

Risk, Resilience & Futures

*A report on Media viability
in India, Nepal & Bangladesh*



About the project

This research project was designed to provide an in-depth assessment of the media landscape in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh by employing comprehensive indicators developed by UNESCO and the Deutsche Welle (DW) Academy. Focused on media viability, the study seeks to analyse the sustainability, diversity, and independence of media outlets; as well as organizational, financial and professional aspects contributing to media viability in these South Asian countries. The project was designed and conducted by Ideosync Media Combine, and was made possible through a UNESCO IPDC grant.

About UNESCO IPDC

The International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) promotes media development within developing countries, countries in transition, and countries in conflict and post-conflict situations. As the only multilateral forum in the UN system designed to mobilize the international community around media development, the Programme provides support for media projects while seeking accord to secure a healthy environment for the growth of free and pluralistic press.

About Ideosync Media Combine

Ideosync Media Combine was established in 1998 and works at the intersection of communities, communication and social transformation. Our projects are designed to deepen equitable and meaningful access to digital media and technologies, and ensure communication justice for all. Our work is founded on principles of gender and knowledge equity, community participation and freedom of speech. We work through research, capacity building, training and participatory content creation.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction	1
Country Profiles	2
Chapter II: Methodological Note	5
Deutsche Welle's (DW) Media Viability Indicators	6
Chapter III: Desk Research Findings	7
Media Viability Indicator 1: Politics	7
Media Viability Indicator 2: Economics	21
Media Viability Indicator 3: Community	24
Media Viability Indicator 4: Technology	25
Media Viability Indicator 5: Content & Expertise	29
Chapter IV: Primary Research Findings	39
Media Viability Indicator 1: Politics	39
Media Viability Indicator 2: Economics	41
Media Viability Indicator 3: Community	44
Media Viability Indicator 4: Technology	45
Media Viability Indicator 5: Content & Expertise	50
Chapter V: Key Conclusions	53
Chapter VI: Media Viability Strategies	55
Chapter VII: Limitations	60

Chapter I

Introduction

News media around the world have been facing significant turbulence, as seen in the scale of layoffs and the closure of media outlets over the past decades¹. This trend has been well-documented in reportage and research by various organisations, international bodies and the media themselves. Adding to this bleak financial scenario, mounting pressures on other facets of news media are undoubtedly threatening the sustainability of independent journalism. These pressures include, but are not limited to, challenges in the domains of press freedom and the safe working conditions of journalists. In 2024, the situation worsened, with an unprecedented increase in the number of journalists killed in their line of duty, particularly in conflict zones. Furthermore, news media organisations cannot ignore larger technological shifts, such as the growth of artificial intelligence, which is already transforming newsrooms.

Given this background, an inquiry into the status of media viability in various countries is a crucial starting point for understanding the sustainability of news media. It reveals the resilience and creativity (or the lack thereof) when faced with growing pressures from different quarters. This report is an effort to contribute to the understanding of news media viability in the South Asian context, focusing on India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The objective of the research is to examine the current status of news media in these countries and suggest strategies informed by primary and secondary research that could meaningfully advance the media viability agendas in the given contexts.

Media viability is defined as the ability of media organisations to do quality journalism in a sustainable manner. It is intricately connected to economic, socio-political and technological dimensions of media organisations and the societies within which they function.

¹<https://www.newslaundry.com/2024/09/05/80-forced-to-quit-pci-report-on-covid-job-losses-details-how-media-ignored-govt-directives>

<https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/01/journalism-layoffs-00138517>

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/jun/30/newspapers-closing-us-rate-two-a-week>

Country Profiles

India

India is the most populated country in the world, with 1.45 billion people spread across its 28 states and eight union territories. The governing structure of the country is the parliamentary system with the President as the constitutional head of the country and the Prime Minister as the head of the Union government. Each state has a similar governing structure to that of the Indian Union's government at its centre. The Indian judicial system includes the Supreme Court as the apex body followed by High Courts and District Courts. India is recorded to have more than 600 million people in the labour force in the standard economic sense as per the latest international statistics. The [union minimum base wages](#) are between Rs. 300 (3.38 USD) and Rs. 450 (5.08 USD), which differ across labour categories. India is a 3.91 trillion USD economy as per the [World Bank data](#). The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognises 22 official languages, among which what the [Census](#) grouped as Hindi has the highest number of speakers in the country (520 million speakers). The second highest number of speakers are Telugu, followed by Tamil and Urdu. According to the last [nationwide Census](#), the national adult literacy rate of the country is 69.3 per cent, and the gender disparity in the literacy rate stands at 19.50.

The number of [registered publications](#), including dailies, in 2024-2025 stands at 1,54,523. While the government owns 0.4% of the total publications, almost 76 percent of registered publications are owned by individuals. The daily circulation figures based on the [government data](#) are a little higher than 210 million. The radio sector in India consists of All India Radio, the state broadcaster and 388 private FM channels and 531 community radios as of 2025. The state broadcaster has 591

stations across the country. The national television broadcaster Doordarshan has 35 channels, which include international broadcasting. Meanwhile, the number of private satellite channels stands at 908 in 2025.

Digital media and television hold the highest and second-highest shares of media and entertainment mediums in India. The number of standalone and YouTube digital news publishers in 2025 is 3,578, excluding the 618 digital arms of newspapers and 97 digital arms of established TV news channels.

According to the 2024 report by Kantar and Internet and Mobile Association of India, the number of internet users in India stood at 886 million and growing.

² In the Indian census, Hindi language is a constellation of 56 mother tongues and other languages which has a speech community around a little more than 10 million people.

Nepal

Nepal is a landlocked South Asian country sharing borders with India and China. It is known for its geography which consists of some of the highest mountain ranges in the world. According to the [2021 national Census](#), the population stands close to 30 million spread across its seven provinces. Like India, the President serves as the constitutional head of the country while the Prime Minister heads the federal government. Provincial governments have a similar structure to that of the federal government. The judicial system is three-tiered with the Supreme Court on top followed by High Courts and District Courts. The economically active 15.69 million people above age 10 in the latest Census are agriculture, forestry, and fishery workers. The Nepal economy is currently [valued](#) at 42.9 billion USD. The minimum monthly wage set by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security is 19,550 NPR (222.30 USD).

There are more than [120 languages](#) spoken in Nepal with Nepali being the most spoken language followed by languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tamang, and Tharu. As per the [2021 Census](#), the country's literacy rate for people aged 5 and above stands at 76.3 percent and the gender disparity in literacy is around 14.2 percent. A [report](#) citing Press Council data in 2021 notes that there are close to 8,000 registered newspapers in the country including 744 dailies. The largest Nepali daily, [Kantipur](#), claims to have a circulation of around 0.453 million and an online readership of 1.5 million. The radio sector consists of state broadcaster Radio Nepal, more than 700 private FM channels, and more than 300 community radio stations. The television sector of the country has the state broadcaster Nepal Television and more than 100 licensed private broadcasters

In 1996, Kathmandu Post from Nepal became one of the pioneering digital news publishers in South Asia. As of 2017, 976 websites are voluntarily registered as digital news publishers with the Department of Information. According to DataReportal, there were 16.5 million internet users in Nepal.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the [third](#) most populated South Asian country with more than [165 million people](#) and shares its borders with India and Myanmar. The [country](#) has a parliamentary system of government with the President as the head of state. The Prime Minister is in charge of the government and the country is divided into eight administrative divisions of first order. [The Supreme Court](#) of Bangladesh, the apex judicial body, consists of appellate and high court divisions. In addition to this, there are subordinate courts, tribunals, and civil and criminal courts. According to World Bank data, the labour force of the country stands at more than [75 million](#).

The Bangladeshi economy is currently [valued](#) at 540.12 billion. While around 38 languages are spoken in the country, Bangla is the official language. The [minimum monthly wage](#) has remained at 8000 BT (65.54 USD) since 2018. The wage board set up for garment workers proposed a revised minimum wage for the industry of 12500 BT (113 USD) in 2023. According to the 2022 [Census](#), the national literacy rate among people aged 7 and above is 74.66 percent and the gender disparity is around 4 percent.

Meanwhile in the TV sector, the country has the state broadcaster, Bangladesh TV, and 50 licensed private channels. According to the 2022 Census, 72.31 percent of the population aged above 18 used mobile phones, and 37.01 percent of the same group reported having accessed the internet in the three months leading up to the census.

A report citing the Information Minister in 2018 notes that Bangladesh has 3,035 registered publications among which 1,191 are daily newspapers. The radio sector in the country consists of Bangladesh Betar, the state broadcaster, 22 private FMs (as of 2019), and 18 community radios.

Chapter II

Methodological Note

The research has two major components: an in-depth desk research followed by primary data collection using mixed methods. As its guiding framework, the research adopted [Deutsche Welle's \(DW\) Media Viability Indicators](#), which were built on UNESCO's Media Viability Indicators, for the country-wise desk research. During this stage, data were sourced primarily from government reports, websites, research reports, news articles, and sources such as websites and articles of organisations working in the field of press and media globally and within specific countries. To ensure relevance, sources dating back to 2014 were used, except in cases where older data were essential, such as the 2011 Indian Census.

The desk research findings revealed certain gaps in data under the five DW indicators: politics, economics, community, technology, and content and expertise, which then guided the subsequent primary data collection stages. As part of this primary research, virtual roundtables (as proxy focus group discussions) with editors, journalists, and representatives of media organisations were conducted for all the countries. Thereafter, in-depth online interviews with news media professionals were conducted with representatives from all three countries.

While conscious efforts were made to maintain balanced representation from mainstream, independent, and small news media outlets in the primary data collection stages, the research ended up with different participant compositions in the three countries. In India, there were more research participants who were media professionals from independent, small, and digital news outlets, given the limited response to our invitations from mainstream and print media professionals. In Nepal, the research participants were mostly from mainstream print media and representatives of media organisations, along with a few editors of small media outlets. In Bangladesh, the research had participants from mainstream print, TV, and radio outlets.

The qualitative data collected from both methods have been thematically analysed through manual coding. In addition to the qualitative data, surveys were conducted to understand the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in newsrooms and the gender dynamics as well as the gender compositions in newsrooms across the three countries.

A detailed breakdown of research participation/sample is given below:

India	Nepal	Bangladesh
Roundtable Participants		
14	11	14
In-depth Interviews		
12	6	11
(8 out of 12 participants are/were in editorial/managerial positions of news outlets)	(5 out of 6 participants are/were in editorial/coordinators positions of news outlets)	(7 out of 11 participants are/were in editorial/managerial positions of news outlets)

Deutsche Welle's (DW) Media Viability Indicators



Politics

The first indicator of the DW Media Viability framework is politics. The emphasis is on a country's political and legal frameworks that influence journalism and news media.



Community

This indicator focuses on various aspects pertaining to the audience, including their capacities, perceptions, uses and values.



Technology

This indicator seeks to examine the intersections of technologies, news media, and audiences. One of the core questions under this indicator is understanding the technological competencies of news organisations for their sustainable functioning.



Economics

This indicator addresses the economic dimensions of media organizations, particular those that define their primary work as news and the broader economic conditions that contribute to the functioning of media markets in a fair and sustainable way. It also considers the relationship between audience affordability and media sustainability.



Content & Expertise

This indicator focuses on the journalistic aspect of the news media, including the production of quality journalistic content, newsroom structures and ownership, the ability to accommodate professional journalists, and the business expertise of news outlets.

Chapter III

Desk Research Findings



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 1

Politics

The analysis of the desk research shows that the political environments within which news media operate in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh are mired in constraints at multiple levels such as institutional and legal that threaten a free and viable press. **In India**, the Constitution does not have any specific articles covering press freedom. The press in India derives its right from [Article 19 \(1\) \(a\)](#) of the Constitution that guarantees freedom of speech and expression as the fundamental right of every citizen which is not absolute in character. Further, [19 \(2\)](#) of the Constitution establishes a list of contexts in which the state is allowed to curtail the rights stated in 19 (1) (a) which it calls reasonable restrictions. The list includes sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with Foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence. Historically, 19 (2) has been used to legitimize the instances of curbing freedom of speech and expression (including media) in the country.

Several recent reports on India suggest regression of democracy and a weakening of institutions such as the judiciary in the country. For instance, the V-Dem [Democracy Report](#) of 2025 mentions India as one of the countries where autocracy has been tightening. The report uses government censorship of the media as one of the indicators to evaluate the state of democracy across countries and India ranks extremely poorly on this measure. Meanwhile, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, which analyses the transformation of developing countries, in its [2024 executive summary](#) of India states that the present Indian government is continuing to undermine democratic institutions

and pursuing agendas to transform the country into a Hindu-majoritarian state. While an independent judiciary is considered one of the core pillars of healthy democracies, the [2025 report](#) of the International Commission of Jurists concludes that the independence of the Indian judiciary faces structural challenges among others that weaken its functions in a healthy democracy.

India remains a country with no independent media regulator and media regulation is handled by different government ministries and bodies that receive state funding.

There are no laws [regulating](#) horizontal monopolies in the media industry or to prevent cross-ownership and vertical integration. Parthasarathi and Agarwal (2020) note that news media regulation in India is characterised by state intervention in various forms and fragmentary institutional jurisdictions. The state intervenes through status, laws, and executive orders and the news media falls under the ambit of different ministries and departments. For instance, digital news media falls under the purview of the Ministry of Commerce through its regulation of foreign direct investment (FDI), while it also comes within the ambit of the Competition Commission of India, a

statutory body that regulates market competition in the country. With the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023, they also come under the purview of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

Community radio (CR) in India remains a terrain where the government has near total control over even though the CR movement of India was about establishing an independent media tier distinct from the State and the private sectors. This is evidenced by the fact that acquiring a license for starting a community radio requires filling out multiple applications and personally appearing in multiple ministries. The application process is cumbersome, lengthy, and even expensive for interested groups. Additionally, community radio and Frequency Modulation (FM) radio channels are banned from independently broadcasting news. A 2016 research article in [The Hoot](#) reveals that community radio ownership largely lies with politicians, NGOs with political leanings, security agencies and governments or entities funded by state money, directly or indirectly.

There are other laws in place which are relevant to media outlets including the defamation law under Section 499 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) (previously known as Indian Penal Code) and copyright laws. Indian newspapers are required to adhere to the Norms of Journalistic Conduct by the Press Council of India, while TV broadcasters have to enforce Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act of 1995.

Digital outlets are regulated under Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000 and the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021. Sections 69A and 79 of the IT Act gives the state powers to order online intermediaries to take down content if it deems so.

A 2020 [article](#) on the content takedown demonstrates that the content removal process which can be authorised by a central government personnel not below the rank of Joint Secretary, is strictly confidential, making it impossible for affected parties including users, to know the exact reasoning for the takedown. 69A of the IT Act allows the state to issue blocking orders in the interests of sovereignty, security, integrity, defense, public order among others. Previously in 2015, the Supreme Court of India struck [down Section 66A](#) of the IT Act which penalised online communication of offensive speech (causing annoyance, inconvenience, injury, obstruction, etc.) citing the violation of freedom of speech and expression guaranteed in the Constitution. According to the consolidated [Foreign Direct Investment \(FDI\)](#) policy of 2020, the FDI cap on news and current affairs in digital media and newspapers is 26 percent requiring approval of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It also depends on the criteria that the majority of directors need to be Indian citizens and top officials of the organization need to be resident Indians. FDI for Uplinking of news and current affairs TV channels is at 49 percent.

