

# INDEPENDENT RADIO AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN NEPAL, 1997–2007

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## Introduction

After an end to the century-old rule of the Rana oligarchy which was notorious for its dislike for mass media, regular radio broadcast from within Nepal started with the founding of the state-owned Radio Nepal in Kathmandu in 1951. Two generations of Nepalis who grew up in the post-1951 period experienced Radio Nepal as the only radio broadcast from within Nepal.<sup>1</sup> After the first People's Movement of spring 1990, Nepal entered a new political era with constitutional guarantees of a fresh set of fundamental rights as described in the Constitution of Nepal, 1990. This historic transformation eventually paved the way for the entry of new actors in the media landscape in Nepal, including the non-state players in the radio sector in the Frequency Modulation (FM) band (Onta 2002a). These FM radios have been the most important new media in Nepal in the past decade.

The first licence to an independent FM radio station in Nepal was issued in May 1997. That licence was given to Radio Sagarmatha 102.4 in Kathmandu, owned and operated by the non-governmental organization (NGO), Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ). Since that moment of recognition that a radio station could be operated by a non-state owned entity, there has been a phenomenal growth in the independent radio sector in Nepal. This growth has taken place in two phases. During the first nine-year phase (May 1997-April 2006), the growth in the number of radio stations was limited by the slow process adopted by various governments with respect to the issuance of licences. By April 2006, only 56 independent radio stations had been issued permits and some 50 of them had already gone on air in more than 20 of the 75 districts of the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Details about the institutional and programming history of Radio Nepal can be found in Onta et al. (2004). A sample of peoples' histories of growing up listening to Radio Nepal and other non-Nepali radios can be found in Parajulee and Onta (2005). The introduction written by Shekhar Parajulee to the latter volume has been translated into English and published as Parajulee (2007b).

The new government that came into power following the successful Second People's Movement of April 2006 processed the applications for radio licences at a faster pace, thus initiating a second phase of relatively fast-paced growth in the FM radio sector in Nepal. During the Nepali calendar year 2063 v.s (mid-April 2006 to mid-April 2007), 140 radio stations were given licences. By December 2007, licences had been issued to radio transmitters which were to be located in more than 70 districts.<sup>2</sup> By late July 2008, a total of 290 licences had been issued and 176 separate radio transmitters had gone on air from 153 distinct radio broadcasting entities (Upreti 2008). By August 2009, the number of licensees and operational radio stations had gone up to 323 and 186 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

As has been often noted, the radio licensees include for-profit companies, not-for-profit non-governmental organizations, cooperatives, local governments, and educational institutions. This plural and dispersed structure of the FM radio landscape has been made possible by a legislative framework that recognized the need for plurality in the radio landscape in Nepal and a financially hybrid environment for radio.<sup>4</sup>

Given this tremendous growth of independent radio – the like of which no other South Asian country has seen – the following question arises almost naturally: what has this growth amounted to as far as Nepali society at large is concerned? This is a question that must be tackled by focusing on various aspects of the growth of independent radio in Nepal.<sup>5</sup> Here, I am only interested in assessing the performance of independent radio as a medium for public engagement on some important issues in

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<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Narayan Regmi, a high-level official at the Nepal Government's Ministry of Information and Communication (MOIC), during a national consultation on community radio in Kathmandu, 3 December 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Based on information available at the most comprehensive website related to radio broadcasting in Nepal: <http://www.nepalradio.org>. Among the licensees, there are some which relay their transmissions from their primary radio stations using transmitters located in multiple sites for which they have obtained separate licences. For instance, Kantipur FM and Image FM have transmitters in eight and seven different locations, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> The most detailed analyses of the policy and regulatory environment that facilitated the growth of the FM radio sector can be found in Humagain (2005b, 2008). Basnet (2008) and Dhungel (2007) discuss the role of the courts in the strengthening of the independent radios in Nepal. I have briefly discussed the hybrid business environment for radio elsewhere (Onta 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For such attempts in the past, see Onta and Mainali (2002), Onta *et al.* (2005), Humagain (2005a), and Humagain, Onta and Bhatta (2008).

Nepal during its first decade of existence (1997-2007). In particular, I seek an answer to the following broad question: how have the new radios changed the media of expression for individual citizens, civil society organizations and political actors with respect to issues concerning poverty, development and political change in Nepal? For analytic convenience I have translated that broad question into these three specific ones:

- i) what kind of access do listeners have to independent radio?
- ii) what kind of influence do listeners have on the content that is being broadcast from these radios?
- iii) what has been the performance of independent radios as a medium for public engagement in issues concerning poverty, development and political change in Nepal?

This study is based on my previous experiential and research-based knowledge of the FM radio landscape in Nepal (see in particular, Onta 2000, 2001, 2002b; Onta and Mainaili 2002; Onta *et al.* 2005; Humagain, Onta and Bhatta 2008), and interviews and interactions with various actors related to the operation of non-state owned radio. Interviews and interactions that have informed this study were held with several radio promoters, managers, journalists, and radio activists, between November 2007 and April 2008. Some of these interactions were held in a one-to-one manner (either face-to-face or by telephone) whereas others have been held as part of workshops, consultations and seminars.<sup>6</sup>

### **Listener Access**

In fall 2005, when only about 50 FM radio stations had gone on air, it was estimated that about 65 percent of Nepal's population was receiving FM

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<sup>6</sup> These include a workshop session on broadcast regulation organized by the Alliance for Social Dialogue (ASD) on 27 November 2007 in Nagarkot; a national consultation on community radio in Nepal organized by the MOIC, UNESCO and the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal (ACORAB) on 3 December 2007 in Kathmandu; a seminar on independent radios in far-western Nepal organized by Martin Chautari on 6 December 2007 in Kathmandu, and a seminar on 'Journalism in FM radio' organized by Martin Chautari and ASD on 29 March 2008 in Kathmandu.

radio signals (Mainali 2007: 117).<sup>7</sup> This number was calculated by adding up the number of individuals living in the primary target broadcasting areas of the 50 stations. The Broadcast Audience Survey of 2006-2007, done by Equal Access Nepal (2007) reconfirmed this figure and suggested that it could be as high as 75 percent if the capacity of the highly sensitive radio receivers to catch the lowest signal levels was taken into consideration. Although no fresh calculations or surveys have been published for the radio signal landscape, it would be safe to assume that at least 75 percent, if not 80 percent, of Nepal's population has access to FM radio broadcast at the end of 2009. This assumption seems logical given that the number of radios on air has more than tripled since fall 2005 and the fact that many of the new radio stations are operating in areas of the country where there were no independent radio stations in 2005. This means about 21 million Nepalis can potentially be reached by at least one or more FM radios.

