means. But the methods adopted by state-owned media were in itself reason enough to ignite public fury. While public support for the movement grew, television along with all other state media continued to act as if nothing was happening. Instead, rallies in support of the now much hated panchayat, attended by beneficiaries of the regime, were a routine affair on the news bulletins. The opposition was labelled anti-social. The media attempted to portray the opposition as conspirators backed by some foreign hand. News of strikes and demonstrations against the regime and its ways were totally blacked out. As the indifference persisted, threats of physical harm against staff members grew more frequent. Dissent within the organisation itself was growing. But under government pressure and official obligations, employees were forced to keep their pent up anger to themselves. With the law and order situation in the country deteriorating on the one hand, and with television and radio still concealing the facts, a climate of fear and heightened tensions was building up. News of developments in the protest movement spread by word of mouth as newspapers with a dissenting voice were either already banned or heavily censored. Soon enough, foreign news media such as Doordarshan and All India Radio as well as the BBC and the Voice of America were the basic sources of information to rely upon. In a time of national crisis, the media itself was going through its own crisis of confidence.
During the final days of the popular movement, just before the old regime collapsed, security risks for television crews were so pronounced that police or army escorts would be normally required for outdoor shootings. Nothing could possibly have been more shameful to a news organisation than to be confined to its own premises, while such historic events were taking place just outside its walls. Such was the situation when at a turning point last April the popular movement culminated in the disbanding of the panchayat regime and the formation of an interim government.

As huge swarms of demonstrators, the largest Kathmandu had ever seen, passed by our front gates, the entire building was brought under army protection, further restricting the virtually nonexistent coverage of the decisive moments.

Perhaps the most disturbing experience of all, in the aftermath of this crisis, was the fact that many people found it hard to believe that we television journalists were as happy as anybody at the collapse of the panchayat regime. By then, state media, including television were so closely identified with the excesses of the defunct regime, that it took a lot of extra effort to get over the stigma.

It was perhaps the role being played by television during this crucial phase of transition that has restored the credibility of the medium. Television was there once again to report upfront the changes taking place and how they affected the nation.
In the initial euphoria of the historic transformation, there was much talk about granting some sort of autonomy for the state media. But so far, nothing definite has materialised, and it is rather unfortunate that media autonomy and restructuring is somewhere low on the interim government's list of priorities. On our own initiative, we have tried to set some precedents during this period of transition, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The main thrust of these professional standards would be to avoid vulnerabilities and to develop a keen sense of first loyalty to our viewers. With a little extra effort and courage, I am confident that crisis reporting could be a lot more fair and accurate.

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Nepal Television