[India's performance](#) in the Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders has been consistently poor over the [past decade](#), suggesting the consistently challenging environment in which the press works in the country. Reporters without Borders states that "India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for the media" and that journalists who are often critical of the government are "routinely subjected to online harassment, intimidation, threats and physical attacks, as well as criminal prosecutions and arbitrary [arrests](#)". In response to the low Press Freedom Index ranking, India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, [stated](#) that India has "the most uncontrollable press" and termed the press index as "mind games."

There have also been several reports of the government employing the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) to charge and [imprison journalists](#) in connection with their work. In 2023, the Indian government banned a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary that critiqued the current Indian Prime Minister using emergency powers under the IT Rules, 2021 and the BBC offices in India were [raided by income tax officials](#) weeks after the release of the documentary. This was not a standalone instance as a few other media outlets including The Quint and The News Minute also faced income tax raids, which were reported to be media [intimidation](#) on the part of the government. In 2023, NewsClick, a news media outlet headquartered in New Delhi, was raided by the Enforcement Directorate department and later, the founder editor Prabir Purkayastha was arrested under the UAPA. The Supreme Court of the country later pronounced this [arrest as illegal](#) and ordered his bail. There have been several incidents in the recent past where the Indian government has ordered to take down or block news content of various organisations such as [The Caravan](#), [The Wire](#), and [Vikatan Plus](#). Foreign correspondents seem to be having a tough time reporting in the country, particularly in the last [10 years](#). New Delhi's Foreign Correspondents Club has at least 70 foreign nationals in India who have a permit to practise journalism in the country. Multiple foreign

journalists have spoken about facing "visa uncertainty, denial of travel permits, even deportation threats" as mentioned earlier, which makes it an [unconducive work environment](#). On another front, a [sting operation](#) by a news organisation also showed a deeply ingrained bias towards the ruling party within many of the country's largest media outlets and organisations.

Women journalists in the country experience high levels of harassment, some of whom have had to face censorship, intimidation, and even police custody or imprisonment for their reportage.

Such gendered violence also takes the form of vicious attacks on social media platforms. In one such incident, women journalists' photographs were morphed with the bodies of porn artists and their telephone numbers and addresses were published in a major invasion of privacy and a threat to their safety. A few such digital crimes also specifically target Muslim women journalists. In 2022, a few such Muslim journalists found their pictures on an app called "[Bulli Bai](#)" in which they were being "auctioned for sale" as the "Bulli bai" of the day. Apart from such instances, a lot of women journalists periodically face trolling, online threats and hate messages which take a toll on their mental health and their ability to [work](#).

In terms of access to information, the country has seen a decade without a single press conference from the current Prime Minister who has been the head of state since 2014. It is pointed out by many as a crucial indicator of a lack of transparency from the state. Additionally, restrictions were put in place for reporters who wanted to access the Indian Parliament during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these curbs were not lifted after the pandemic, leading to protests by [journalists](#).

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 has a clause to amend Section 8 of the landmark Right to Information Act (RTI), which deals with exemptions from the disclosure of information. This amendment adds further exemptions to the RTI, exempting “information which relates to personal information,” severely undermining the purpose of the RTI Act as most information, including that of government officials, can ultimately be linked to an [individual](#).

This amendment adds further exemptions to the RTI, exempting “information which relates to personal information,” severely undermining the purpose of the RTI Act as most information, including that of government officials, can ultimately be linked to an [individual](#). Other amendments have also been made to this Act over the years, some of which have bypassed the attention of journalists, even as some activists and a few opposition parties have protested and attempted to [push back](#) these

changes. The wait time after a person requests information under the RTI Act has also increased over time, fueling [public resentment](#). In 2024, [The Hindu](#) reported that the Railways had issued an advisory for its officers after an officer responded to a query regarding the cost of 3D selfie booths with the Prime Minister’s image. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) has [documented](#) 74 deaths, 164 assaults, and 180 cases of RTI activists being threatened since the RTI Act came into effect. Further, a [citizen group’s report](#) on the workings of the Information Commission across the country revealed that six out of 21 commissions were defunct across various periods from July 1, 2024 to October 7, 2025 demonstrating the poor functioning of the RTI overseeing body. A 2025 [memorandum](#) submitted by the Press Council of India to the Minister for Electronics and Information Broadcasting states that the Digital Personal Data Protection fails to exempt journalists who collect, process, and publish public and private data for the larger public good as part of their work. In such a scenario, it puts journalists liable for heavy penalties prescribed by the Act.

India is also actively working on creating a Broadcasting Bill that seeks to regulate Over-the-Top (OTT) services and digital news. It has been reported that a [draft of the bill](#) was unofficially released by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 2024 and later withdrawn. The government has not acknowledged the release of this draft publicly, which, according to reports in the public domain, was intended to strongly restrict freedom of speech and expression in the digital realm.

In Nepal, the [Constitution](#) ensures the right to freedom of expression, right to communication, access to information, and the right to privacy as fundamental rights under Articles 17, 19, 27, and 28. Article 17 states that every citizen shall have freedom of opinion and expression whereas Article 19 (1) states that no publication and broadcasting or dissemination or printing of any news item, editorial, feature article or other reading, audio and audiovisual material

through any means whatsoever including electronic publication, broadcasting and printing shall not be censored. However, reasonable restrictions apply to sections that include but are not limited to protecting the nationality, sovereignty and indivisibility of Nepal, contempt of court, inciting materials, indecency and inciting untouchability or gender discrimination. The independence of the judiciary in Nepal faces challenges, as many judicial council members belong to political parties. The Nepal Bar Association tends to appoint judges close to mainstream political parties and it also does not have a clear record of judges, judiciary staff, and legal [professionals](#).

In the Press Freedom Index, Nepal has often oscillated by 20 positions upwards and downwards in the last five years. In 2025, it slipped to the 90th position from the 74th position in 2024. Similar to India, an independent regulatory body for media is [absent](#) in Nepal and the regulation is done by various government agencies or departments.

The governing laws of the media in Nepal are the [Press and Publication Act of 1992](#), the [National Broadcasting Act of 1993](#), and the [Working Journalists Act of 1995](#). The [Press and Publication Act of 1992](#) regulates print media, whereas the [National Broadcasting Act](#) regulates radio and television.

The Working Journalists Act governs the working conditions of journalists. The [Copyright Act of 2022](#) provides exclusive rights to creators or authors. Copyright allows creators or authors the right to reproduction, translation, adaptation, alteration, public performance, broadcasting, communication to the public, distribution, and rental. The duties and responsibilities of journalists and media houses are clearly outlined in the 2016 Journalist's Code of Conduct in Nepal, which also allows reporters to protect confidential sources and requires them to credit the original source when republishing or [broadcasting material](#).

The country has seen the introduction of several bills and legal instruments in the last few years which received widespread criticism for allowing governments to exercise and control free speech and media. **In 2020, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology tabled a new Public Service Broadcasting Bill, which was widely criticised for granting the government more control over national broadcasters like Nepal Television and Radio Nepal. It was also argued that the bill would compromise editorial independence by enabling politicians to issue directives to broadcasters.** There is currently no law governing digital media platforms, so the government introduced the Online Media Operations Directive 2017 as guidelines for the registration, renewal, and operations of [digital media](#). The [Electronic Transactions Act 2063 \(ETA\)](#) of 2008 has vague provisions that are often exploited to stifle freedom of expression and target journalists, as well as social media posts. There have been instances in the past of legal actions against journalists and social media users, restricting their online expression. In 2020, four new bills, the Advertisement Regulation Bill, the IT Bill, the Nepal Media Council Bill, and the Public Service Broadcasting Bill, were proposed by the government of Nepal. Like the Public Service Broadcasting Bill in India, the [Nepal Media Council Bill](#), which was passed by the parliament in early 2025, was criticised for [undermining](#) independent media structures. The bill will replace the

the existing Press Council of Nepal with a Nepal Media Council, and the chairperson will be appointed by the government. Previously, its chairperson was selected by the members of the council.

Nepal's new penal code, passed in 2018, states in its 58th point that any action meant to intimidate, cause fear, or terror to the President or the Nepal parliament will be considered a criminal offense.

The code also forbids publishing private information, including that of officials, and imposes a ban on recording conversations without permission. It requires photographers to obtain permits before taking, selling, or publishing photographs. Experts believe the move is guided by a desire to control the [free press](#). To address challenges such as credibility and misinformation, the government of Nepal has proposed a Social Media Bill 2025, a reworked version of the IT Bill proposed in 2019, which was shelved due to backlash. The bill aims to regulate social media platforms and their users through compulsory registration and harsh penalties. The government claims that the bill is not intended to curb freedom of expression and has outlined around a dozen punishable offenses, which the public finds [concerning](#).

In Nepal, the Right to Information Act came into effect in 2007 and as per the 2019/20 National Information Commission annual report, the federal level implementation of the Act was observed to be satisfactory with a greater need for reform in provinces. However, the 2025 report by Open Knowledge Nepal reports critical gaps in the implementation of the Act including definitional, access level, and institutional barriers. The government support to the media comes in the form of subsidies for raw materials, tax benefits, and provisions for foreign investments or funding assistance and government advertisements.

Political instabilities have always had a significant impact on the media in Nepal. The 2019 [report](#) prepared by Media Action Nepal on the media freedom lists multiple threats to free press in the country such as a coercive environment built by the government through intimidation using its departments such as police, restrictive laws that criminalise or penalise journalistic activities, and failure of the government to ensure safeguards and violation of international obligations. During the Madhes Movement 2015, there were many incidents of violation of press freedom including but not limited to attacks on journalists and media houses. Vehicles carrying newspapers were set on fire. Agitated political parties intimidated the media in various ways, dictating to them not to publish news of other [political parties](#). In 2022, in the days leading up to the national and provincial elections, the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) ordered Setopati, a Nepali news portal, to delete an article within 24 hours. A day later, they threatened a Facebook group titled No Not Again with a possible prison sentence of five years, accusing them of spreading propaganda and promoting hate speech through negative publicity. The Press Council Nepal (PCN) asked Nagarik Daily for an explanation for the publication of a [satirical cartoon](#) of the ex-Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. Journalists in Nepal report harassment from both officials and the [public](#).

According to Digital Rights Nepal, in 2022, Nepal witnessed 45 incidents of press freedom violations, including arrests, obstructions, threats, and attacks affecting over 120 journalists.

Nepal recorded 31 press freedom violations over a six-month period from October 2022 to March 2023, according to the International Press Institute. In 2023, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) recorded 58 [press freedom violations](#), including two arrests and one incident of [gender violence](#).

Political cadres, security personnel, and the public intimidate journalists which goes against the principles of a [free press](#) and builds an atmosphere of coercion for news media. The former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has routinely denied access to information and [misbehaved](#) with journalists in public. Rajeev Gurung, the former Minister of Physical Infrastructure and Transport for the Gandaki Provincial Government in Nepal, has [publicly told](#) a journalist he should be physically attacked. K.P. Oli, who was recently sworn in as the Prime Minister, marking his fourth time in office, has repeatedly [discredited and mocked](#) the media. In May 2024, Kailash Sirohiya, the chairman of Kantipur Media Group, was [arrested](#) on accusations that he held multiple citizenships. This incident took place based on a complaint by the then-Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane's political party, Rastriya Swatantra Party, shortly after Kantipur Media Group published stories [accusing Lamichhane](#) of embezzlement of cooperative savings.

On the other hand, women journalists reportedly face harassment as soon as they put forward views that do not align with mainstream ideas. They are also character-assassinated and [body-shamed](#). They do not tend to report harassment because the perpetrators are often powerful men who could [jeopardize their careers](#). Nepal has legislation addressing sexual harassment at the workplace.

[The Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act 2014](#) aims to create a secure and dignified work environment. A study by Media Advocacy Group (MAG) found that 88.6% of women journalists in Nepal have experienced online violence, with 53% facing harassment from people in their own profession.

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In Bangladesh, Article 39(2) of the [Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of expression for all its citizens and freedom of the press. However, like many other countries, these rights are subject to reasonable restrictions including national security interests, public order, decency, morality, friendly relations with foreign countries, indecency, defamation, and contempt of court. A 2019 report suggests that Bangladesh's judiciary is [heavily politicised](#), given the backdrop of two antagonistic major political parties in the country, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. This is particularly critical, considering that the [separation and independence](#) of the judiciary are outlined in the country's Constitution. The [reform of the judiciary](#) to maintain its independence has resurfaced in national conversations following the political turmoil of 2024. Bangladesh ranked 127th out of 142 countries in the [Rule of Law Index](#) for 2024, according to the World Justice Project. The country ranks constantly poor in the [Press Freedom Index](#) by Reporters Without Borders.

The Media Reform Commission, formed under the interim government of Bangladesh in 2024, concluded that laws both old and new continue to threaten journalistic freedom leading to state repression.




Media in Bangladesh is regulated through a variety of laws, such as the Special Powers Act of 1974, the Official Secrets Act of 1923, the Contempt of Court Act of 1926, the Copyright Act of 2000, and the Code of Criminal Procedure. The Bangladeshi Press Council, the official regulatory body in the country, was formed in 1979, and no other body exists to oversee the media in the country. The Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, the major collective of professional journalists, split into two in the mid-1990s over [political allegiances](#). The [Newspaper Employees \(Condition of Service\) Act of 1974](#) outlines the rights and privileges of journalists in Bangladesh. Additionally, Bangladesh has the [Right to Information Act](#), which was passed in 2009 to allow the public to access information from the government and private entities. **A 2021 report by the Media Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) concluded that journalists often do not receive complete information from requested authorities and that risk factors associated with using the information discourage journalists from using it.** Newspapers in the country reported having to pay corporate tax (27.5%) in Bangladesh, which is high and having to pay high import duty for newsprint as well. Newsprint, which is the primary raw material for newspapers, is currently subject to a 5% import duty, a 15% VAT, and a 5% Advance Income Tax (AIT). It has been reported that only six out of 584 newspapers paid their tax in the fiscal year 2023-3024. The same news report notes that despite repeated pleas from publishers to exempt newspapers from corporate tax, no progress has been made so far. Mediastar Limited, which operates *Prothom Alo*, pays the highest tax among newspapers, amounting to around 100-120 million Tk (823,331.23 USD-987,997.48 USD).

In early 2024, the then-government introduced the Cyber Security Act (CSA), which was criticised as a significant encroachment on the freedom of the press. It contains arbitrary clauses that empower the state to target what it deems as propaganda and allow for searches and seizures of equipment without warrants. **A 2024 Amnesty article states that the CSA includes draconian provisions from the previously repealed Digital Security Act of 2018, which succeeded the Information Technology Act of 2006.**

Journalists and media organisations frequently face threats, intimidation, and attacks in Bangladesh. A [2025 news report](#) from Shariatpur reveals attacks on three journalists over a news item that was published. Similarly, in early 2025, the office of the news outlet *Dainik Chattogram Pratidin* was [targeted](#) in an attempted attack by a large group of people. In early 2025, an [attack](#) on three journalists at the Supreme Court premises by members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was reported in the media. In 2024, Women's Press Freedom reported that female journalists, including photographers, were [indiscriminately attacked](#) during anti-government protests. Amy Jannat, a female journalist from United News of Bangladesh (UNB), was allegedly prohibited from entering the venue of the Qawmi Entrepreneurs Summit 2025 for reporting, with security guards stating that [no women were allowed](#) to cover the event. Women journalists in Bangladesh's media industry account for only 5 percent in print and 25 percent in electronic media. Bangladesh National Press Club's executive committee is [dominated by men](#) who are reported to be reluctant to grant membership to women. Available data suggests that only 54 of the club's 1218 people are women. In 2024, Somashte, an NGO based in Dhaka, launched [Support Desk for Journalists' Legal Aid](#) with the support of the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund.