Given the uneven spread of the FM radios, the number of stations that any individual has access to depends upon where she is located. In the Kathmandu Valley, a listener has access to about 30 stations that broadcast from various locations within the Valley. Listeners in Pokhara can listen to at least eleven stations, not all of which are located in the Pokhara Valley itself. In the central Tarai belt between the cities of Bhairahawa and Butwal, listeners can receive signals from at least seventeen FM stations. In general, listeners in the central, eastern, and western regions of the country have access to more FM broadcasts than listeners in the mid-western and far-western regions. Due to the haphazard way in which frequencies have been assigned, reception quality has been compromised in many parts of the country (Upreti 2008).

Beyond the issue of the physical access to FM signals, there are other relevant issues related to access to FM radios. In a country where about half of the population is not literate, the access of the print media is immediately limited to the half that can read. Radio has a distinct advantage because its listeners do not have to be literate. Since various FM radios are broadcasting programs in languages spoken by different ethnic and caste groups, even those who can not understand Nepali have begun to have access to FM radio contents in some parts of Nepal. This is true for speakers of at least eighteen languages including Rajbanshi,

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<sup>7</sup> According to the 2001 census, the total population of Nepal was 23.15 millions. For late 2009, the estimated population of Nepal was about 27.5 to 28 millions (CBS and MPE 2003).

Bantawa Rai, Santhal, Jhagad, Chepang, Newari, Tamang, Maithali, Gurung, Magar, Bhojpuri, Rana Tharu, Purbeli Tharu, Dangora Tharu, Avadhi, Kham Magar, Limbu, and Doteli.<sup>8</sup> As the FM radios spread further into rural areas, broadcasts in other languages of Nepal are very likely. In addition, significant size of culturally-migrant audiences in different parts of Nepal will also enjoy programs in their mother-tongues in their adopted cities. The best example of the latter phenomenon is Maithili-language programs that have been broadcast by several FM radio stations in Kathmandu (Premarsi 2008).<sup>9</sup>

In the same decade of FM radio growth, Nepal has imported hundreds of thousands of cheap Chinese battery-operated radios that can be bought for 50-500 Nepali rupees. These radios are being sold even in rural markets. When a new FM station goes on air in parts of the country not previously served by FM radios, newspaper reports have suggested that shopkeepers have quickly sold hundreds of radios to their customers. In 2007, a campaign to distribute radios to households that can not even afford cheap receivers was started by senior radio journalist Bhairab Risal. In collaboration with community radios located in Makwanpur, Dhading, Chitwan, Nawalparasi and Palpa districts, more than 1200 radios were distributed to members of Chepang, Darai, Bote, Majhi, and Kumal communities. This initiative was later followed by the Kathmandu-based radio program production organization Antenna Foundation which distributed over 5000 radios as part of its project on mobile radio demonstrations.<sup>10</sup> We can confidently assume that in the ten year period between 1997 and 2007, more Nepali families have come to

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<sup>8</sup> This list has been compiled with help from Gopal Guragain, personal communication, January 2008. Studies of broadcasts in a few of these languages have been done. For instance, see Maharjan (2002), Tamang (2005), Sarvahari (2008) and Premarshi (2008) for studies of broadcasts in Newari, Tamang, Tharu and Maithili respectively.

<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that in the Kathmandu Valley, there are about 300,000 individuals who speak Maithili and perhaps as many more who understand it. According to the famous columnist CK Lal (personal communication), the purchasing power capacity of the Maithili-speaking Kathmandu residents is greater than those of the larger group still living in the original Maithili speaking areas of the eastern Nepal tarai. Hence it is no surprise that once the radio stations overcame their initial inhibition, as described by Premarsi (2008), they quickly realized that broadcasting Maithili-language programs in Kathmandu FMs also made good commercial sense.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Bhairab Risal and Madhu Acharya, January 2008.

own radio receivers than was the case in any previous ten-year period since Nepalis started buying radios in the late 1920s.

A survey done in 1997 had found that about 51 percent of Nepali households had radios (Maung and Ghimire 1997). A more recent survey done in 2006-07 has found that 82 percent of Nepali households have radios and about 76 percent have radios with the FM band (Equal Access Nepal 2007). The same survey has suggested that about 95 percent Nepalis have FM radios in their neighborhood and about 44 percent of the households have radios that cost less than five hundred rupees.

Some of the independent radios have done surveys of their own to find out some details of radio ownership and access in their primary broadcast areas. The baseline audience survey done by Radio Madanpokhara in 2004 amongst 690 families in the Tansen municipality and 15 Village Development Committees (VDCs) of Palpa district revealed that while almost 87 percent of the respondents owned a radio set, only 77 percent had a set that could receive FM signals.<sup>11</sup> 85 percent of the families in the city of Tansen had FM radios whereas the corresponding number was 74.5 percent for the villages. The survey also revealed interesting differences amongst various caste and ethnic groups in terms of FM radio ownership. Almost 90 percent of the Brahmin and Newar families owned such radios whereas the corresponding numbers for Chhetris, Magars and 'lower' castes were 73.8, 73.7 and 60.7 respectively. Amongst Magars, 94.4 percent owned FM radio sets in the city whereas the corresponding number was only 72.4 percent for the villages. More than 91 percent of those surveyed who had a FM radio set reported listening to Radio Madanpokhara. Almost 97 percent of the respondents with college-level education reported listening to Radio Madanpokhara whereas among illiterate respondents, this number was only 56.2 percent. Radio Madanpokhara was reported by 85 percent of the respondents as the most often listened-to radio station. These data indicate very important differences regarding FM radio ownership and use between urban and rural residents, educated and illiterate citizens as well as between and across caste and ethnic groups.

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<sup>11</sup> This paragraph is based on Banjade (2006) who reports extensively about the findings of the survey. The situation could be somewhat different in late 2009 given that listeners in the broadcast areas served by Radio Madanpokhara can now access several other radios, only some of which are based in the town of Tansen.

The availability of cheap radio sets, the spread of FM radio coverage to about 75-80 percent of the country's population and content generation in at least a dozen and half languages mean that radio has become the most accessible mass medium for the citizens of Nepal.

### **Influence over Contents**

What kind of influence do radio listeners have over the contents of FM radios in their areas? In other words, what kinds of influence do individual citizens, civil society organizations and political actors have over independent radio for them to feel that it is available as a media of expression for them? A definitive answer to this query can only be given after a comprehensive study involving investigation of the efforts of the respective radio stations and their listeners as well as analyses of broadcast contents and the processes that generate those contents. Such a study was not possible as part of this research but some tentative efforts in that direction have been made.

When commercial FM growth first took place in the Kathmandu Valley in the late 1990s, the common public's engagement with radio left a lot to be desired. Those analysing the situation then felt that members of the public were either too pleased to hear their own voices broadcast as part of inane phone conversations or they considered radio as only good for entertainment and thus a medium that was to be enjoyed, not one that required serious engagement (e.g., Onta 2006). Even in Radio Sagarmatha which was considered to be a serious radio offering discussions and analysis by some of the country's leading social critics, musical programs drew considerable response from listeners in terms of regular feedback through various channels but hosts of talk programs barely got any feedback from their listeners.<sup>12</sup> Friends of radio producers occasionally provided some encouraging advice but those too were merely perfunctory in functional terms.