² Privately accessed report

Press Freedom Ranks for the last five years
by Reporters Without Borders (out of 180 countries in the list)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
	142	150	161	159	151
	106	76	95	74	90
	152	162	163	165	149

Source: <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2025>

Reported journalist was killed in connection with their work.

2021-2025 (Source: https://cpj.org/data/killed/2025/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&start_year=2021&end_year=2025&group_by=location)



2021-2020 (Source: https://cpj.org/data/killed/2025/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&start_year=2000&end_year=2020&group_by=location)



Data Privacy and Digital Laws (passed/tabled) in India, Nepal and Bangladesh

India - Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

The Act primarily concerns digital data processing in the country.

Data processing in relation to personal data covers activities such as collection, recording, organising, structuring, storage, adaptation, retrieval, use, etc. by data fiduciaries. Data fiduciaries are individuals or groups who have a say on why and how personal data is processed. For instance, a social media platform is a data fiduciary since it as a group decides why and how its users' data is collected and processed.

Tiered approach to data fiduciaries, which means the Central Government will notify some as a Significant Data Fiduciary. Significant Data Fiduciaries have to appoint a Data Protection Officer based in India to represent them and be the point of contact for the overseeing body.

The Act lays out the obligations for data fiduciaries that include ensuring consent mechanisms for data processing, spelling out their 'Data Principals', meaning whose data will be processed by the fiduciary, grievance mechanisms, and withdrawal of consent at any point. Some instances where explicit consent taking is not necessary is also explained by the Act such as when Data Principal voluntarily gives data to the fiduciary, the state to discharge subsidy, benefit, service, certificate, license or permit when the beneficiary has already consented for processing her data for some other things previously, for the state to discharge its functions regarding any law or interest of sovereignty and integrity and security of the country, etc.

To process the data regarding children or a person with disability, data fiduciaries need to obtain verifiable consent from a parent or legal guardian. The Act prohibits Data Fiduciaries from engaging in tracking and targeted advertising of children.

Chapter V of the Act establishes the Data Protection Board of India, a statutory body that will oversee non-compliances concerning data processing in the country, outlined in the law. The Central Government has the right to appoint the members.

Section 38 (2) of the Act states that in cases of conflict with other laws, DPDP shall prevail. The Act outlines heavy amounts of penalties to Data Fiduciaries in cases of non-compliance, subject to its gravity, nature of personal data breaches, among other things.

Section 10 of the Act requires the platforms to obtain verifiable parental consent from parents for their children's data processing. This clause is anticipated to lead platforms to take a data-intensive approach such as seeking parents' IDs or Digi Lockers.

The Act provides broad exemptions to the state to access any information from any data fiduciary for the interests of sovereignty, integrity and security of the state. These terms which don't have any agreed-upon definitions, allow the central government to make decisions that could potentially fall under these. Also, it may require data fiduciaries to break end-to-end encryption.

The Act is widely criticised for its section on amendments to the RTI Act 8 (1) (j), which makes all personal information beyond the reach of RTI. It goes against the principle of balancing public interest and personal information. Personal information of officials is already protected in RTI which says that all personal information that satisfies the larger public interest only requires disclosure. Any such information that can not be denied to parliament and state legislature can not be denied to people as well. While the RTI says it prevails in occasions of conflict, the DPDP also states it prevails in the events of conflicts.

[Internet Freedom Foundation](#) has put out a reading of the DPDP rules, where they mention the following concerns: While Rule 3 says data fiduciaries must provide notice to Data Principals, the mechanisms by which it should be extended are unclear which may lead to platforms adopting dark patterns. Rule 6 prescribes adopting reasonable security safeguards by data fiduciaries, however it still lacks clarity on its implementation. Rule 15 exempts research, archiving and statistical purposes but fails to mention what constitutes this research and archiving. The appointments in the regulatory bodies established by the Act are to be made by the government which undermines the principle of an independent regulatory body

NEPAL - Social Media Bill 2081 (Proposed in early 2025)

According to the bill, companies, firms, or institutions wanting to operate social network platforms must obtain a license. Licensees must adhere to the terms and conditions and regulatory frameworks.

The applications will be reviewed by the concerned departments, and if the review deems the applicant detrimental to national security, sovereignty, geographical integrity, public security, national unity, independence, or dignity, the license will not be issued. In such a case, the applicant must be notified with written justification within seven days. The validity of the license is for two years. Six reasons are outlined as potential causes to revoke the license that include a threat to national security, harmony, sovereignty, geographical integrity, or national dignity and non-compliance with departmental instructions. An appeal can be made by companies in case they find the decisions unfair and the decisions of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology secretary will be final.

The bill lays out provisions regarding offenses, investigation, prosecution, trial, and appeal related to the use of social networks. If the department receives credible information, complaints, or evidence indicating that content published on a platform violates this Act or other existing laws, and finds it necessary to remove such content after verification, it may issue a directive to the permit holder or their local representative in Nepal to remove the content—either temporarily, permanently, partially, or entirely. Upon receiving such a directive, the permit holder or the local contact person must immediately remove the specified content. If the instructed content is not removed, the department may impose a fine ranging from NPR 500,000 to NPR 1.5 million, after giving the permit holder a fair opportunity to respond.

It mandates the users to not engage in any activity that insults or defames others with the intent to harm their dignity, including trolling, abusive language, or hate speech. “Hate speech” refers to content that incites violence or spreads hatred against individuals, groups, or communities and disrupts social harmony via posts, shares, comments, live streaming, tagging, hashtags, mentions, or similar actions. Sending or posting offensive or harmful content such as text, images, audio, video, or impersonations, on social networks to harass, intimidate, shame, insult, defame, or spread rumours constitutes cyberbullying under the bill.

[UNESCO](#) has reviewed the bill and raised the following concerns: The definitions of platforms and social media in the bill are intertwined, ambiguous and not in line with international documents. A platform is defined as a publicly available social media platform and social media is defined as a system that allows interactive communication. These are distinctive in covering a wide range of things such as internet infrastructures to AI tools, websites and social media platforms, among others.

The bill seeks to apply the same regulatory conditions to all things despite the difference in size, scale, user base and risk base. It then doesn't differentiate between large tech corporations and small players. The misuse of social media is very broad, from posting to reposting, hashtags, etc, all of these behaviours fall under the same regulatory framework, even when they are drastically different from one another. It creates concerns about the proportionality and culpability of each behaviour, which, right now, the bill collapses into one and proposes severe punishments.

The regulating authority established in the bill is the government, which goes against the principle of independent regulatory bodies.

The definitions of social media and platforms also cover editorial services, online publications, radio, and TV transmission, which have different functions than platforms or social media, which need separate regulation. UNESCO argues that such things should be regulated as media.

The bill requires the licensing of all social media platforms that are managed by the government department. The granting, renewal, and revocation are conditioned on several things including protecting national sovereignty, peace, unity, independence and dignity. These words permit broad interpretation by the government, which then leads to curtailing political speech.

UNESCO argues that the bill intends control and punitive regulation over systematic mechanisms to ensure accountability, transparency and human rights in line with international documents. The constraints established by the law for freedom of speech are vague notions such as defamation, affecting national interests, shaming and humiliating, and spreading rumours among others. UNESCO also notes that the bill does not provide any instructions to platforms to increase their transparency regarding content moderation, algorithmic decision-making, etc.

BANGLADESH - Cyber Protection Ordinance, 2025

The primary concern of the ordinance is to enforce a regulatory framework for cybersecurity in the country.

One core part of the ordinance is about establishing several key government bodies to oversee cybersecurity in the country. For instance, a National Cyber Security Agency will be established to oversee cyber security in the country, including the safety of data. The National Cyber Security Council (NCSC) is headed by the Prime Minister and with different ministers, military officials and others. It will oversee cybersecurity audits and other operations as well as policy making.

National Cyber Emergency Response Team: The executive arm that will monitor and manage cybersecurity risks. The team will be doing cybersecurity audits, specifically of Critical Information Infrastructure. The National Security Operation Center will be responsible for monitoring threat management for the Critical Information Infrastructure. Security Operation Centers are again entities that will manage and respond to security vulnerabilities.

The ordinance defines Critical Information Infrastructure as entities whose disruption will impact the security, stability, foreign policy, and defence of the nation. It includes sectors like transport, energy, defence, finance, and health. The government reserves the right to declare any entity as Critical Information Infrastructure under this ordinance. Under this ordinance, the Government, in consultation with NCSC, holds broad powers to regulate and manage things related to data and cybersecurity in the country.

The ordinance also specifies offences and penalties in the cybersecurity domain. It includes spreading fake/false information that harms public order and national security 103 (1) (a), publishing harmful and defamatory content 103 (1) (b), spreading false and malicious information about CIIs 98 (1) (d), breaches of data privacy and confidentiality 106 (1) (b). The ordinance allows the government to declare any other thing as an offence in consultation with NCSC 109 (1).

The ordinance allows government agencies, officers and bodies set up by the ordinance to search, arrest, seize equipment, as well as decide under what conditions all these can be done. The ordinance classifies a number of offences as cognizable, including cyber attacks, cyber terrorism (no definition is provided but refers to the 2009 Anti Terrorism Act), and spreading fake/false information that threatens public order and security and obstruction of cyber security incident management, non-compliance with data management instructions, defamation and hate speech.

Section 103 (1) (a) of the ordinance states that fake news and false information that harms public order or national security is an offence. However, the vague and broad interpretations possible under terms like public order, national security and false information could be threatening free speech and expression, especially opinions that are critical in nature. Section 103 (1) (b) further makes publishing harmful, defamatory and obscene content an offense and the problem of broad interpretation arises here as well.

Section 98 (1) (d) of the ordinance explicitly makes spreading malicious information about Critical Information Infrastructure an offense, but malicious information is a vague term that could be used to curtail critique. The sweeping powers given to agencies established by the ordinance to monitor, audit, and regulate without independent oversight emerge as a serious concern over misuse. It is also important to note that all the agencies established are centralised government structures. The punitive clauses of the ordinance place a burden of proof on individuals with high intensity, which raises concerns over citizens' rights and fair legal procedures. The ordinance remains silent on independent checks and balances against potential misuse of the provisions of the ordinance. A larger criticism has been that the ordinance preserves the essence of the repealed Cyber Security Act of 2023 and Digital Security Act of 2018 by the ousted Sheikh Hasina Government.



Economics

In India, news media funding, especially of large mainstream organisations, remains heavily dependent on advertising, both from government and private sources across countries. In an attempt to move away from advertisement-heavy revenue or to widen the scope of funding options, news organisations are experimenting with other revenue models such as paywalls, grants, donations, and monetisation of digital platforms.

In print media, expenditure is spread across production (raw materials/technology), people (employees and others who work behind the newspaper content and production), marketing and distribution domains. Revenues could be across advertising, circulation, subscription, brand extensions and apps. **According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report, traditional television advertising in India is expected to grow at a 4.2% Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) between 2023 to 2028, while internet advertising’s year-on-year growth, which was at 26.0% in 2023, is expected to be 12.2% in 2028.** Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry figures show the following:

	2023	2024	2025	2024-27
Print	259 billion INR	260 billion INR	262 billion INR	0.9%
TV	711 billion INR	679 billion INR	676 billion INR	-0.6%
Digital	686 billion INR	802 billion INR	903 billion INR	11.2%

Source: FCCI and EY report 2025 https://www.ficci.in/study_details/24081

As per a COTT (a digital content measurement tool) report, digital media showed promising returns, with revenue of Rs. 63,200 crore in the year 2023-2024, with Over The Top (OTT) platforms accounting for Rs. 31,800 crore. While there are different sources of revenue for media outlets, advertising forms the largest part of it, as subscription revenue does not bring in a sizable amount for mainstream media outlets. Kohli-Khandekar’s 2021 book *The India Media Business: Pandemic and After* shows that Disney Star India, with 143.5 billion Indian Rupees, Zee Group, with 133 billion Indian Rupees, Google India, with 130 billion Indian Rupees, and Times Group, with 100 billion Indian Rupees, are the four highest-ranking media companies in terms of revenue.

The work notes that the most significant shift among legacy news publishers after the 2020 pandemic has been the move toward mobilising direct reader contributions as a core revenue strategy. This rethinking within legacy establishments stems from several factors, including stagnant readership since 2017, the migration of audiences—particularly younger ones—to digital platforms, and the rising cost of newsprint. The author also points to macroeconomic conditions, such as the economic slowdown following the 2016 demonetisation, as contributing factors. Print advertisement rates, for instance, dropped from around ₹500 per square centimetre to ₹100–200 for the same space after 2020.

A study of data on government advertising expenditure collected through RTI requests was undertaken by Newslandry. [It showed](#) that **governments tend to distribute ads either in lieu of favourable coverage by media outlets or use it as a way to “beat journalists into compliance”**. The study went on to say that governmental control over media should concern news consumers, as it ultimately shapes the news they consume. When it comes to local news media outlets, a 2024 CRISIL report showed that advertising revenue was set to grow from [8% to 9%](#). In recent years, a few radio stations in the country have been reported to be finding it difficult to stay afloat, with some shutting down due to heavy [losses](#). **Print media advertisements, for instance, are taxed only at 5% as per the Goods and Services Tax (GST), while other forms of media are charged at 18% for the same.** A research paper found that the media market in India is either oligopolistic pertaining to broadcast media, or of the monopolistic competition type when it comes to the newspaper industry, the digital media sphere, or user-generated [content](#).

A 2025 [research paper](#), which studied the business models of 14 digital native news start-ups in India, noted that the revenue model of such entities mostly comprises multiple elements such as advertisements, subscriptions, donations, and crowdfunding. A 2016 Reuters Institute [report on digital journalism](#) start-ups in India concluded that while some of these outlets have grown in their reach and use in a short span of time, they are in competition with digital verticals of established legacy media and digital platforms for attention and monetisation. The report goes on to add that, considering the low prices of newspapers (heavily subsidised through advertising revenue) and low TV packages available to the Indian audience, the push to pay for digital news by its users seems considerably harder than in high-income countries, where the base pay for print and TV is relatively higher. Unlike Western contexts, philanthropic support to news media in India is rare, as are the foundations and individual donations, the report adds.