Despite the situation being as described above, what was encouraging was to hear many more and different types of voices over the radio than was customary for the case of the state-owned Radio Nepal. In the form of vox pop, sound bites in magazine-style reportage, interviews, and

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<sup>12</sup> I hosted the discussion program *Dabali* in Radio Sagarmatha between May 1998 and December 1999. During those months, I received no written feedback from my listeners. I did get a few phone calls from listeners who disagreed with points made in the program by my guests. See Onta (2000, 2002b) for analyses based on this experience.

discussion programs, listeners of the then new radio in Kathmandu were getting to hear daily the voices of dozens of small and big people from all different walks of life. Just this fact alone made these new FM radios sound as if listeners had relatively good access to them and were in a position to influence their contents. This perception was important in FM radios' ability to build rapport with their listeners and to make the medium appear far more democratic than had been the case with Radio Nepal and the print media in general.

As has been argued at some length by Guragain and Ghimire (2005: 63-73), the relationship between radio stations and their listeners depends upon a host of factors on both sides. On the side of the radio stations, the quality of their program contents, their user-friendliness and their social reputation are some of the more influencing factors that determine their ability to attract listeners. On the side of the listeners, their social and demographic backgrounds, personal circumstances and interests influence their choice to tune into particular stations and programs. Guragain and Ghimire add that most listeners seek participation in programs after being influenced by them to some degree and once that happens, it is up to the radio stations to decide if and how to organize their relationship with such listeners. They argue that although most stations have not defined this relationship in their policies, both commercial and community stations place great value in listener participation. However, only some radio stations have managed to structure this relationship formally.

By and large, commercial stations have relied more upon market surveys for feedback on their programs than direct responses from their listeners. Their desire to reach large audiences – and this explains why some Kathmandu-based stations have obtained licences to run a set of relay transmitters so that they can reach listeners in different parts of Nepal with the same set of programs produced in Kathmandu – makes commercial sense as it allows them to claim higher rates for their advertisements. Nevertheless, commercial stations have come up with some program formats that allow listeners to call the stations and interact with program hosts and their guests. For instance, in the early morning current affairs program, *The Headliners* of Kantipur FM, listeners can call in and ask questions.

Community radios based in rural Nepal seem to have a better and more structured mechanism to engender and use listener feedback in their radios than is the case with commercial or urban-based radios. Some of the community radios such as Radio Madanpokhara have extensive networks of what are known as 'listener clubs' which provide formal and



extensive commentary on what is put on air by the radio, suggest ideas for programs and provide information and other support to produce them (Aryal 2008). This radio also has exclusive women-only radio listeners club. It also has formal representatives in the VDCs in its primary broadcast area. These individuals not only act as community correspondents but they are also an important part of the mechanism through which letters and other feedback from listeners are gathered and forwarded to the radio station. These representatives also produce certain programs (Aryal 2008).

Other radios such as Radio Lumbini (near Butwal) have also organised their listener clubs but they also rely upon regular public hearings to collect feedback from listeners located within their primary broadcasting areas. Still others such as Radio Swargadwari in Dang collect listener commentaries while their reporters are on the field chasing stories. Some radios such as the Nepalgunj-based Bageswori FM have a network of active voluntary correspondents who provide feedback and materials for program contents.<sup>13</sup> Some combination of these feedback mechanisms have also been adopted by other radios.

As the FM revolution spread across Nepal, listener influence over contents have come through various means and channels. These have included personal visits to the stations, letters, email messages, phone calls and faxes. In the last 3-4 years, because of the increasing reach of mobile and CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) phone lines, more and more rural listeners are able to call radio stations from their phones to give their responses. “Perhaps because local radios have contributed to the demystification of radio broadcast technology, people are not afraid to speak on air. They have the confidence to speak on radio because they know people from their communities who have done that,” says Bhuwan Timilsina, the former program manager of the community radio Bijaya FM in Gaidakot.<sup>14</sup> Tula Adhikari of Bageswori FM also acknowledges the

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<sup>13</sup> Based on personal communication with Gunakar Aryal (Radio Madanpokhara), Mohan Chapagain (Radio Lumbini) and Dadhiram Subedi (Radio Swargadwari), December 2007 and the presentation of Tula Adhikari (Bageswori FM) at Martin Chautari on 29 March 2008. Chapagain is no longer the station manager of Radio Lumbini but he is still one of its promoters. More details on the work of listener clubs can be found in Guragain and Ghimire (2005: 68-73) and Aryal (2008). Also cf. Hochheimer (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, January 2008. Timilsina now works for BBC World Service Trust in Nepal.

importance of the spread of mobile phones to generate responses from rural listeners.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from feedback on broadcast contents, FM radios have been accessed as a medium of expression by citizens who feel that the radio can voice their grievances or help them find solutions to their personal problems. Gunakar Aryal of Radio Madanpokhara recalls a time when a woman wrote to his radio asking for suggestions regarding what she could do after her husband took a second wife. The radio station found a woman lawyer who explained on air the legal sanctions against polygamy. Apparently the couple reconciled and the woman wrote back to the radio station saying her husband loved her more than before.<sup>16</sup> Radio journalists in Kathmandu and elsewhere have over the years told many similar stories, some tinged with a sense of happiness because they were able to broadcast content that helped the individuals who had approached them.<sup>17</sup>

Rural listeners have been provoked by radio to seek it as a medium of expression for news of and commentary upon mundane aspects of family and community life. For instance, many have asked radio stations to broadcast news about marriages and births in their families or events in their communities (Aryal 2008). When development plans have been perceived as having a deleterious effect on the life of local communities, members of such communities have spoken out in local radio. For instance, this has happened in the program *Hāmro Lumbini* (Our Lumbini) of Radio Lumbini where the negative impact of the expansion of Lumbini as a World Heritage Site on the local community was criticised (Martin et al. 2007). When radio journalist Ghama Raj Luitel (2004) – who has been associated with Radio Sagarmatha since its beginning and is currently its station manager – studied the impact of Radio Swargadwari in Dang in mid-western Nepal, more than half of the 200 people he talked to mentioned the fact that they could now use radio to express their feelings and problems (cf. Kunreuther 2004). Radio has also been used by local, regional or national critics to vent their opinions and commentary on a whole range of topics. But this is not to say that radio is equally available to all members of the community. As JB Biswokarma (2008a, 2008b) has reminded us, independent radios have been largely unavailable to members of the dalit community who have

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<sup>15</sup> This was mentioned in his presentation at Martin Chautari on 29 March 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, December 2007.

<sup>17</sup> This assessment is based on my continuous conversations with radio journalists since 1997.

had to produce their own programs and such producers have had to face discrimination from their non-dalit colleagues.<sup>18</sup>

What is the case with civil society organizations? FM radios have also been accessed as a medium of expression by civil society for a number of reasons. Some approach the radio stations because they are interested in having news about their activities broadcast over radio. While for the radio, these activities might constitute part of the work that generates local news of the day, for the organizations involved, such news provide them and their activities social visibility. In each radio station that broadcasts local news, dozens of phone calls, faxes and emails are received daily that report about activities that could potentially make it to the news. In Radio Sagarmatha, more than 50 such items are received daily whereas in Radio Annapurna in Pokhara, about 15 such items are received by the newsroom everyday.<sup>19</sup>

Civil society organizations have also used radio to highlight the issues they work on or care about. Examples of such organizations include Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), Asmita, Jagaran Media Centre, Pro Public, Education Journalists' Group, Dalit Sewa Sangh, Himal Association, and Eco-Himal.<sup>20</sup> Radio programs produced by such organizations (or jointly with some radio stations) on a variety of themes have been broadcast over the past decade. Themes such as anti-corruption campaign, books, child rights, community forestry, conflict resolution, constituent assembly elections, dalit rights, education, environment, good governance, human rights, old Nepali songs, public health, reproductive health, rights of the disabled, science and technology, social inclusion, sustainable development, women's empowerment, etc. have been the focus of such programs. As the escalation of the Maoist insurgency made development service delivery very difficult or impossible from around the turn of the century, many of the international NGOs working in Nepal and their Nepali NGO counterparts turned to promoting the rights of variously disenfranchised citizens and groups. As mal-governance and corruption were evoked as two of the main causes of the Maoist insurgency, themes

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<sup>18</sup> Thapa (2008) discusses the participation of women in radio journalism and Adhikari (2065 v.s.) provides a linguistic analysis of women's speech in radio.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Durga Karki (then with Radio Sagarmatha) and Deependra Shrestha (Radio Annapurna), January 2008. Further details of the news manufacturing process in FM radios in Kathmandu and Pokhara are discussed in Adhikari (2005a, 2005b).

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the program *Śakti*, focused on issues related to women's empowerment and produced by Asmita, see Thapa (2002).

such as good governance were promoted by such organizations as well. The easier availability of independent radios – physically and bureaucratically speaking when compared with Radio Nepal – and the larger degree of editorial freedom granted to such organizations by those radios while producing the programs focused on the above-mentioned themes meant these radios became an almost automatic media of expression for civil society organizations in the last decade.

However this combination also reflects the poor editorial and financial situation in which most of the independent radios find themselves. As they are financially weak and need to fill up their air time with socially relevant content, most of the radios have given up some of their editorial prerogative by broadcasting content prepared by outside entities. “Yes, we have sacrificed some degrees of our editorial capacity when broadcasting content prepared by other organizations,” said Durga Karki of Radio Sagarmatha. But she added that such organizations also figure out rather quickly the parameters within which they should generate the contents acceptable for the concerned radio stations. However other radio journalists are more critical of this relationship with civil society organizations. “This arrangement is not very good for the future health of independent radios,” said Binod Dhungel, the news coordinator of Nepal FM in Kathmandu.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to the radios’ relationship with civil society organizations that are not producing their own programs or are not necessarily interested in being in the news, it has to be described as less than satisfactory. If fault has to be identified, then the failure of radios to evaluate and challenge the work of such organizations (and the social movements they are part of) in depth and the failure of such organizations to seriously engage with radio are both responsible for this state of affairs.

In a country where politics dominates the general social agenda, it is no surprise to know that political parties have used independent radios to push forward their party lines. Given the history of their doing the same with party-owned or affiliated print media (Pathak 2007), this dynamics on the part of the political parties is to be expected. In their recent review of the state of community radio in Nepal, Pringle and Subba write:

In the past, some political ‘affiliation’ of radio owners and staff, and by association of stations themselves, has been common, perhaps even the

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<sup>21</sup> Personal communication with Durga Karki, Deependra Shrestha, and Binod Dhungel, January 2008. Dhungel is no longer associated with Nepal FM.

norm; furthermore, the growth of FM radio has, in part, been driven by the impulse to first advance and subsequently balance political presence...in the past, all stations have generally adhered to the principle that *affiliation* to political parties does not directly influence content and that FM stations remain strictly non-partisan and editorially independent (2007: 19; emphasis in the original).

However this is not to suggest that all radios have a political affiliation to project or promote. Deependra Shrestha of Radio Annapurna in Pokhara claimed that his radio provides selective space to all types of politicians, both 'national-level' ones from Kathmandu and local types. "We invite them for talk programs where we set the agenda. When they address public forums, we cover them in our news," said Shrestha.<sup>22</sup> When asked why only the same political leaders seem to appear in all of the Kathmandu FMs repeatedly, Binod Dhungel of Nepal FM said that journalists approach only those politicians "who are popular, radio sexy and in the mainstream of their own political parties."<sup>23</sup> In other words, radio is relatively easily available as a media of expression for specific individuals of the major political parties and not to everyone even in the top rung of their leadership.

For rural radios, the absence of locally elected politicians since mid-2002 has meant that the medium's potential as a media of expression for locally competitive politics has been underdeveloped.<sup>24</sup> "If our radio could challenge locally elected politicians to inform our listeners how they make and spend the development budget, we would be enhancing local democracy," said Mohan Chapagain of Radio Lumbini. In the absence of elected politicians, Chapagain added, office executives tended to avoid the limelight by not speaking to local radios.<sup>25</sup> However others

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<sup>22</sup> Personal communication, January 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication, January 2008.

<sup>24</sup> The term of the last legitimately elected (in 1997) local bodies expired in mid-2002. Due to the internal conflict no new elections could take place in 2002 and they have not been held since. Local bodies have since been run by appointed executives. In early 2006, King Gyanendra-led government held elections to municipal bodies but it was largely a farce. See International Crisis Group (2006) for an analysis of the situation immediately preceding these municipal elections.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, December 2007.

have added that even though not in office, local politicians do have to pay attention to local radios.<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between independent radios and political parties is beginning to come under increasing public scrutiny because of the arrival of radio stations with contents that are tied to specific political parties and their ideologies (Bhusal 2007). In the words of Pringle and Subba,

There is serious concern that in the current phase of radio growth, concurrent with a critical time in the country's socio-political development, political parties will begin or have already started to exercise more overt influence over FM stations. The clearest example of this change is the advent of 'Maoist' stations...., broadcasters that are clear and upfront about the influence of the party in decision-making (2007: 19).