A Google-Kantar [report](#) titled “The Indian News Consumer: Willingness to Pay and Key Drivers” studied the factors that attracted news consumers to subscribe to paywall content. The report showed that “news in the preferred language” is a highly valued content element across different language groups when it comes to their willingness to pay for the consumption of news, including Hindi (67%), Bengali (75%), Tamil (63%), and Gujarati (79%). Another primary factor in their decision to subscribe was “reliable content” with 67% of the current news subscribers choosing that as a criterion. The report also found that the willingness to pay for any digital news content, either through subscriptions or through any other model, was comparable between local language and English language news consumers. It also stated that audiences are “open to sharing first-party data and microtransactions in the form of either pay-per-content or mini access pass.” On another front, **the news landscape of India has also been witnessing a surge in news aggregators like Dailyhunt.**

Nepali media houses are also heavily reliant on advertising as their main source of revenue. Sales revenue is low due to low subscription rates and free-to-air [broadcasting](#). Currently, media houses receive just 10 per cent for an advertisement. The size of the advertisement market in Nepal is estimated to be around Rs [5 billion a year](#). According to a [report](#) by Freedom Forum, the Nepali media has witnessed a huge financial crisis in 2023. There has been a massive decline in the [flow of advertisements](#). In a 2020 report titled ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on Nepali Media’ by Freedom Forum, the lockdown [affected](#) the business of advertising. Nepal Republic Media Limited’s annual turnover was between 600 to 700 million rupees before the COVID-19 pandemic. This figure [dropped](#) to 170 million rupees during the pandemic. In 2023, Nepal Republic Media became the first publicly listed media company. It issued 3,619,891 shares to the [public](#). However, the company is at a loss according to its second-quarter report for the [current fiscal year](#). The ongoing economic crisis after the

pandemic has affected the advertising industry and the market has decreased by almost 55 percent in the [past three years](#). Secret negotiations with government officials and corporate executives to get advertising revenue by Nepali news media is a well-known practice. This results in various players using the media to achieve their own interests, including winning elections, boosting sales, promoting brands or people, or [setting agendas](#).

The Nepali government is a major funder of the media, despite most of its advertisements going to state-owned media.

The Public Welfare Advertising (PWA) scheme, managed by the Department of Information (DoI), is a major advertising revenue for small media outlets. However, there has been a government proposal to [scrap](#) it. The PCN manages the government-funded Media Development Fund to support the development of small media outlets outside the Kathmandu Valley and the [Journalists Welfare Fund](#). The internet has been a fierce competitor to traditional media in the country. **Newspapers, radios, television, and even digital portals that follow the same business model as legacy media are feeling the pressure as digital access is reshaping how Nepalis consume media.**

The expansion of the internet has led to the flourishing of online news media, but they struggle to survive due to a lack of sustainable revenue sources. Most of them have adopted the banner advertisement model, with the contents mostly being offers, notices, and brand promotions. However, the growing use of ad-blocker tools prevents it from becoming a reliable part of their [business model](#). Google [AdSense does not support](#) the Nepali language, limiting the advertisement revenue potential from that source. In 2013, the popular news platform Setopati announced that it would adopt a paid subscription model along with advertising, but it could not fully work.

The Nepali Times withdrew its paywall as subscriptions remained low. In 2021, the popular newspaper Nayapatrika announced that it would restrict free access to digital content but admitted that the traction would then be low. **Kantipur Publications and Nepal Republic Media require subscriptions to access digital copies of printed newspapers on their websites, but the subscriptions are free, and the companies receive no financial benefits.**

In **Bangladesh**, the [market and circulation](#) of print newspapers and magazines are slowly shrinking as digital media becomes more popular, despite the newspaper and magazine advertisement market being projected to reach [219.58 million USD](#) in 2025, as per Statista. **The recent report by the Media Reform Commission reaffirms the financial precarity of news media in the country.** It emphasises the phenomenon of increasing readership growth online, which does not translate into revenue for the news media outlets. The situation is further aggravated by the high corporate tax rate (27.5%) and tax and import duties on newsprint. As per a collaborative [report](#) of FOJO Media Institute and Management and Resource Development Initiative, advertising remains the dominant revenue channel for Bangladeshi media. The subscription model experimented with by some is not yet a sustainable revenue stream for media in the country. The report also concludes that **Bangladeshi media suffers from a fragmentation of the revenue market among a large number of media outlets, which leads to intense competition and less profits** from this revenue source. The operating budgets of most media are either small or negative. The lack of sufficient revenue leads to labour precarities such as reduced wages, delayed payments, and a lack of other employee support. The lack of resources to spend on newsroom development is also one of the results of the financial crisis, the report notes. Major mainstream news media are owned by business groups that have other business interests, such as pharmaceuticals, textiles, food processing, and construction. Bangladesh also suffers from high media

cross-ownership and concentration. Government advertising remains an important revenue source for many news outlets. This incentivises inflated circulation figures to get the government advertisement money. Concurring with such findings, the Media Reform Commission Report⁴ concludes that the current distribution mechanism of government advertising is corrupt. In addition, the report also criticises existing Television Rating Point (TRP) measures as inefficient.



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 3

Community

Desk research analysis reveals that digital transformation of news consumption coexists with large literacy gaps and trust deficits in all three countries. **The Digital News Report 2024 of India showed that a massive 71% of their respondents prefer online medium for news consumption, with 49% of them relying specifically on social media** for the [same](#). It also showed that [57%](#) of the respondents were worried about the authenticity of online news that they came across. Additionally, 51% of them expressed concern over hyperpartisan content and poor journalism, while half of the respondents were worried about false news. A Statista [report](#) also shows that the levels of trust in the media in the country have gone down over the last three years. A survey result by [Factly and the Internet and Mobile Association of India](#) shows that respondents who were between the ages of 15-20 and above 50 are observed to be more susceptible to fake news. News [reports](#) citing a 2025 Google and Kantar survey, it was noted that 96 percent of Gen Z users (ages 15–28) in the study were digital news consumers, and the trend appears to involve passive consumption, as they encounter news while scrolling. The Gen Z are a demography in the country with 87 percent of them using Internet. The percentage of Gen Z who follow news organisations is slightly lower than those who follow creators. Further, the [report highlights](#) that this demographic prefers emotionally resonant, immersive, and visual formats of news compared with traditional

models of news presentation. However, the same report also notes that trust levels among this group are higher for news organisations than for creators. While English is the preferred language for reading among Gen Z, regional languages maintain a strong presence in audio and video consumption. An overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents in the study also use AI tools to explore news in greater depth.

According to the [Nepal Media Survey 2024](#) by Sharecast Data Initiative, most Nepalis equate TV (21.5%) and radio (20.6%). The younger, educated population considers Facebook (19.9%) and YouTube (16.9%) as 'media'. Those with at least a Bachelor's degree are more likely to associate both traditional and digital platforms as media. There is lower media engagement in Madhes and Karnali provinces where the literacy rate is low and access to electricity and local media are limited. In Bagmati and Gandaki provinces, there is a higher adoption of both traditional and digital platforms. **Print media shows a decline with only 13.8 percent saying they have read a newspaper or magazine in the past six months.** The engagement is higher among educated and urban audiences. The media survey shows that traditional and digital media coexist with younger, urban audiences gravitating towards digital platforms while older, rural populations rely on traditional media. Trust in media is reported to be the highest in the Bagmati and Karnali [provinces](#).

² Privately accessed report

A 2020 report by Media Development Resources Initiative of Bangladesh reveals that television is the most popular medium of news consumption in Bangladesh followed by social media and newspapers.

8.4 percent of the research respondents reported reading newspapers and around 18 percent reported not using any media for news. Among that, the percentage of female (61.30%) non-media users was much higher than the male non-users (38.70%). The top reasons for non-usage were reported to be lack of time (43.3%), not liking any news media (12.6%), considering media as a waste of time (12.6%), and having no belief in news media (11.5%). Close to 27 percent of the survey respondents of the research consume media for 1-2 hours daily. Two-thirds of the respondents also reported having received fake news, and the issue seems to be comparatively high in rural areas. The report also shows that younger respondents emerged as more media literate than older people, and a correlation between higher educational levels and news literacy was also found in the survey. The report ends with suggestions that place enhancing news literacy capacities as an important intervention that demands attention from policy makers. Digital and Media Literacy among citizens across the region is low. **In India only 12 percent Indians over the age of 15 are computer literate. Media literacy is harder to ascertain and there are fewer studies in the region that give any significant understanding regarding the ability of citizens in India, Nepal and Bangladesh to parse news in a digital age, assess sources and credibility of sources and evaluate the information they are receiving.**

In India and Bangladesh, fragile social cohesion seems to be a significant social challenge. According to a 2019 Bertelsmann Stiftung [commentary](#), India is one of the weakest countries in terms of social cohesion. It points to the escalating conflicts between people of Hindu and Muslim faiths in the country and cites the protests that happened in India in 2019-20 in connection with the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) as a sign of weakened social cohesion. A 2023 [Report on International Religious Freedom](#) by the US State Department mentions numerous instances of communal and religious violence in Bangladesh. For example, the report mentions that on March 3rd and 4th, reports from media and Ahmadi Muslim leaders indicated that law enforcement and government officials did not intervene when hundreds attacked the Ahmadi community during their annual convention in Ahmednagar, Panchagarh District. The clashes resulted in two deaths including one Ahmadi, and numerous injuries, affecting both Ahmadi and police officers, as reported by media and NGOs.



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 4 *Technology*

The three countries analysed for the purposes of this research are characterised by growing digital adoption (especially smartphones). There are recorded instances of people's digital access being challenged by regulatory interference from the state and impacted by financial constraints. On the news media front, organisations have been adopting digital technologies (user-facing technologies and for production and management of news), but the financial barriers emerge as a key challenge for many who already have scarce resources.

Tracing the actors in digital journalism in India, Parthasarathi and Agarwal (2020) note that established newspapers leveraged online much before the television

before the television in the country dating before 2010. Alongside, several legacy print organisations started broadcasting channels like The Times of India, which used their legacy as a news brand to gain audience traction. In addition to these, there are digital native players in the news media industry which are relatively small in size and resources supported by journalists, venture capitalists and public interest philanthropists. Hence, the Indian digital news media landscape is inhibited by legacy news organisations, broadcasters and digital natives. They go on to argue that the dominance of domestic players such as legacy newspapers and broadcasters and international tech giants together create an ecosystem where digital native players are dependent on the former for amplification and the latter for visibility and revenue.

In terms of taxation on technology, camera and photography equipment, which are crucial for producing quality visual news content, are currently taxed at [18%](#). If a news media outlet wants to import printing equipment, it requires approval from the Registrar of Newspapers of India for the same by filling out a [form](#). When it comes to audiences' access to technologies, India is seeing a lot of brands offering 5G technologies through smartphones. Indian media houses are increasingly exploring the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for their benefit, with the technology being used for cost-cutting, to simulate human intelligence, and for its problem-solving [capabilities](#). Additionally, **a Reuters report showed how the rise of digital media has led to some newspapers investing in digital media technology and expertise, while also adapting their editorial priorities, distribution strategies, and business models for the same.** The [TV Today](#) annual report states that its employee benefits expenditure has increased by 17.45% in 2022-23 and its attributed to two factors; cyclical increments in compensation and human resources expenditure on expanding existing businesses, primarily in digital operations.

Many news outlets in the recent past have come up with paywalls on their digital vertices. The News Minute and the Newslaundry, two independent news organisations in India, offer a bundled subscription called the [“Disruptor”](#) which is available at a monthly rate of 500 INR and is offered at an annual rate of 5,000 INR. The Wire, another independent news media outlet, solicits [monthly contributions](#) starting from 200 INR per month to support their work. The Caravan, known for being a leading journal on politics and culture, offers yearly [subscriptions](#) to either the print or the digital versions of the magazine at 2,400 INR with the pricing at 6,000 INR for a 3-year subscription. When it comes to some of the legacy organisations in the country, [The Hindu](#) group offers its publications at an annual subscription rate of 2,799 INR, which also includes digital copies of their newspapers as well as a subscription to magazines owned by the publication such as Frontline and Sportstar. The Times of India, on the other hand, offers its publication at an [annual rate](#) of 1,716 INR. Most of these subscription rates are beyond the reach of a majority of the people in the country, given the current income levels and costs of living. As far as television is concerned, viewers have to pay a Network Capacity Fee (NCF) which is priced at 130 INR per subscriber for 200 SD channels and 160 INR per month for more than 200 channels apart from paying GST as [applicable](#). **In India co-viewing of TV is widely prevalent. According to a Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) report, 98% of homes have a single television.**

One of the recent crucial legal pieces on digital in India is the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023. There has been concern around how the Act mentions terms such as “reasonable safeguards”, “appropriate measures”, and “necessary purposes” which can seem vague in the absence of adequate elaboration and might lead to [invasion of privacy for citizens](#) in some cases. Another major cause for concern in the country has been the interference of government authorities with regard to accessing digital communications. India recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in 2023, with people not having access to the internet 116 times during the year for various [reasons](#).

When it comes to Nepal, the country ranked 109th out of 133 countries in the Network Readiness Index which evaluates how countries use information and communication technology, indicating a subpar level of digital status in the country.

According to Data Reportal, there were 15.85 million internet users in Nepal in January 2023. Nepal's internet penetration rate stood at 51.6 percent of the total population at the start of 2023. Connectivity in Least Developed Countries Status Report by International Telecommunication Union (ITU) shows that Nepal falls behind India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in terms of affordable digital access, where the cost is less than 1% of Gross National Income (GNI) as compared to the 2.6% of GNI in Nepal. This affects its adoption and usage, limiting digital productivity growth. Additionally, there is still a lack of awareness and acceptance of technology in rural areas. Even in urban areas, frequent network outages cause disruptions in connectivity.

According to the full report of the National Census 2022, 73.2 percent of people living in Nepal have access to smart mobile phones. 34.2 percent of Nepalis listen to the radio and only 49.9 percent have a television at home. There are frequent internet disruptions in Nepal, with non-payment of dues causing shutdowns, government interventions, and arbitrary bans. Internet in Nepal comes from Airtel and Tata, accounting for 70 percent and 20 percent of the country's internet services respectively. Nepal owes eight billion rupees to these Indian upstream providers and in recent times, the unpaid dues have resulted in sudden internet outages, causing widespread disruption of work.

In 2022, the government introduced new regulations that made it compulsory for all online TV as well as YouTube channels to get an operating license at a fee of Rs 500,000. In 2023, the Nepal Government banned TikTok when over 2.2 million of the 30 million people in Nepal were actively using it. Though the government cited disruption to social harmony as the reason behind the ban, the public believed it was a politically driven act. The ban went against Article 17 and Article 19 of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of expression as well as against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The ban was lifted in August 2024. **Despite Nepal having laws regarding online privacy like the Privacy Act 2018 and the Individual Privacy Regulation 2020, there is no dedicated authority to overlook privacy regulations in the country.**

In Bangladesh, as per Global Digital Reports by DataReportal, there were 77.36 million internet users at the start of 2024, with internet penetration standing at 44.5 percent. Additionally, Bangladesh had 52.90 million social media users in January 2024, accounting for 30.4 percent of the total population. On the other hand, there were a total of 190.36 million mobile users in Bangladesh in early 2024, which is equivalent to 108.5 percent of the total population. **In 2025, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) stated that the number of internet subscribers touched 13.28 crore.** Available reports on data suggest that 49.4% of the population owns a TV while smartphone ownership stands at 74.5%.