The reference to 'Maoist' stations is to those stations in different parts of Nepal that are generally perceived to be under the control of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In early 2008, it was estimated that there were about five or six such radio stations, including Radio Paschimanchal in Tansen and Radio Mirmire in Kathmandu. The rise of such stations in the run-up to the Constituent Assembly elections, originally scheduled for June 2007, first postponed to November 2007 and eventually held in April 2008 is no coincidence. As Pringle and Subba (2007) had recognized, the increasing competition between political parties to influence the electorate on the fundamental agendas of state restructuring in Nepal via media outlets had led to this particular kind of "politicization of broadcasting".<sup>27</sup>

### **Radio and Public Engagement**

How can we assess the experience of the development of independent radio, including community radio, as a medium for public engagement in issues concerning poverty, development and political change in Nepal? To answer this question we need to understand that most of the independent radios are run by journalists and broadcasters who have been hired to produce journalistic and entertainment-oriented contents.

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<sup>26</sup> Mentioned by Min Bahadur Singh of Saipal FM in a discussion program at Martin Chautari, 6 December 2007.

<sup>27</sup> See Adhikari and Pokhrel (2008) for a report of media monitoring during the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections.

Community radios are no exception.<sup>28</sup> For that reason we can say that most of the actually existing community radios are more ‘for the community’ radios that rely on journalists to produce most of their contents than ‘from the community’ radios. This is not to say, as discussed earlier, that there is no participation from the communities in running these community radios and producing their contents. There is, to various extents in different radios. However most community radios, in fact most independent radios, operate under the journalist-as-a-trustee-of-the-public-interest model and this fact has a direct bearing on how radio has performed as a medium for public engagement.

Since this is the case, the above question can be answered in three parts. First, we can offer a general view of the contents of radio programs as a way to understand what radio journalists and producers are offering to their listeners. Second, we can then assess radio’s role in public engagement in issues concerning poverty, development and political change. Last, we can look at the quality of journalistic performance and link it with investments (not) made to enhance their capacities.

### *Program Contents*

FM radio has increased the amount of news available in radio to listeners.<sup>29</sup> This has especially been the case with respect to listeners located in urban areas but is also becoming true for rural listeners as the coverage of FM radios expands further into rural Nepal. In the early days, since the FM stations were not supposed to broadcast their own official news bulletins (as per one of the conditions mentioned in their licences), none of the stations called their news-oriented programs ‘news’. However they did broadcast news by other names. In terms of content, news programs in independent radios vary a lot: they include a reading of the newspaper headlines and some main news from major newspapers of the day both national and local; political, economic, development-related and sports reports; and reportage about literary activities, formal meetings, institutional events and other happenings in the local and national society at large.

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<sup>28</sup> Community radio is not a legally distinct entity in Nepal (Humagain and Onta 2008). See Humagain (2008) for a discussion of the debates on what constitutes a ‘community radio’ in Nepal and elsewhere. For a manual on how to assess community radio from a managerial perspective see Mainali, Chapagain and Subba (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Some of the contents of this sub-section were first put together in Onta (2001).

In a 2005 study of news programs broadcast over eleven FM stations in Kathmandu, it was found that nine stations were broadcasting over two hours of news each per day in four languages. Radio Sagarmatha, the leader in this category, was broadcasting a total of 3 hours and 40 minutes of news during the course of its 18-hour daily broadcast. Media researcher Krishna Adhikari (2005a) found that politics dominated the news bulletins and almost half of the news broadcast was directly related to politics. In terms of other news coverage, developments works, education, health, tourism-related items were also broadcast. Events, especially disasters and accidents, were also covered. In these Kathmandu stations, news was being manufactured through station correspondents, press releases, print, online and agency sources. Adhikari (2005b) found much the same dominance of politics-related news in the five FM stations he studied in Pokhara which were broadcasting anywhere from two to three hours and 40 minutes news daily in Nepali. In recent years, a package of news programs produced by the Kathmandu-based company Communication Corner has been bought and broadcast by more than 30 FM stations all over the country and this trend has been further entrenched by the advent of radio networks.<sup>30</sup>

Second, FM radios have provided what can be called 'everyday life' information. This includes information about bus schedules, market prices for vegetables and fruits, lost animals, traffic accidents, health camps, air pollution readings, weather forecasts, etc. In addition FM radio has provided live information about special events such as elections, religious gatherings, and ethnic and national celebrations.

Third, FM radio is assisting the dispersion of expert and social knowledge on topics of interest to general listeners as well as NGOs and other entities engaged in social transformations in Nepal. This is being done through programs designed to cater to various themes – about contraceptives and careers, disasters and development, health and hobbies, languages and literature, music and movies, poverty and politics, stage and sports, and so on. This new knowledge is being executed through many popular formats such as 'quiz' interaction, interviews, chat shows and musicals. Music production in many Nepali languages has received a shot in the arm due to the popularity of musical programs in

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<sup>30</sup> Personal communication with Manteswori Rajbhandary, Communication Corner, December 2007. Development trends of news and other contents in radio networks since the research for this article was completed have been discussed at length by Humagain, Bhatta and Maharjan (2009).



FM radios, and riding the wave of the popularity of such programs, more serious programs in those languages devoted to current affairs and analyses have also come on air.

Fourth, FM radio has increased the amount of social analysis available in radio through various programming formats. In the form of a monologue it has come as anonymous or attributed response from persons walking on the streets, often called 'vox pop' in radio parlance. It has also come in the form of commentary from noted social critics and this format was pioneered by Radio Sagarmatha in its early days. As a dialogue, such social analysis has come in the form of short one-to-one interviews or longer conversations between the host and her guest(s) in talk programs. Additionally it has also come in the form of multiple dialogues between the host(s), guests and listeners who call in by phone. Frequently, others have participated in such discussions by sending in their queries by mail, fax or email before the programs go on air. Such analysis was also to be found in the magazine-style feature reportage focused on a specific theme as demonstrated by the early team of *Hāmro Khālḍo* program in Radio Sagarmatha and *Mādiko Pāhur* in Radio Madanpokhara. In the early days of independent radio, some of the subjects covered by these programs had never been discussed over Radio Nepal, and others had received critical treatment that was then impossible to find in the state-owned radio.

The volume of this kind of analysis, especially in the talk format, has increased geometrically in almost all of the radio stations. Talk is happening primarily in Nepali but it is also emerging in other languages spoken in Nepal. Topics selected have been quite varied such as good governance, sustainable development, quality education, Maoist insurgency, efforts to alleviate poverty, public health issues, local development, corruption, youth, foreign labor and the remittance economy, NGOs, literature and arts, human rights, etc. The rights of the citizens and their development needs have also been discussed frequently as the importance of both increased when the state went into a spiraling crisis following the intensification of the Maoist insurgency from around the year 2000. After radio won back its freedom from the clutches of authoritarian administrators, first during the emergency of 2001-02 and again during 2005-06, politics of the day has dominated talk programs.<sup>31</sup> The ongoing crisis of the Nepali state and the efforts to search for a permanent solution to this via the Constituent Assembly and the eventual

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<sup>31</sup> On media censorship in Nepal in the last decade, see Bhattarai (2005), Hutt (2006) and Onta (2005), among others.

writing of a new constitution have frequently been the themes for discussion programs in various talk shows.