Internet usage in Bangladesh is growing rapidly, and the country's mass media are reportedly adopting the latest technologies available, though they are under severe financial crisis. Satellite TV channels in the country have been using ENPS (Electronic News Production System) and Octopus systems for quite some time. For live broadcasting, TV channels now use DMNG (Digital Mobile News Gathering) instead of DSNG (Digital Satellite News Gathering). Channel 24, the leading 24-hour

satellite TV channel in the country, introduced an [AI news presenter](#) named 'Aparajita' in July 2023. However, the channel did not disclose many details of this artificial intelligence intervention. **Mobile Journalism (MoJo) is a rapidly growing trend in newspapers and online news outlets in the country.**

According to a 2024 [study](#), individual usage of AI tools in the country is on the rise while institutional adoption is low at the moment. The popular tools are used for grammar checks, translations, design, and research and fact-checking. While the concerns about job loss are reported to be moderate among the respondents, the influence of critical thinking due to over dependence is observed to be a strong concern. The report also indicates that despite the enthusiasm regarding benefits, the capacity and technical knowledge is currently limited in Bangladesh newsrooms. Newsrooms are also reported to be uncertain about the audience trust on their AI use, according to the report.

Digital News Publishers Association, India vs Google

In 2021, the Digital News Publishers Association (DNPA) filed a complaint against Google to the Competition Commission of India under Section 19(1)(a) of the 2002 Competition Act. The complaint listed numerous issues with the dominance of Google on digital platforms, undermining a level playing field for news publishers and hampering their business possibilities.

DNPA asserted that the majority of digital traffic, more than 50 percent, for news comes from search engines where Google holds a dominant position, making the latter an essential trading partner of news publishers. It allows Google's algorithms to decide what website a viewer discovers, influencing the traffic to news websites. On the other side, while news content gets more traffic to the search engine, the publishers are not able to leverage the digital advertising revenue, which is again dominated by search engines like Google. On top of that, Google holds a significant position in advertising intermediation in the country as well.

While the content produced by news publishers has been used to make the snippets Google makes available to its users, the dominant position has made the company unilaterally decide not to compensate digital revenue shares to news publishers. This is non-transparent, and the tech giant doesn't disclose any data as to the ad revenue earned by Google from placing advertisements on their websites. Deciding on the case, the Competition Commission not only accepted the allegations against Google's dominance prima facie but also directed the Director General to open an investigation into the matter.

This has to be understood within the emerging business and news consumption models for news publishers, where traditional advertising on print and other media has slowed, and people are largely migrating to digital for all kinds of content. The distribution problem posed by the digital space, where a few tech giants dominate, is experienced as threatening the control news publishers previously had over their distribution mechanisms. Further, their digital traffic and revenues are heavily dependent on essential trading partners like Google, who exerts strong control over the digital realm. As Parthasarathi and Agarwal (2020) note, "these giant online intermediaries thus pose the biggest competition to online news outlets in monetising content" (p. 7).



Desk research across the three countries reveals that the independence of news media is undermined by concentrated ownership, often corporations, and political affiliations of outlets, especially mainstream news media which leads to bias. On the other hand, newsrooms continue to be unequal for women and other marginalised groups and have precarious labour conditions.

In India, people have the option of consuming news in a variety of languages. **With 7 in every 10 online news users consuming local news in Indian languages on an average, the regional language landscape for news consumption is vast.** These local languages include Gujarati, Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu with the number increasing to 8 in every 10 users among Hindi and Gujarati news consumers. The most popular sources for local news were found to be news publishers, local content creators, and WhatsApp groups. Media outlets were found to cover news in a biased manner, with news consumers stating that media organisations tended to report favourably on the ruling party in [particular](#). There have been instances of journalists and media outlets being manipulated and sometimes even being penalised for their unbiased and [unfiltered coverage](#) of news. Furthermore, **rural issues sometimes do not get the coverage they deserve, with critics arguing that the country's press overlooks such issues, creating a significant informational and representational void in such regions.**

Over the past 15 years, large and powerful corporate houses such as Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL) and Adani Enterprises have acquired several popular media companies using diverse [strategies](#). Such concentration of media ownership is in itself a cause for concern as it is a threat to a diversity of voices in the media. Apart from such concentrated ownership, another concern relates to the heavy reliance on advertising for revenue. This reliance further

weakens the freedom of editors and journalists, as advertising gains prime importance to keep news media outlets afloat. This concentration of media ownership is made possible due to the lack of laws or regulations on cross-holding of media in the country, as mentioned earlier in the report, leading to a few powerful conglomerates controlling a significant portion of the media audience. The problem of concentrated ownership is further exacerbated by the fact that some of the big media outlets have close ties to the government. Such a relationship in turn leads to biases in favour of the government and editorial decisions being taken by the owners of such media outlets rather than the journalists, which is a threat to the press and its freedom as a [whole](#).

To ensure that journalists get paid fair wages for the work they put in, the Government of India established the [Majithia Wage Board](#) and came out with pay scale recommendations for journalists, varying according to the size of the news media outlet and the experience levels of the [journalists](#). The Wage Board recommended higher salaries for journalists in most cases, as compared to what they were earning. This led to many news media organisations protesting the recommendations of the Wage Board when it was published. The pay scales are not adhered to by most news media [organisations](#).

When it comes to marginalised groups working in Indian media, the numbers look bleak according to an [Oxfam India and NewsLaundry report](#). The number of articles written by Dalits and Adivasis (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, respectively) was no more than 5% in English newspapers and stood at a mere 10% for Hindi newspapers. Additionally, of the 121 newsroom leadership positions across newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines that were studied, 106 were occupied by journalists from upper

castes and none by those belonging to either the SC or the ST [castes](#). This is crucial because diversity and inclusiveness are required to ensure representation as well as quality news content in any country, which seems to be currently missing in India. While studying newsroom composition from a gendered lens, an [Ormax Media report](#) stated that women hold just 10% of senior leadership roles in media. **While that is the case when it comes to women's leadership, the number of women journalists in general has been declining as well.** According to a [study](#) conducted by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) in partnership with the Network of Women in Media in India (NWMI), the number of women reporters in print dropped from 43% in 2015 to a mere 13% in [2020](#). The numbers for television, on the other hand, dropped from 60% to 52% for the same period. While the number of women reporters for radio in 2015 was not monitored, it stood at 20% in 2020. The study also revealed that female reporters no longer covered certain beats, while male reporters did not face any such constraints. Women largely seem to work on beats such as gender issues, health and human rights, arts and culture, civic issues, as well as rural development and do not seem well represented in sports, labour, crime, or [international relations](#).

A 2019 report titled [Gender Inequality in Indian Media](#) published by UN Women and Newslandry showed that the numbers are marginally better when it comes to digital media. Of the 11 digital media websites studied by the report, women constituted 35.4% of the journalists. The study also threw light on the lack of female representation in panels and debates across different media outlets. Additionally, the International Federation of Journalists' (IFJ) report named [Media and Gender in India](#) which came out in 2015, brought to light the fact that India's largest news agency, the Press Trust of India (PTI), has no women photographers on their staff. Their 19 photographers on staff were all male, proving that certain categories of journalism remain inaccessible to women even today. The study added that a woman photographer hired by the PTI in Delhi two decades ago was fired soon after her appointment and was fighting a court case to get reinstated. **In 2024, the**

[the Network of Women in Media released guidelines for safer newsrooms, identifying major issues such as humiliation and harassment; unfair newsroom practices, including gaslighting and the silent treatment; casteist, sexist, ableist, and queerphobic behaviour; poor working conditions; and the denial of rights, including the use of illegal contracts that prevent journalists from joining unions and associations.](#)

Apart from advertising, **[Indian media platforms use various other ways for monetisation, such as subscriptions, microtransactions, and digital services.](#)** News media organisations in the country are also embracing innovation and technological advancements for their benefit. Times Internet is using GenAI to convert content from one format to another, which can help bring additional users, which in turn results in additional revenue while also reducing the editorial team's [effort](#). Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are also being used for writing and editing by media outlets. Hindustan Times (HT Media Ltd.) is using AI to boost traffic as well as editorial efficiency and has a GenAI-based newsbot among various other [initiatives](#). Another area in which news media outlets seem to be leveraging technology is for personalising content for their users based on their interests and profiles, which will also aid in audience monetisation. [Digital Patrakar Defence Clinic](#) by Internet Freedom Foundation offers pro bono legal advice and representation to Indian journalists for their reportage and threats that may come from those. Thomas Reuters Foundation, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas collaboratively published a [handbook for journalists](#) on their rights when threatened with suits.

Most of the media in Nepal has a single owner or is a private limited company. Many media institutions are supported by political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and other groups. Media ownership and political affiliation often go hand in hand in Nepal, undermining its capability for neutral and unbiased reporting. It also results in self-censorship, especially in rural areas, as reporters might face pressure from local [political parties](#). The public believes news media owners lack transparency and there is thus an overall sense of [distrust](#) in the news media publishers. Nepal news media also suffer from a lack of transparency of funds, with most financial transactions, including subscription rates and revenues, being heavily guarded secrets. The Press Council of Nepal monitors media content, addresses issues, and gives warnings when necessary. However, media houses have a track record of ignoring these warnings, leveraging their political connections. Another problematic aspect of the Nepal media, which could lead to a conflict of interest, is that **all the Various Nepali unions of journalists have different political party affiliations.** The Nepal Press Union, which was established in 1991 to safeguard the rights of working journalists and ensure press freedom, is affiliated with the Nepali Congress. Press Chautari Nepal, on the other hand, is affiliated with CPN-UML, the communist party of Nepal.

The Working Journalists Act has set a minimum wage for media outlets, but Nepali media have failed to implement it. Over 500 working journalists have complained about salaries, lack of perks, and [unfair treatment](#). State-funded media outlets see changes in staff during the frequent [government changes](#). In 2023, the Minimum Wage Fixation Committee recommended that journalists be paid Rs 34,124 [per month](#). The current wage is Rs 24,600 but even that is [not implemented](#). **According to the Committee Chairperson, journalists are rarely paid according to the salary structure fixed by the committee, which makes the profession financially unviable.**

The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened an already dire condition in Nepal, according to a national report on The Impact of COVID-19 on Nepali Media by Freedom Forum. Within a few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federation of Nepali Journalists reported that journalists had been laid off, underpaid, or that their payments had been delayed. Major newspapers, except those owned by the government, have reduced the number of pages, laid off staff, and closed their [regional editions](#). Kantipur Media Group (KMG), Nepal's leading media house, recently went through a massive downsizing, slashing almost one-third of its 1,200-plus [jobs](#).

In its recent report, the organisation Freedom Forum Nepal points out that journalists have turned to teaching, running businesses, and working at NGOs or corporate offices to meet their financial needs, while some have opted to go abroad for work.

After the restoration of democracy in 1990, there were many publications in indigenous languages. However, such publications struggled to find long-term financial support and eventually stopped operations. Currently, there are only around 21 indigenous language newspapers in Nepal. The numbers are dwindling because of financial constraints, limited reach, and a lack of business acumen. Discriminatory state politics and restricted access to government services further marginalise indigenous language media. Nepal has over 124 languages. Indigenous Television was started in 2015, after a year-long struggle for a license. It operates as a non-profit managed by the Indigenous Media Foundation, an organisation of working

journalists from different indigenous nationalities in Nepal. By 2022, 2,500 hours of programs in 17 different indigenous languages have been produced, broadcast, and archived. It does not receive funding from the government.

Nepal's media landscape also struggles with gender equality. As of April 2023, there were [13,077 members](#) of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, which is the umbrella organisation of Nepali Journalists. Among them, 2,408 were women journalists. According to a study conducted by Sancharika Samuha in 2016 among 907 media houses across Nepal, 21% of women journalists were working in various media in the capital, Kathmandu. 26.7% of the journalists in the country were female. Women have limited opportunities in key reporting areas as well and their involvement in specialised beats like foreign affairs and security is low. A [study](#) by Media Advocacy Group found that only 6.6% of women journalists are engaged in these beats. Gender stereotypes, lack of interest and knowledge, and the notion that these beats are challenging are said to be the factors behind these trends. According to the report [Status of Women Journalists in Nepal](#) by Sancharika Samuha in 2015, the number of women journalists who have reached senior and executive positions is very low. Only 2.9% women were senior correspondents, 8% in editorial positions and 2.7% in publishing and managerial positions. Similarly, among 41% chief editors, only 2.4% are women and among 777 editors, only 11.1% are women. The report also stated that women journalists were paid less compared to men. **A 2022 study by Media Action Nepal found that there were only 76 women bylines out of 21,919 news items published in 20 media outlets. This is merely about 0.30 per cent of the total news published.**

Journalists have access to training and workshops, including theoretical and practical classes on storytelling, audio, video editing, photography, etc. Nepal Press Institute is Nepal's first and most credited media training

institute. It was established in 1984 and is dedicated to capacity building of the media. It is free from any political affiliation. CMR Nepal Journalism Academy is a joint initiative of the Center for Media Research-Nepal (CMR-Nepal) and Interlink Academy for International Dialog and Journalism, Hamburg, Germany, to establish a leading journalism training school to build the capacity of journalists to thrive in an increasingly digital age. The Center for Investigative Journalism also provides journalists with training to enhance their reporting skills in various parts of Nepal. Many colleges and universities offer mass communication degrees, but over the past decade, the number of students enrolled in these courses has been steadily declining, fueled by a lack of job security in the media as well as low [salaries](#).

Most media outlets in Bangladesh are owned by large business conglomerates with diverse financial interests, and owners' overt political party affiliations are also a visible trend in the country. In 2019, the ninth wage board in Bangladesh recommended an 80 to 85 percent increase in wages for print media employees. Opposing the gazette regarding this, the Newspapers Owners' Association of Bangladesh released a statement soon, calling the wage recommendations unrealistic for media companies to meet as they function with great financial struggles and higher taxes.

GRADE	As per 8th Wage	As per 9th Wage
	Board Total Salary 2024	Board Total Salary 2025 2024-27
1	67,645	1,16,095
2	51,980	90,095
3	38,073	67,112
4	25,420	44,962
5	22,595	39,889
6	20,231	35,670

Source: <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/398891/budget2025-2026>

In 2022, there were [protests](#) by journalists to implement the ninth wage board recommendations along with several other demands. The 2025 Media Reform Commission found that salaries and allowances of the employees are irregular and most journalists are low paid in the country. Further they [recommended](#) that entry-level salaries of journalists should be equal to that of 9th-level Bangladesh Civil Servants adjusted against inflation annually. During the COVID pandemic, [layoffs](#) of journalists were reported in the country. A 2024 research article by [Alam and Steyn](#) pertaining to the precarities of print journalists in Bangladesh during the pandemic reported that journalists experienced pay cuts and job cuts, among other issues. A Media Resource Development Initiative study on [Gender Equality and Media Regulation](#) notes that the regulation and policies in the country, including national policies and provisions for gender sensitivity in media regulations, seem to have the objective of protecting societal morality rather than safeguarding the rights of women. As per the report, despite having a High Court directive in 2009 for the prevention and redressal of sexual abuse in workplaces, the implementation is observed to be limited.

Interestingly, the then sitting Press Council had no complaints committee in accordance with the 2009 High Court directive. The council has never had a woman chair in its history, the report adds. Out of the 18 organisations that participated in the research, only 10 reported having gender-sensitive provisions and policies for newsrooms and content. Apart from the mandatory maternity leave, common provisions for women in organisations were reported to be drop-off services from late evening onwards and separate toilets.

Media Ownership: The Concentration Problem

India is observed to have high ownership concentration in its media markets, including news media. The [Media Ownership Monitor](#) of 2018-19 demonstrates that four groups (Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, Amar Ujala, and Dainik Bhaskar) share more than 75 percent of the readership in the Hindi-language news media market. It extends to other regional markets where top players have command over more than half of the total audience.

In 2008, the issue of cross-ownership of companies in media and associated sectors was flagged before the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB). However, TRAI recommended no restrictions on cross-holdings then, and the issue of vertical integration in the broadcasting domain was pointed out by MIB again after four years. The industry's leaning on the issue was clear from the 2013 comments on the consultation paper floated by TRAI. Many industry stakeholders, in their comments, argued against any regulations, as the big media industry in India, with numerous outlets, is itself a testament to thriving plurality. The [recommendation](#) report put out by TRAI in 2014 defines control as when an entity holds at least 20 percent of the total share capital directly or indirectly, has 50 percent of voting rights on the board, is in a position to appoint half of the board of directors, or controls the affairs of the media entity by appointing key managerial people. Entering into agreements that allow an entity to do the above also amounts to control, the report adds. The 2014 report clearly states that within the media industry, ownership issues are of utmost importance for the news and current affairs genre. It cites studies noting that corporate ownership of media ensures a quid pro quo situation where favorable coverage is assured for the companies in the ownership position. The corporates directly owns equities in media groups, or control is exerted through indirect ownership of equities through subsidiaries or trusts. This business arrangement brings corporate people to the

media decision-making tables. Then there is a trend of big media houses becoming corporates, investing their money in other businesses. The issue of political ownership of media poses the problem of leveraging media by the owners for self-promotion, propaganda, and lobbying. Nonetheless, India has yet to have any law regulating horizontal and vertical integration in the media market.

The Adani Acquisition

Similar to billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Limited, which holds significant control in the media and entertainment industry in India, another billionaire, Gautam Adani, has started raising his interests in media recently through various acquisitions of some notable media companies. In 2022, Adani's subsidiary, AMG Media Networks Limited, announced its acquisition of a 49 percent stake in Quintillion Business Media Private Limited, which operates the financial digital news platform BQ Prime. Reports on the acquisition cite a 48 crore deal that gave a significant number of shares to the Adani Group.

In the same year, a subsidiary of Adani acquired [27.26 percent](#) of NDTV stakes from Radhika Roy and Prannoy Roy, raising their total share of stake in the same to 64.71 percent. Immediately after this, the company made three new appointments to the board. Within some time, several people associated with the network, including a few renowned journalists, resigned. In 2023, Adani Enterprises [announced](#) 50.5 percent of the stakes in Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), further consolidating its media control. The same year, the Adani Group also acquired the remaining 51 percent stake in Quintillion Business Media Private Limited.

The media landscape of Nepal also testifies to the high levels of cross-ownership in the country. For instance, Kantipur Media Group owns Kantipur, a daily; The Kathmandu Post, an English-language daily; Nepal, a weekly magazine; Saptahik, a tabloid; and Nari, a women's magazine. Similarly, Nepal Republic Media Private Limited owns Nagarik, a daily; Republica, an English-language daily; Sukhrabar, a weekly tabloid; and Pariwar, a specialized magazine. The pattern continues in other top media groups such as Gorkhapatra Corporation and Nepal News Network Private Limited. Kantipur also has Kantipur Digital Corp, which has investments in [F1Soft International](#), a software company.

Cross-ownership and media concentration are also reported to be issues in Bangladesh. A detailed report by the Centre for Governance Studies in 2021 reveals the grip of business companies and political groups over the media. A key conclusion notes that family ownership of media is a well-known element of Bangladeshi media, and members of the same family own different media groups with different political leanings. Further, the relationship between political groups and media owners has different shades. One is the direct ownership of media by politicians, as evidenced by several former MPs owning media outlets. The second comes

in the form of loyalties built into the relationship between owners and the ruling government, since licensing requires a cordial relationship between the two. Then, politicians lobby on behalf of businesses to gain media licenses, and lastly, ownership of media houses is often passed down to people who are connected to the present ruling regimes, the report adds. Conglomerates like Asia Group, Bashundhara Group, Beximco Group, Gazi Group, Gemcon Group, HaMeem Group, HRC Group, Impress Group, Jamuna Group, Karnaphuli Group, and Transcom Group own multiple media outlets in the country. Many of these groups are invested in other businesses, which creates a conflict of interest mentioned earlier in the cases. According to the analysis of the group, many of the business owners of media in Bangladesh also have a presence in sectors such as financial institutions, insurance, energy, and real estate. For instance, owners of Rupayan and Bashundhara media groups also have stakes in energy and real estate.

Media Development Support and Fellowships

There are various media development organisations across the world that support and aid news media outlets in various countries. However, such initiatives face certain [specific challenges](#) when it comes to supporting initiatives or organisations in South Asia.

Safety concerns, for instance, can be a challenge for citizen journalists who look at applying for training or other initiatives. In order for countries across South Asia to be able to confidently apply for such initiatives, there needs to be awareness of any associated risks or safety concerns and threats in order to protect them from the same and enable them to apply their learnings to their work instead of leaving them in an unsafe environment.

One of the major challenges for any media outlet is to find and sustain revenue sources to keep the outlet running. Funding fluctuations can be detrimental to sustained development. In cases of accepting revenue from varied sources, news media outlets are cautious at times to avoid the possibility of reputational damage, as explained by a media development expert in Asia. Public displays of logos or names of organisations that support a particular media civil society organisation could possibly be misused against them creating reputational damage. There is also the additional challenge of being labelled as a “foreign agent” and carrying out foreign agendas in such cases. For media outlets in South Asian countries, reliance on external funding sources can pose a significant hurdle as with the recent freezing of U.S. development aid, which has impacted numerous organisations in South Asia. Such funding issues are exacerbated by certain laws and regulations in some countries such as the [amendments](#) to India’s Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) which prevents news outlets from receiving foreign funding according to Rule 9 (1) (e) of the Act

This means that any non-governmental organisation applying for FCRA registration must declare that it does not publish news or news content in order to then receive foreign funding. Such an amendment has made it very difficult for news media outlets in the country to sustain themselves particularly in the context of publishing nonpartisan news while having to rely on regional funding sources to ensure the smooth running of the organisation.

When organisations come up with strategies to utilise resources or deliver impact on a certain scale, a lack of reliable data prevents them from making valid assumptions. This can then result in erroneous strategies that could waste resources, fail to create expected impact, or even cause unintended harm. In cases of sketchy, inconsistent, or wrong data, program execution tools such as baseline reporting, contextual analysis, and evidence gathering become challenging as well. Such data gaps in South Asian countries sometimes extend to audience research as well. When certain areas are overlooked or underrepresented, critical areas may be left unaddressed resulting in missed opportunities.

Administrative requirements and problems with the same, a lack of direct access to donors, and challenges with collaborations between organisations in the same country or from different countries are other challenges when it comes to media supporting initiatives in South Asia, which is applicable for India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Fellowships in India

In order to support quality journalism and provide journalists with varied support, there are various fellowships in India that can be availed. These range from support for journalism in general to aiding and encouraging reporting on specific beats or issues. The REACH Media Fellowships, for instance, are targeted at those reporting on [tuberculosis](#). [The National Foundation for India Fellowships](#) encourage fellows to undertake in-depth reporting on a broad range of issues, with fellowships being awarded to 20 or 30 fellows. There are also fellowships like the [Indian Science Media Fellowships](#) and the [Without Borders Media Fellowship](#) which focus on scientific storytelling and health-related journalistic reporting. The Centre for Science and Environment gives out the Anil Agarwal Media Fellowship is awarded to encourage journalists to focus on issues of development and environment, while the [South Asia Journalism Fellowship](#) helps develop leadership skills among individuals to enable them to tackle issues such as governance, media ethics, and political reporting focused on South Asia's unique challenges. There are also fellowships such as the [India Together](#) fellowship focused on science research, regional and local economies, and the changing state of education.

Fellowships in Nepal

Many fellowships are available for journalists working in Nepal as well. The [Without Borders Media Fellowship](#) focusing on health-related journalistic reporting and the [South Asia Journalism Fellowship](#) aimed at enhancing leadership skills to tackle governance and political reporting specifically focused on South Asia's unique challenges are applicable to Nepal as well. There are various other fellowships such as the [NIMJN-CANSA Climate Reporting Fellowship](#) aimed at in-depth climate reporting and the [SAJA Reporting Fellowship](#) to encourage more in-depth stories related to South Asia which are often excluded from mainstream media. The [ICDR International Fellowship Program for Dalit Journalists](#) enables reporting on caste-based issues and human rights violations, and abuse of power among other complex issues in South Asia. The [Development Reporting Fellowship](#) aims at assessing gender and consumer awareness of Nepali advertisements while [Impulse NGO's](#) fellowship focuses on cross-border trafficking journalism. Other fellowships include the [Himalmedia Fellowship Programme](#), the [Investigative Reporting Fellowship](#), and the [Sawtee Media Fellowship](#) which specifically encourages reporting on issues at the intersection of digital transformation and economic development.

Fellowships in Bangladesh

The [Without Borders Media Fellowship](#) and the [South Asia Journalism Fellowship](#) mentioned for India and Nepal are applicable for journalists working in the country of Bangladesh as well. Additionally, there are certain fellowships specifically for Bangladesh including the 12-week-long [Farming Future Bangladesh \(FFB\)](#) fellowship focused on agricultural reporting, nutrition, and food security, and the [OKUP Media Fellowship on Climate Change, Migration, and Modern Slavery](#) for journalists practicing in the country. Additionally, the [Young Media Fellowship on WASH](#) deals with crucial water, sanitation, and hygiene issues in Bangladesh while [Impulse NGO](#) supports reporting on human trafficking by Bangladeshis as well.

Fellowships for women journalists

In order to encourage reporting by women journalists from across different countries on various beats, certain fellowships exist particularly targeted at women. Some of these include the [Elizabeth Neuffer Fellowship](#) for women and non-binary journalists, the two-year, full-time [Global Press Fellowship](#), the [Prabha Dutt Fellowship](#), and the [APWLD Media Fellowship](#). Such fellowships aim to bring nuanced, in-depth, and feminist perspectives to complex social issues that impacts people around the world.

Networks of Journalists

There are many such national and international networks that journalists from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh can be a part of and benefit from. These include various networks for Indian journalists such as the [Earth Journalism Network](#) (EJN) particularly focused on environmental reporting, the [International Journalists' Network](#), the [Indian Newspaper and Journalist Society](#) which aims to protect and safeguard the interests of print and electronic media, [101 Reporters](#) which specifically supports freelance journalists, and the [Journalists' Council of India](#) (JCI) which ensures sharing of problems faced by journalists to the government administration. Given that women journalists face distinct and specific challenges during the course of their work, the [Network of Women in India](#) (NWMi) supports women journalists, providing them with a safe space and offering them fellowships as well.

Journalists in Nepal can make use of networks such as the [International Network for Nepali Journalists](#) (INNJ) to enable journalists to network and empower them with resources and information through seminars, trainings, etc., [Media Action Nepal](#) which advocates for the rights of journalists, varied [journalists associations](#), and the [Federation of Nepali Journalists](#) (FNJ). Bangladesh has networks for journalists as well including varied [journalists associations](#), the [Commonwealth Journalists Association](#) (CJA) which aims to promote freedom of expression and professional journalism, the [International Federation of Journalists](#) (IFJ) which represents about 6,00,000 journalists across 140 countries, the [Telecom and Technology Reporters Network](#) (TRNB), and [Media Watch Bangladesh](#).

Chapter IV

Primary Research Findings



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 1

Politics

The primary data reiterates the picture that emerged from the desk research. Respondents from all three countries remarked on the excessive use of state agencies against news media to intimidate them especially if they took a critical stand against the state. In particular, participants from India emphasised the hostile use of tax agencies, among others, to curb news media, while in Bangladesh, a similar environment is created through security agencies by the ruling regimes. Furthermore, primary data shows that the hostile relationship of the state with the news media unfolds not only through explicit intimidation following critical reporting, but also takes the form of policies and laws that are either passed or have been on the table in recent years.. For instance, news outlets, particularly digital and independent media in India, find several policies of the state inimical. Respondents indicated that existing policies hinder potential funding or investment support, and place a high tax and resource burden and compliance with media and communication laws in the country is debilitating..

“As for global funders, they don’t fund India. I’ve spoken to several of them, and the reason isn’t that India is a high-income country; it’s that the regime here is very hostile. And it’s becoming even more so with new clauses and regulations: the Digital Broadcast Bill, IT Bill, and so on.”

~IDI, India

A similar sentiment was echoed by respondents of the other two countries where news media professionals perceive the latest legal developments as a further the infringement on the freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

“And there are also many legal barriers, such as the Digital Security Act and then the Cyber Security Act. I believe none of these protect journalists or ensure their freedom, and they do not align with the provisions for press freedom in our constitution.”

~IDI, Bangladesh

An increasing threat of defamation and other criminal suits against journalists and news organisations by state and non-state actors has emerged as a critical theme in our primary data. The atmosphere of fear it builds escalates self-censorship among journalists. One research participant from India emphasised the constant stress they face in their personal and professional lives once they realise that they are under surveillance for their work. It forces them to ‘soften’ their approach towards subjects, which becomes antithetical to the principle with which many budding small news outlets start.

“[B]ut there was a lot of surveillance happening. And we were like, this is getting crazy...We got coverage, we got accolades, awards, international recognition, but we were still very small. We didn’t have the funding or the kind of backing that mainstream media houses have...And I would also definitely say self-censorship. I think in the last one year, there was a lot of self-censorship that had started even amongst us.”

~ IDI, India

In Bangladesh, the atmosphere of fear over legal repercussions from the state has been a crucial deterrent under different regimes, as a participant noted.

“For example, what is our fear now? The fear of lawsuits. The fear that they will file a case against me at any moment. During the previous era, it was the same thing: they set an example with digital cases, saying, “Look, if you do this, I will do that to you.” As a result, out of fear, we would self-censor. Now, there is no Digital Security Act, but there are cases. So, we get the same weapon under different names as journalists. So, let me just say, the sense of fear, it remains in front of us, in some form, under some name..”

~IDI, Bangladesh

Additionally, lawsuits come with heavy legal costs for news organisations and journalists. The scarce resources within which journalists and outlets already work makes the situation extremely precarious for them.

“Political risks, on the other hand, are out in the open. If the government comes after us, like with the income tax raids, people know, people talk about it. The bigger challenge for us is actually defamation.”

~IDI, India

One research participant from India was candid about the cost of fighting their legal cases in recent years and explained how the social capital of people in the outlet comes to some advantage in those critical situations.

“In terms of costs, I’d estimate that over the last four years we’ve spent roughly ₹40–60 lakh on 8–10 cases. Had I not had one of my closest friends who owns the law firm advising us, the cost could easily have been ₹2.5 crore...Our ability to manage these cases without going bankrupt is largely due to social, caste, and family privilege.”

~IDI, India

About legal aid, research participants from Bangladesh pointed out the lack of accessible legal aid for journalists who are being persecuted by the state and the lack of proper data on journalists fleeing, facing abuse and fighting legal cases in the current political climate. According to several participants from Bangladesh, the growing culture of mob violence against news outlets acts as a strong deterrent forcing news outlets to worry about property damage and other financial losses and weigh these against journalistic duties to report.

“The innovation is mob culture... all the newsrooms, all while writing a single word or broadcasting any single news, news managers are thinking about when the mob will come, how to avoid that. The owners give the instruction; Don’t do anything; I have this amount of assets in this building.”