Fifth, FM radio has increased the amount of oral history available in the radio. This has been achieved through programs that present the life history of a 'big' person in his own voice (e.g., *Mero Kathā*), interviews with senior citizens and through profiles of a 'subaltern' made by reporters. Alternatively, personal histories have also been broadcast in programs that have been presented in the form of letters from listeners to program hosts.<sup>32</sup> These points hardly exhaust the program contents of FM radios in Nepal but they help us to come to a preliminary understanding of what independent radios are providing to their listeners.

### *Public Deliberations*

What has then been the experience in Nepal with respect to radio as a medium for public engagement in issues concerning poverty, development and political change? A definitive answer to this question will have to wait for a more comprehensive study that can look at the program portfolio of each radio station in recent years and analyse not only the contents of the relevant programs but also the level of their engagement on these issues. Given that most radio stations claim to have broadcast many programs that deal with development issues of Nepali society, this will certainly not be an easy task. Hence only provisional answers have been provided on the basis of what others have said in the past and also on the basis of responses given to the writer by various stakeholders in the radio landscape during the course of this research.

It is clear that independent radios have furthered a culture of public deliberations on issues concerning poverty, development and political change in Nepal. Through broadcast of various types of information and analysis in many different formats and languages, radios have broadened the public debate on poverty, development and politics in Nepal through the participation of erstwhile unheard voices and through the dissemination of the debate to areas and communities poorly served by radio until recently. Examples of programs in languages other than Nepali can be cited here. Significant programs in the Tamang language (Tamang 2005) and Newari (Maharjan 2002) have gone on air from various radio stations in the central and eastern parts of the country. Tharu language programs were initially put on air by the organization Backward Society

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<sup>32</sup> For a social analysis of one such program in a Kathmandu FM, see Kunreuther (2004).

Education (BASE) through its station Ghodaghodi FM in the western district of Kailali. These programs were especially targeted for former bonded labourers who had become free after the Nepali state made such a declaration in July 2000 (Fujikura 2007). Eventually many other programs in the Tharu language were broadcast by other FM radios (Sarvahari 2008). In the most recent past, programs focused on the ongoing political transition in Nepal have been broadcast in many languages. For instance, *Kacehari* (in Tharu), *Deškāl* (mostly in Maithili from Janaki FM in the eastern Tarai town of Janakpur), *Chinophāno* (in Nepali, produced by Antenna Foundation and broadcast from various stations) and *Badlimdo Nepāl* (in Nepali, produced by Communication Corner and broadcast over several stations) are some examples but there are many more.

Talk shows have been the format par excellence through which radios have pushed forward the culture of public deliberations. Through the early years of this decade, these talk shows covered issues directly related to politics, poverty and development. Radios have promoted discussions related to politics including internal democracy in political parties, their financing, elections, and inter-generational struggles for leadership. These shows have also featured many issues directly related to poverty and development including agriculture, education, environment, economy, food and livelihood security, health, hydropower, NGOs, and tourism (Onta 2002b). These shows have also promoted a multi-faceted discussion about democracy, civil and political rights and social movements. The rights of the Nepali citizens and their development needs were also discussed frequently as the importance of both increased when the state went into a spiraling crisis following the intensification of the Maoist insurgency from the year 2000. After radio won back its freedom from the clutches of authoritarian administrators, first during the emergency of 2001-02 and again during 2005-06, politics of the day has overwhelmingly dominated talk programs.

The ongoing crisis of the Nepali state and the efforts to search for a permanent solution to this via the writing of the new constitution by the elected Constituent Assembly have frequently been the themes for discussion programs during 2006-2009. Talk shows have provided a platform for representatives of various political parties to elaborate their views on the issues that characterize the ongoing transition to a fully constitutional republic in Nepal. This is an important service radio stations are providing to their listeners.

Only a few systematic studies of talk radio have been done thus far. Discussion programs have got Nepalis talking to each other in ways that are important for the overall democratisation of Nepali society, concluded Komal Bhatta (2005) after a study of talk shows in Kathmandu radio stations. In a chapter published in a book of essays on journalism in the new radios – the title of the book being *Reḍiyo Patrakāritā* (Onta *et al.* 2005) – he also concluded that the talk shows in Kathmandu’s radio stations were often burdened with issues at the ‘national’ level.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, local radios have been very successful in bringing local and community-specific issues in public deliberation. After a study of discussion programs in four FM radio stations in Pokhara, Shekhar Parajulee (2005) has concluded that they have brought to attention problems in local development (e.g. supply of drinking water), delays in government offices, environmental degradation, education, and much more. Parajulee has argued that despite many weaknesses on the part of the show hosts, these programs are effective on many counts. They have been useful in bringing to the same table representatives of groups that have been parties to everyday conflict. Many such conflicts have been resolved as a result of these discussions. After hearing the versions of many sides on a specific issue, the knowledge of the listeners have been enhanced and members in the local community have discovered each other’s skills and strengths. Parajulee has added that by subjecting public officials to a kind of public hearing, such programs have played a role in increasing the monitoring of local politicians and development administrators by the media. In so doing they have contributed to the making of an accountability system for local leaders.<sup>34</sup> “When radio broadcasts news or discussions that highlight problems in the village development committees, city or the district development committees, pressure builds up on the officials and they act to resolve those problems,” said Bhuwan Timilsina, who worked for Bijaya FM until mid-2007.

FM radio’s interactions with government officials and politicians have added to the collective knowledge of radio listeners regarding governance, or lack thereof, in Nepali society. Similarly discussions with

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<sup>33</sup> Bhatta has not noticed any significant changes in the format and performance of radio talk shows in Kathmandu since 2005. Personal communication, January 2008.

<sup>34</sup> For further details, see Parajulee (2005). These views were also shared by a Pokhara-based broadcaster Gangadhar Parajuli in a seminar organised at Martin Chautari on 29 March 2008.

practitioners of other professions have demystified specialist knowledge, intellectually empowering the community of listeners to a certain extent. In addition, commentaries from social critics broadcast in the format of a monologue or while they are participating in the talk shows in the company of politicians provide different perspectives to the public than those provided by politicians interested in a particular outcome that is more favourable to their respective parties. In other words, talk shows have enlarged the public sphere of political debate in Nepal.