~ Roundtable, Bangladesh

While desk research shows that journalists and news outlets face social media trolling in connection with their work and that for women it often turns into gendered attacks, one research participant from India shared how religious identities of reporters from minority backgrounds become a target when they report stories related to the majority religion.

“I usually tell people, if I see their story is getting trolled, I just tell them to switch off social media immediately. Because really, there’s nothing you can do to address it, and you’ll only end up feeling sad or upset...People do get upset, especially when their story is targeted. For example, if a Christian reporter writes about a Hindu temple, their religion is attacked immediately. I now keep Muslim reporters away from writing on temple issues or caste issues unless they’re fully aware that a backlash will come their way.”

~ IDI, India

There is a strong perception among the primary research participants that the bodies, organisations, and unions that exist primarily to protect the interests of journalists are ineffective and hyperpartisan in nature. Press councils are not able to support journalists' interests and, in some places, themselves issue threats to media outlets in connection with their work. In Bangladesh and Nepal, the partisan nature of unions and associations has emerged as a hurdle when it comes to taking collective action to protect journalists' interests, including labor issues. Many journalists tend to see the unions and associations as not doing anything, or not doing enough, when it comes to providing safeguards. They remain politically fractured and non-transparent, according to most of the respondents of this research.

“Even these unions and organisations are politically inclined. The members have political affiliations and that’s how they reach top roles. Journalists might have some channels to complain if there’s a problem but I don’t know how many complaints have been made and how many have been addressed well. If they were addressed well, we would hear about it. But nothing concrete has been done by them.”

-IDI, Nepal

“...[O]ur organisations are actually partisan and exist solely to protect their own community, their own party members. Not for journalists.”

-IDI, Bangladesh



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 2

Economics

According to the majority of our research participants, particularly those from Bangladesh and Nepal, the crippling financial instability of many news outlets remains an important problem on the economic front when it comes to running a news media outlet. This situation is attributed to multiple factors, including decreasing revenue from advertisements, a lack of diverse and stable revenue options, and not being able to generate meaningful revenue from digital platforms, among others.

“Along with that, media runs on advertising; it’s one of the main revenue sources for media worldwide. And that advertising has shifted towards social media. Since companies are promoting and branding themselves on social media, the revenue for media has decreased significantly. Therefore, (news) media organisations are forced to find other revenue sources for their financial stability, which I also see as a big challenge.”

~ IDI, Nepal

The issue of timely salaries has been a major issue that emerged in interviews from Bangladesh and Nepal. This signals that news outlets are not able to generate enough revenue to sustain their operations and pay their staff in a timely manner.

“And people can put ads on Facebook or TikTok themselves. Nobody looks at ads in newspapers. So, why put ads in newspapers? There are many other digital platforms for that and it’s even possible to show ads only to the desired audience. That’s why I’m not hopeful that the media will become profitable -we will not get our salaries on time unless an alternative for revenue generation is worked out.”

~ IDI, Nepal

Financial instability restricts news media outlets' ability to hire or retain talented journalists. This is further exacerbated by low wages in the news media industry, which makes the field unattractive to young people. Several research participants were of the opinion that the precarious economic conditions force people to take up anything they get in order to sustain themselves. As a result, people joining the newsrooms might not have the commitment and drive that a newsroom requires, given that they are already mired in a struggle for survival. In India, many of the independent news outlets in our research shared that they often run on shoestring budgets. The annual operating budgets of small digital native outlets in India roughly range between close to a crore to a few crores Indian rupees..

Despite such struggles and issues, **advertising revenue continues to be the predominant source for mainstream news media in all three countries, with some outlets experimenting with paywalls and other diversification strategies.** Their revenue channels include hosting annual events, offering their human and social capital from the newsroom to other kinds of organizations who may need it, and monetising their digital platforms. In most cases, revenue from digital sources, whether it is advertisements, subscriptions, or platform monetisation, is not substantial and not enough to sustain all the operations of the news outlets at the moment.

“So in terms of the publications revenue, I would say that around 30 to 40% comes from print revenue, 10 to 15% from online advertisements, and around 30% comes from events.”

-IDI, Nepal

“We have also started this[paywalls]. It's not a huge source, but we are getting some response.”

-IDI, Bangladesh

The revenue landscape of digital news media is dominated by big tech companies, which leads to a lack of a level playing field, our participants shared.

“The logic of that was that we had already anticipated what Google and Facebook could do with ads; they had extreme dominance. For instance, when we started, the pre-roll YouTube ad rate used to be between ₹320–₹400 CPI (cost per index). Today, that same pre-roll ad for Indian news is around ₹32. Imagine how much it's dropped. Back then, if you got 40,000 views, you could make around four lakh. Today, you'd need four million views to make that money, and even then, you won't, because it keeps falling.”

-IDI, India

Government advertisements in these countries are often distributed based on the loyalty of the news outlet to the government and its willingness to avoid carrying reports that are critical in nature. In smaller regions with fewer industries or businesses, news media are primarily dependent on government advertisements. The loss of this revenue stream due to adversarial reporting is rampant and affects the financial viability of news outlets. The imperative to stay financially afloat also creates internal conflicts between the editorial and business arms of news outlets, with the latter censoring the publishing of anything that might lead to revenue loss. Many respondents spoke quite candidly about this dynamic in our research interviews. One research participant from Nepal also pointed out that there is rampant corruption in the money allocated for advertisements by the government and the money that actually reaches news organisations is less. From Bangladesh, a few research participants attributed part of the financial crisis to the stagnant market and the increasing number of news outlets competing for limited resources.

“...Obviously related to the advertisement market, there has been a rapid growth in the number of news outlets in Bangladesh, print, TV, and online. That became a big challenge. And the market is the same; the revenue market is the same.”

~Roundtable, Bangladesh

Several of our participants from independent media in India see the future viability of news organisations as being primarily dependent on direct revenues from audiences, rather than ad-centric business models. The long-term strategy for such media outlets is to stay away from government and corporate patronage, which often comes with strings attached.

“Fairly when you're facing sort of both ideological and institutional pressures, I do not see any other business model that can successfully sustain itself through prolonged period unless there is direct support from the readers.”

~ Roundtable, India

Nevertheless, the subscriptions are yet to be substantial for most outlets that have opted for depending on the subscription model for their financial sustainability currently. The general reluctance of people to pay for news is often cited as a key obstacle to the success of paywall experiments, particularly in Nepal and Bangladesh.

“In my previous organisation...to diversify our digital revenue, for example, we tried coming up with more sponsored content or we tried digital subscriptions for our paper. But the thing is that the Bangladeshi audience, the people in our country, are not ready to pay for it. They think that they can just go on to some social media and browse there and find out what's happening around the world, and that's it for them.”

~ Roundtable, Bangladesh

The challenge for these organisations also lies in building a loyal audience that will pay for journalistic content rather than for any ideological leaning they may have toward a news organisation.

“The challenge with subscriptions and donations that I see is to distinguish support that comes from people like us and organisations like us, particularly for ideological reasons or for journalistic reasons. Is your donor, is your subscriber, subscribing to you because he or she believes you are doing good journalism? Or he or she believes you are sitting on the same side of the ideological spectrum that he or she sits.”

~Roundtable, India

Outlets that have received support in terms of institutional funding, such as grants, testify that such revenue streams are highly volatile and dry up at some point. Sustaining the outlet beyond that requires a long-term business model. For instance, primary data reveals that there are several small outlets in India that received grants from organisations such as the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation (IPSMF), which were very crucial for the early years of the outlet. Ending or unavailability of such grants often throws the small players into financial uncertainty. The dependence on civil societies and non-profits for revenue is also shrinking as those players themselves are in a financial bind due to recent policy shifts. Other such donors have shifted their support to influencers and content creators. Such funding usually works as pay for services like content creation or other such support extended by the news outlet.

Another source of revenue for news outlets in recent years across countries has been annual conferences/roundtable discussions/ outsourcing own resources and networks for which they receive sponsorships and advertisements.

“So one of the diversification methods is we host round tables. So these are projects that we take up from NGOs and other institutions. Let's say the World Bank wants to hold a roundtable on women's financing. So they would collaborate with us. We would provide the location, we would provide a lot of the logistics, including recording it, contacting experts in the field, getting them to attend the roundtables so on and so forth. They have made somewhat of a difference because we were so heavily reliant on print only.”

~ Roundtable, Bangladesh

“Sometimes we'll get a turnkey project. For example, X was doing shoots and a video story here. They didn't have any on-ground support, so they got in touch with us, asked if we could help with a producer and equipment, since their reporter wanted to go to Chhattisgarh. So, we did that. Then there's the event which we used to hold every year. A couple of years ago, we also got a grant for the studio. But overall, I'd say not more than 10–15% of our revenue comes from such sources. It helps with sustainability, but it's unpredictable; there could easily be a year where we don't get any such contracts.”

~ Roundtable, India

“We regularly hold dialogues across the provinces. We discuss local issues there, and there are various local advertisers who are ready to help us with some revenue in that. There are also national advertisers who are interested in such initiatives. We also hold an annual conclave, which is our flagship event. It is our biggest event and it helps us raise some revenue. And we also hold regular dialogues on issues like labor and of Nepali economy, women, etc. We have four or five niche areas on which we hold regular events and which help us cover the cost, cover the revenue that we have lost in terms of advertisers.”

~ Roundtable, Nepal

An effect of this trend could be an interest of journalistic organisations in building a pool of skills and resources that they can monetise, which then could be channelled to sustain their journalistic expenditures. For example, as one of our research participants pointed out,

“So, that's why we have to actually also enhance our capacity. If we can enhance our capacity beyond news, if we can provide some other support services to the people in the market, that could get us some extra money.”

~ IDI, Bangladesh



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 3

Community

Many of our research participants shared that media organisations are building strategies to target audiences who have shifted to digital platforms.

“Our most dramatic growth came with a combination of three things, a perfect storm, so to speak. In 2019, we redid our tech, we launched our app, and then COVID hit.”

~ IDI, India

“Over the next few years to increase our engagement with the people and connect with them, because mainstream media has been rather slow to connect with the youth population. By youth, I mean roughly those between 20 and 40. So how do we go to where they spend their time online or where they are getting their news? We need to go where they are consuming content. We can't expect them to come to us. So those are some of the things that we're trying.”

~ IDI, Nepal

“But in the home ground Bangladesh, you know, the English leadership is comparatively very poor when you compare that with Bangla leadership in the newspaper business. But whatever that niche market is, we actually tried to engage them through our digital presence, where they can always give us feedback.”

~ IDI, Bangladesh

On the other hand, small news organisations increasingly realise that having sustained and healthy relations is key to their viability. Hence, we observe a conscious attempt to build strong relations with audiences as an important viability strategy, especially in India.

“That’s another reason our subscription model works: we actively listen to our subscribers. Whenever I travel, whether it’s Bangalore, Punjab, or London, wherever, we put out an announcement that I’ll be in town. Then we book a restaurant or a bar, and subscribers come by.... I take their feedback directly. Our subscribers know their feedback is taken seriously...People will read and share opinions, but they won’t pay for them. We figured that out five or six years ago. What subscribers do pay for is solid reporting.”

~ IDI, India

“Earlier, we did invest in a social media person, especially for Instagram, and that helped us grow. But now we’ve rethought it. For our new Community and Campaigns Manager, social media is only about 1% of her role. The rest is about building deeper connections with our readers, ensuring our work has a larger impact, and expanding where our stories are spoken about...This approach also supports financial viability. As we build our membership program and institutional memberships, community building becomes central, not just to engagement but also to revenue. So, this is our beginning of thinking about those things.”

~ IDI, India

Another recurring theme that came up in the qualitative data was regarding the declining levels of trust common people have in news media, especially in mainstream media. In Nepal, several participants attributed the trust gap to the perception of people, particularly the younger generation, that the media- particularly mainstream legacy media has become part of the establishment. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, research participants pointed out that the decline in people’s confidence in the media is because of clickbait journalism and sensationalism brought about by hypercompetition in the news media landscape. At the same time, **a couple of participants from Nepal and Bangladesh pointed out that the trust gap of the public in established media is also fuelled by politically interested groups circulating a negative narrative about such institutions.**



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 4

Technology

The issue of technology and its impact on news media organizations, journalism as a profession and other related aspects including financial viability is complex. **On the one hand news organizations and journalists are trying to keep up with new digital technologies to stay abreast of the fast changing times - including innovating with formats and presentation styles that can keep audiences interested. On the other hand, financial and resource constraints prevent these newsrooms from investing effectively to innovate with technology.** AI and social media algorithms further complicate the ecosystem.

Our data reveals that newsrooms have started employing AI for various purposes, including image generation, transcriptions, and translations, though most outlets are yet to draft formal policies around AI usage.

Some newsrooms in India have informal regulations on the accepted use of AI and several others in our interviews said they are currently thinking about AI policies for their newsrooms. Our data also reveals that there is confusion and uncertainty about the effective use of AI among journalists. There are journalists who feel that technological advances have made verification of information harder with synthetic media.

“...there is a lot of confusion around what you can do and what you cannot do. Can you edit some text? Can you ask for ideas? Can you edit your video? Can you use captions generated by AI? Can you use summaries? There is a lot of confusion about what you can and what you cannot use. We are dealing with some of the challenges. For instance, many of the articles, especially the opinion pieces we get these days, are generated by AI. One of the problems we are facing is that many writers admit to using AI but they say they just used it to correct grammar and that the ideas are their own. So what do we do in that case? That is an increasingly bigger problem. So I think over the next year or two, we have to work out our media AI policy in terms of what we permit and what we don't permit because it can be a slippery slope.”

~ IDI, Nepal

The issue of not being able to make sufficient investments in digital and other new technologies owing to lack of resources was emphasised by research participants from smaller news outlets.

As more and more people consume news through social media apps or platforms like Google, these tech companies become powerful players in the news ecosystem. **News outlets are dependant on the tech companies like Google and meta to reach their audiences but these platforms are also acting as gatekeepers.** That means they have a lot of control over which news stories people see and which websites get more visitors. AI summaries generated in response to search queries often contain information or news pieces from different news outlets. While this ensures traffic to the platforms, it does not necessarily translate into traffic for the news outlets, as people tend to stop at the AI-generated summaries. At the same time, news organisations must also keep up with such social media platforms' policy changes to avoid being flagged for rule violations which might lead to a further loss of traffic and/or revenue.

Another aspect of the Ai revolution is the lack of data training in local regional languages.

AI and Newsrooms: Survey

A short survey to understand the implications of AI in newsrooms was conducted across the three countries as part of primary research. While it reveals some emerging trends on the subject, the survey is limited by a low sample size, especially from Nepal. Further, it followed convenience sampling methodology. Thus, the findings should be read as initial insights regarding the questions of AI and newsrooms in these countries. This was conducted using

Google Survey Forms, and the team reached out to potential respondents via social media and email. The survey had three major sections: personal information, personal use of AI in relation to work, and institutional structures and AI. People who marked themselves as non-users of AI did not have to fill in any questions regarding personal use of AI, and they were directed to questions regarding their own institutions and AI.