Independent radios have assisted public deliberations via other program formats as well. These would include short interviews, news, commentaries, magazine reports, special thematic programs, radio drama, etc. Through short interviews and news, listeners have had a chance to hear a lot from politicians, constitutional experts and others about the rapid political changes of the past two years and about the ongoing political process to elect the constituent assembly. Though talk about poverty and development issues have been sidelined a bit (compared to the late 1990s), they have not completely vanished from the programs in these formats.

According to Gunakar Aryal of Radio Madanpokhara, in his experience, news has not been a very good format for promoting public deliberations on poverty and development. “Educational programs, radio plays and even musical programs have been far more effective when it comes to promoting discussions on poverty and development; radio magazines come second,” added Aryal. Mohan Chapagain of Radio Lumbini added that radio programs have urged individuals to do more than just deliberate on issues related to development. He gave the example of a radio program that prompted a listener with money to engage in local philanthropy by paying for the construction of drinking water pipes for a school.<sup>35</sup> Development issues feature prominently in magazine reports and special thematic programs, some of whom are being produced by civil society organizations as mentioned above.

Although an overwhelming number of radios on air are still located in urban areas or district headquarters, most of their listeners are located in rural areas of Nepal. Hence, according to Guragain and Ghimire (2005: 35-51), the pressure to broadcast contents that are relevant to the needs and aspirations of Nepalis living in rural Nepal bears equally upon commercial and community stations. On issues that have a direct bearing

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<sup>35</sup> Personal communication with Gunakar Aryal and Mohan Chapagain, December 2007.

on social development, independent radios have played an important role. In particular, they have been important partners in the campaign against untouchability spearheaded by dalit activists, the campaign against social discrimination of widowed women, the campaign against the practice of dowry, and in the rights-based movement of women, dalits, children and others. Independent radios have contributed to the positive public evaluation of such campaigns and to enhance the self-confidence of poor and socially excluded groups and communities, conclude Guragain and Ghimire.

However they also add that the total minutes of broadcast time dedicated to programs related to agriculture, skills development, livelihoods, and other concerns of the rural-area based listeners is very small compared to the total minutes of daily broadcasts by the various radios on air. Most commercial stations are not interested in broadcasting programs targeted to farmers or related to their concerns. Although many programs are targeted at the poor, Guragain and Ghimire argue that only a few raise the issue of poverty. Programs on development and health, on the other hand, do get lots of air time. Despite these shortcomings, radio promoter Gopal Guragain has concluded that independent radios have created a curiosity regarding local development, facilitated the participation of citizens in national development activities, enhanced the political consciousness of its listeners and contributed to the deepening of democracy at the local level.<sup>36</sup>

Radio activist Raghu Mainali feels that in the past 10 years, independent radios have successfully brought the voices of those marginalised in Nepali society to the mainstream of Nepali social and political life. He adds that these radios have made public the fundamental strength of local communities. By amplifying the voice of various communities, Mainali adds that these radios have contributed to the reduction of poverty. They have also played a role in empowering local people and made rulers more accountable to them. By doing this, according to Mainali, radio has contributed to the creation of public knowledge about good governance and the delivery of development. He also adds that radio has played a significant role in the rights-based social movements of women, ethnic and linguistic minorities. All this has

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<sup>36</sup> This passage is based on Guragain's responses in the interview with Parajulee (2007: 124-25).

contributed to the enhancement of the living standard of local people, claims Mainali.<sup>37</sup>

Evidence presented by those who have been involved in promoting independent radio in Nepal or in producing contents for both commercial and community stations has suggested that these radios have been at the forefront of promoting political debate in the country. Radio reporters have given instant reports and news of all kinds of political activities and transitions that have taken place in national politics in Nepal. Analysts have also claimed that radio and other media have played a decisive role in relegating King Gyanendra to the margins of Nepali politics during and after the completion of the successful Second People's Movement in spring 2006 (e.g. Dahal 2009). During that Movement, most radios sided with those who wanted to put an end to King Gyanendra's active rule. When it reached its climax in April 2006, many radio stations became the media of expression to those who wanted to see not only the end of Gyanendra's active rule but also an end to monarchy as a political institution. During the People's Movement, news in FM radios allowed listeners to be aware of what was happening in different parts of the country. The talk shows highlighted why King Gyanendra's role as an active monarch had to end. According to media researcher Devraj Humagain who has closely observed the FM radio scene since 2001, independent radio prompted listeners to participate in the Movement.<sup>38</sup> Radio promoter Raghu Mainali has claimed that the large and non-violent participation of the Nepali people in the movement can be attributed to the work of independent radio.<sup>39</sup>

Subsequent to this movement, the level of curiosity regarding politics among listeners has been enhanced through radio's continuous coverage of what has been described as Nepal's most recent 'political transition'. According to media researcher Humagain, this kind of continuous political coverage has allowed listeners to be constantly aware of what is happening at the political centre (Kathmandu) of the country.<sup>40</sup> FM news over the networks promoted by Communication Corner and others have allowed listeners in different parts of Nepal the luxury to know, almost in

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<sup>37</sup> This passage is based on Mainali's responses in the interview with Parajulee (2007: 108-09).

<sup>38</sup> Personal communication, January 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See Deane's (2006) interview with Mainali.

<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, January 2008.

a blow by blow basis, what is going on in Kathmandu amongst the political parties.

Local radios based in different parts of the country have done as much in the case of local politics even when there has not been much competitive substance in them because of the absence of elections to the locally elected bodies at the village, city or district levels for several years. Even in the absence of locally elected representatives, radios have promoted a culture of public hearing and accountability on the part of local politicians and administrators and have gotten them and their publics involved in a multi-way conversation. Independent radios as a source of information and communication among the poor and marginalised Nepalis have enhanced some aspects of their ability to influence their everyday circumstances and participation in the local-level democratic processes and political change.

The easy access (in being able to receive the signals and in economic terms) that independent radios have to a big majority of Nepalis when compared to both print and television media means that radio has a significantly different potential of influencing change in Nepal. Some aspects of this potential have been realised. Thus far, radio's contribution to inculcating a robust kind of political consciousness in the citizens of Nepal with respect to their political rights has been documented. Radio's ability to provide a degree of self-confidence to the citizens of the country so that they begin to have a healthy curiosity about their right to development and better living standards has also been recorded. These are important contributions but they alone can not assure that the multiply disenfranchised Nepalis will see optimistic political changes and benefit from the delivery of development services and outcomes. While radios have enlarged the scope of the political debates in Nepal, we can not demonstrate that they have played a significant part in ensuring a political outcome that is robust. Radios have been building pressure on the political parties but only the parties can ensure a smooth political transition and the writing of a new constitution through the Constituent Assembly. In December 2009, it looked unlikely that the new constitution will be written by May 2010, the deadline set according to stipulations in the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Martin Chautari (2009a, 2009b) for reports on the constitution-writing process through the Constituent Assembly.



*Journalistic Engagement*

However radio's full potential have not been realized for reasons that are internal to the sector as well and this we will analyse here briefly. Despite the relative success of independent radio, the current performance level of radio journalists in Nepal leaves a lot to be desired. This is a concern to be discussed here because it impedes a better realisation of public engagement on important social and development-related issues. Let us only look at two genres of radio contents: news and talk shows.

In the early days of independent radio in Nepal, radio journalists who were all, relatively speaking, new in the profession were at a disadvantage when compared with their colleagues in print journalism. Some who had come to do radio had a print media background but found the new medium and its requirements challenging. Others with no previous journalism background were inducted in the radio sector as raw personnel. They had to learn the techniques of radio format and the skills of journalism while on the job. Hence in the early days, independent radio journalists were not equipped, relatively speaking, both in the newsroom infrastructure preparedness sense and in terms of their personal skills, to broadcast breaking news. Instead they focused their attention at social reportage (this was especially true for Radio Sagarmatha in the late 1990s) and given the absence of such contents in Radio Nepal, their work attracted both attention and appreciation from the public at large. Political news in the then new radios, it could be said, was a derivative product of what the print media had covered.

In the most recent past, radio journalists are increasingly involved in the practice of broadcasting breaking news. In fact one could even say that the frequent (hourly) news bulletins in most independent FMs have become the most popular news format. Many of these bulletins are produced with a shoestring budget. Even as the number of the news bulletins was increased over the years, station owners have been reluctant to add additional journalists and make new investments in their news teams. For instance one FM in the south-central city of Hetaunda had just two reporters and an editor staffing its newsroom in early November 2007.<sup>42</sup> It is rather common to find radio stations where staff exclusively dedicated to news production is absent. In 2005, at one leading commercial station in Pokhara, the person who headed the news section also hosted several talk shows a week and handled some phone-in entertainment-oriented programs apart from managing the station. As a

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<sup>42</sup> Personal communication with Hari Humagain, Hetaunda FM, November 2007

result, there is a severe lack of editorial depth even in stations that have been on air for a good part of the past decade. This lack shows up in poor news judgment and broadcast of news that have not been cross-verified.

According to Gopal Guragain, the director of the production house Communication Corner, there is a looming crisis that independent radios are inviting upon themselves given their penchant to be the first to broadcast news that have not been processed according to the correct editorial protocols. Continuous abuse of editorial authority on the part of unscrupulous radio producers is likely to bring discredit to the entire independent radio sector.<sup>43</sup>

If that is the case with news, what is the state of journalistic performance in talk shows? Talk show hosts pioneered discussions on current affairs and much else in independent radio in the late 1990s. These programs, it could be said, contributed to radio's role in expanding the burgeoning Nepali public sphere around the turn of the century. They brought into public scrutiny many aspects of Nepali society in ways that were certainly new for Nepal during the late 1990s. However, this format and its achievements started to plateau by the year 2002 or so. In the late 1990s, it was common for talk show hosts – even those who produced several programs a week – to be their own producer, researcher and anchor. That situation was then justified, both by the producers involved and by station managers, as somewhat 'natural' given the infancy of the independent radio sector. However, the execution template of the single-person produced talk show has not changed much in stations with such programs in the past five to six years.

According to journalists, one of the main reasons for this stagnation was again the unwillingness of the radio stations to make additional investments in the personnel producing such programs. "I have given up on the hope that I will ever have a research assistant to run my daily evening show" said Kiran Pokharal who hosted the popular talk show *Ājakā Kurā* in Radio Sagarmatha. "The idea that I might need research help in running my two talk shows is so alien to the station management that I have not even made a proposal to them regarding this," said Shreeram Paudel who hosted *Ājako Sandarbha* and *Samaya Cakra* in Image FM. When asked if the increasing competition in the talk show genre in the FM stations in Kathmandu has helped to upgrade its quality, Pokharal mentioned his personal effort, adding that it is necessary to maintain his reputation. Paudel added, "When doing programs related to

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<sup>43</sup> Mentioned in his response in the interview with Parajulee (2007: 134).

politics, I discuss them with my reporter colleagues. However, there is no structural strength and this shows when I do programs on non-political issues."<sup>44</sup>

Other journalists too have often blamed the managers of radio stations – commercial owned or NGO owned – who ask them to increase the quantity of programs broadcast with very little new investment. There seems much truth in their accusation. Most radio stations can not demonstrate that they have added investments on their news teams and talk shows even when they are producing more of both compared to four or five years ago. In fact the station manager of a relatively new commercial FM in Kathmandu (Ujyalo FM), Manteswori Rajbhandary acknowledges that a talk show hosted by one of her colleagues had to be put on hold because she could not provide a research assistant to him. According to her, except for donor-supported programs, the station does not have enough money of its own to produce such talk shows. However, she does not feel that all the blame should go to radio station management. Even as the intellectual resources available to radio journalists have increased significantly over the last decade, she feels that many of those who have joined the sector recently do not apply themselves adequately to prepare for a long-career in radio journalism.<sup>45</sup> “Journalists employed by radio stations do have the time to do research on topics they are chasing as reporters or talk show hosts but they do not do research because they fail to see it as a long-term investment in their own careers,” adds Rajbhandary.

What this means is that while the enthusiasm and skills of individual radio journalists have contributed to making radio an important media of public engagement in Nepal, robust institutional investments on enhancing their performance capacity are still lacking. Those who have joined the sector recently have not been provided institutional incentives to apply themselves to produce stellar quality programs. As a result, the quality of journalistic engagement in important issues across the board has not improved in the desired manner.

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<sup>44</sup> Personal communication with Kiran Pokharel, Radio Sagarmatha, December 2007; with Shreeram Paudel, Image FM, December 2007. Both of them have since quit working for radio. Paudel works as an anchor for a new television station.

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication, December 2007. Rajbhandary is no longer the station manager of Ujyalo FM although she continues to serve as one of the directors of its parent organization Communication Corner.

## Conclusion

The diverse ownership scheme and the spatial distribution of radios all over Nepal mean that independent radios are part of the partially successful democratization process that is ongoing in the country. This is a reflection of how the erstwhile Kathmandu-dominated country is gradually changing. It is a reflection of how power relations between the capital and other regions of the country as well as between the traditional ruling class/caste and other sections of Nepali society are being increasingly negotiated and managed by radio and other types of intermediate-level organizations located in various parts of Nepal.

In this scenario, radio contents have become a relatively cheap resource with which Nepalis can think about issues that concern their lives and the life of the nation at large. Many listeners have easy access to the new radios while others have found ways to influence their contents to a limited extent. While independent radios have been a good medium for public engagement in issues concerning poverty, development and political change, the level of journalistic performance has not improved substantially. It must be emphasized that since the radio sector in Nepal continues to experience fast growth and change, the conclusions reached in this article are somewhat preliminary in nature. Within the next three to five years, they will probably have to be seriously revisited.

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