	INDIA	NEPAL	BANGLADESH	NOTES
TOTAL SAMPLE	44	20	42	While India and Bangladesh had roughly the same sample size, Nepal is low and almost half of the rest.
GENDER	63.6% Female 36.4% Male	65% Male 35% Female	75.6% Male 24.4% Female	India is the only country where the female respondents were higher than the male respondents.
DESIGNATION	Editors were the largest group of respondents, amounting to 22.7% of the total sample, followed by reporters	The percentage of editors and reporters was of same size, 35%	75.6% Male 24.4% Female	India is the only country where the female respondents were higher than the male respondents.
EXPERIENCE LEVEL	The majority of the respondents had 1-3 years of experience, 52.3%	The majority of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience, 50%	The majority of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience, 51.2%.	
MEDIA TYPE	The majority of the respondents were from digital outlets, 40.95%	The majority of the respondents from digital outlets, 55%	The majority of the respondents were from TV channels, 39%	
LANGUAGE	The majority works in English-language media, 63.6%	Overwhelmingly regional language media, 90%	Overwhelmingly English language media, 92.7%	

Findings from the AI in the Newsroom Survey

Common threads across countries

All the countries are reported as having high levels of individual-driven AI adoption by media professionals in relation to their work. 81.1%, 60%, and 78% of respondents from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, respectively, said they use AI tools in relation to their work. AI tools are mainly used for editorial and desk tasks such as spell and grammar check, translations, and design.

In India and Bangladesh, the majority among these respondents use AI daily, while in Nepal, only 8.3% of them stated that they are daily users. Across countries, spell and grammar check and translations topped as the purpose of respondents' AI use. Other reported uses include transcriptions, summary generation, designing, data analysis, keyword generation, and fact-checking.

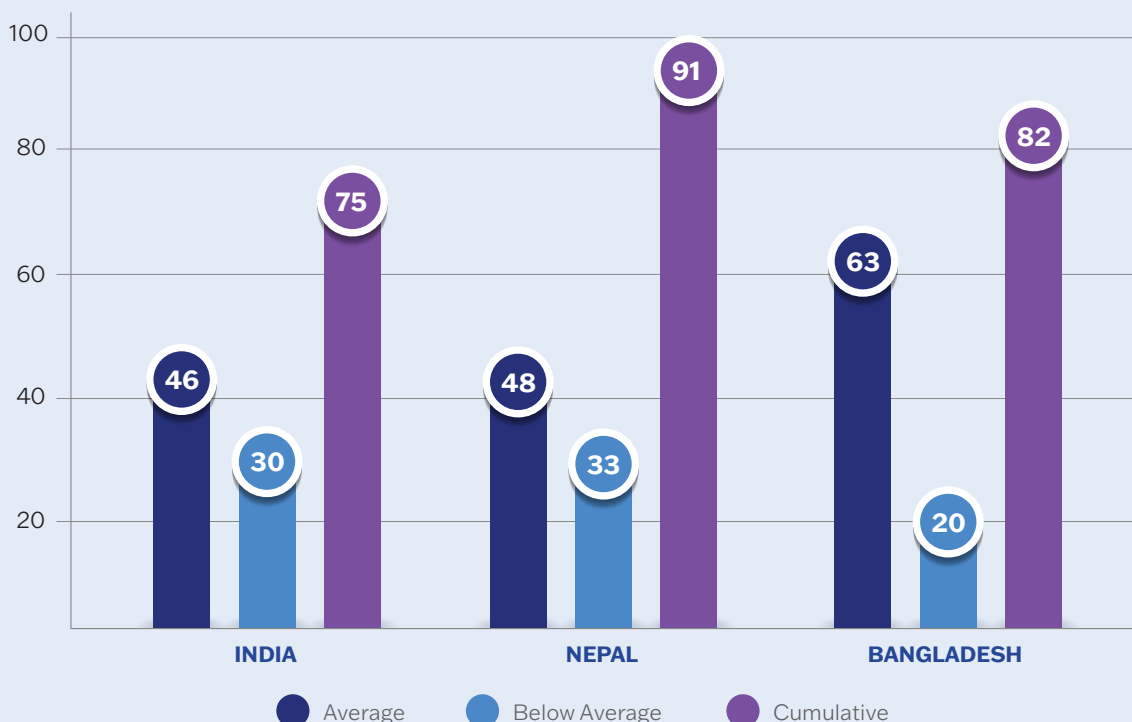
All the countries recorded an overwhelming lack of organizational infrastructures and policies. The majority of the respondents across countries expressed an interest in taking AI training.

In terms of training, more than 60% in India and Nepal and an overwhelming majority of 85% in Bangladesh, reported receiving no training on AI. Respondents who did receive training on AI got it mostly outside of their own media institutions. The majority of the current AI use is self initiated (63.9% in India, 69.2% in Nepal, and 81.3% in Bangladesh). Furthermore, paid access to AI tools is largely absent as well (54.5% in India, 80% in Nepal, 78% in Bangladesh).

There is a general consensus across countries about the need for institutional policy regarding AI, while currently, the majority agree that there are low organizational investments and resources in relation to AI.

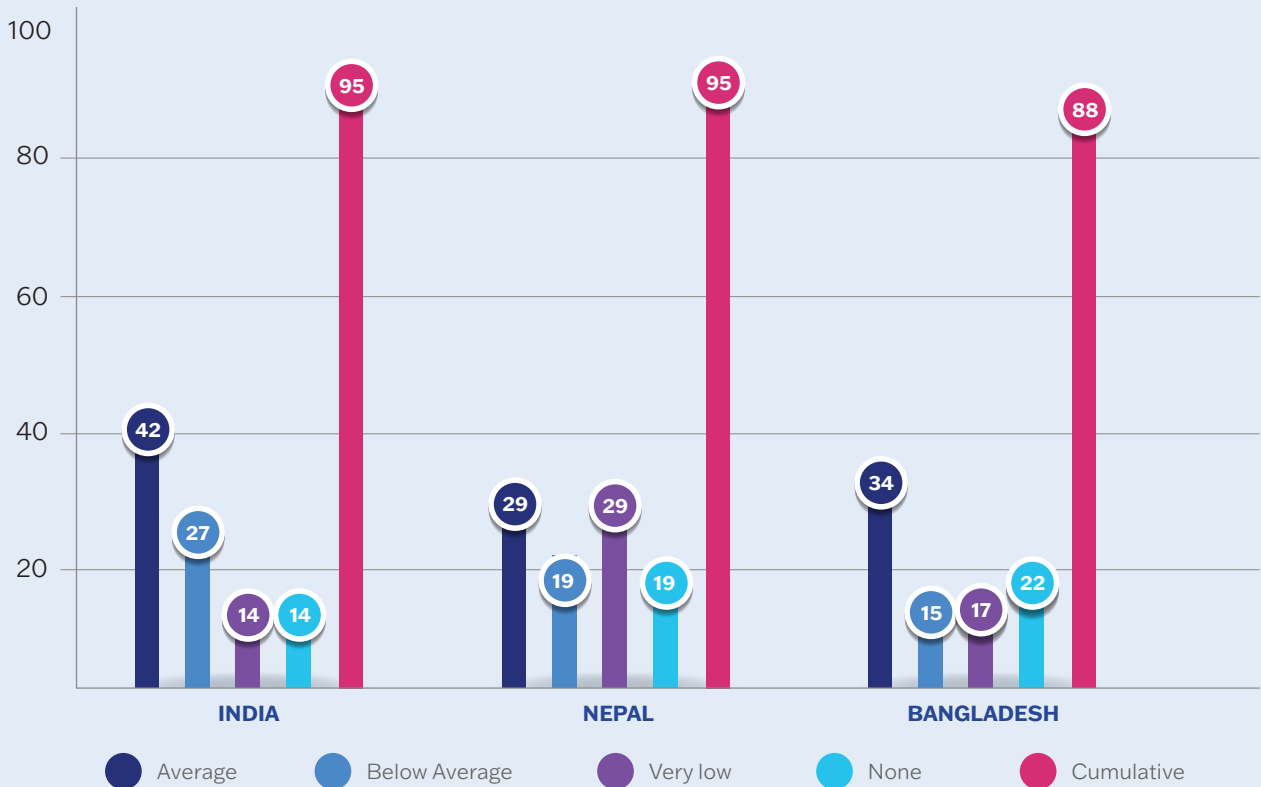
A vast majority in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh were in agreement about the necessity of an AI policy in all newsrooms (86.4% in India, 85% in Nepal, 87.8% in Bangladesh). Only 20.5% in India, 9.5% in Nepal and 7.3% in Bangladesh ranked their organization's technical capacity and qualified professionals for AI support as High.

Rating organization's technical capacities & qualified professionals to support AI use



Similarly, overwhelming majority across the three countries also rated current investments by their newsrooms in AI as low.

Rating current organizational investments in AI



A significant percentage of respondents ranked ethical concerns (31.8% in India, 20% in Nepal), lack of knowledge within their institutions (25% in India, 36.6% in Bangladesh), financial constraints (40% in Nepal), and lack of interest (36.6% in Bangladesh) as the top two reasons for the investment gap. Self-reported knowledge of AI among the respondents is mostly average or below average. In India, close to 66% ranked their AI knowledge as average, while in Nepal, an overwhelming majority (85%) reported their knowledge as average.

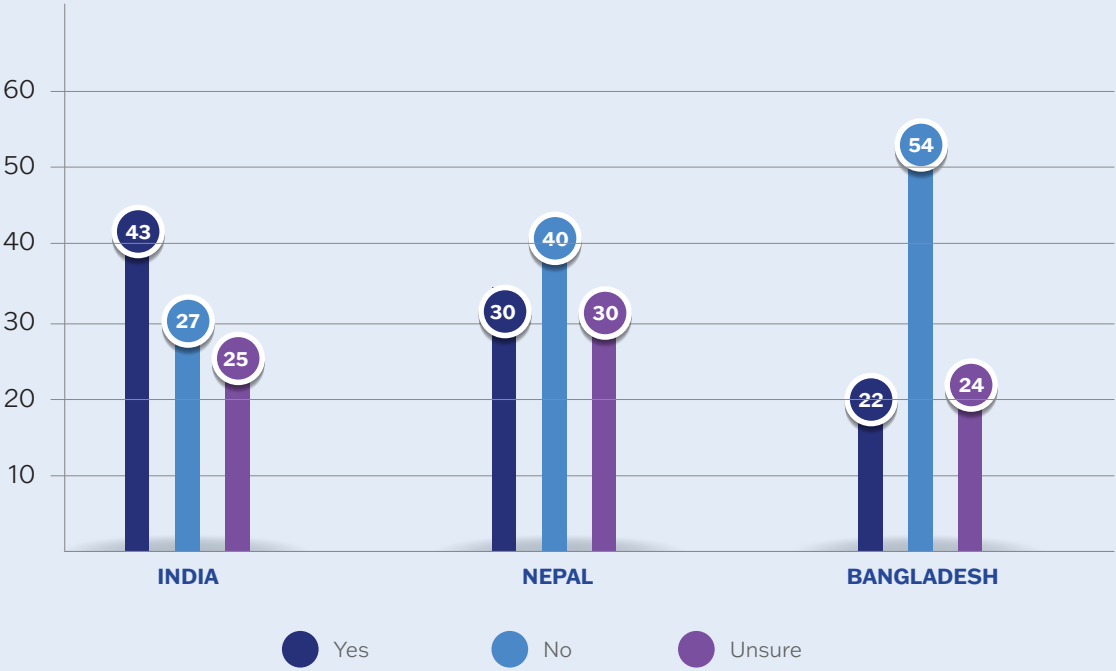
With another 15% ranking their knowledge as below average, no respondent ranked themselves high. In Bangladesh, 51.2% ranked their knowledge as average, and an additional 24.4% reported having below-average knowledge of AI. Script writing, copy editing, and graphics are mostly perceived by respondents as areas where AI is going to have the greatest impact in the near future.

Rating current organizational investments in AI



AI use disclosure rate (full and partial) varies across countries (50% full and 25% partial disclosure in India, 58.3% full and 33.3% partial disclosure in Nepal, 40.6% full and 31.3% partial disclosure in Bangladesh). The majority of the people who opted for no disclosure reported that they don't believe AI disclosure is necessary, followed by a lack of institutional policies (the second most common reason in Nepal and Bangladesh). Only in India, a little higher than 10% said they don't want to be perceived as taking AI assistance.

Anxious regarding potential job loss due to AI



MEDIA VIABILITY INDICATOR 5
Content & Expertise

Our primary data reasserts that the lack of women in leadership positions and skewed gender and minority ratios in news media continue. Women journalists also continue to face gender bias on personal and systemic levels.

“What happens is like, things have gone to an absurd level, passing comments that they think are no big deal. It is not abuse or racism, it is just normal. I mean, matters are treated in this way. There have even been times, if I could recall, when talking about increments during evaluations, I have heard things like “You have a husband. What do you need an increment for?” Journalists face these gender-based comments, very common.”

~ IDI, Bangladesh

Inadequate salaries are a deterrent to journalists sticking with the profession for a long period. A young journalist from India, in our interview, shared that if they were to leave the profession, it would be because of inadequate pay. People at the editorial level seem cognisant of the insufficiency of salaries in journalism. Many participants across the three countries shared that they observed a decline in investments in ground reporting as well. The focus has shifted from boots on the ground to desk-driven stories.

“I also feel that media houses don’t really pay attention to reporting these days. Because reporting, in essence, is the main asset of news. But to get in-depth reporting, field reporting, finding scoops, and bringing out things that positively impact the community, you need to invest in reporters. That investment is not happening, which is also a kind of challenge.”

~ IDI, Nepal

“International agencies still sometimes have you report, but in India, the focus has really shifted away from reporting. What you see now are mostly explainers and desk-driven stories; there’s not much real ground reporting.”

~ IDI, India

Essential newsroom policies and accountability structures are either absent or underdeveloped in many news outlets. Independent and small newsrooms tend to formalise policies as they grow and expand rather than having them in place when they begin operations. Structured capacity building and training are either limited or completely absent in most newsrooms across the three countries. In places where training is an active part of employees’ upskilling, it is often conceptualised as a continuous feedback mechanism and other support for a fresher’s work rather than taking the form of courses or other mechanisms.

“I haven’t taken a single training funded by the office, or suggested by the office, or through the office, during my five years of work. There is nothing for my skill development in that way from the office, no training or experience sharing. Our media house has radio and, TV in both English, Nepali. If they called all the editors and reporters together in one place, and just asked the editors to speak for like 15 minutes each, we would learn so much...It’s not a big deal, and there’s no expense involved. But they don’t even do that much.”

~ IDI, Nepal

Several small news organisations in India seem not to prefer hiring fresh talent at the moment as they do not have the financial resources required for the learning curve and possible dropouts that may accompany such hiring. Institutional journalism training is perceived by senior newsroom professionals as having a limited effect in preparing young people for the demands of the journalism profession across countries.

“But there is a serious skills gap among journalism graduates. The way we envision stories is not taught in schools. Many editors working on niche or offbeat journalism face the same problem: expectations don’t match reality. Which means, outside of journalism schools, we need to build more specialised training programs to prepare people for this kind of work.”

~ IDI, India

A couple of participants from digital media in India shared that light/sensational/opinion content brings them traction in terms of viewership online. However, it doesn't convert much into subscriptions, according to one. For someone else, the struggle is to balance content that gets them viewership and ground reporting content.

“But audiences flock to crime, thrillers, sensational content, or culture. That’s where viewership and money come from. So we try to balance. We bring people in with popular content, but also carry them into serious journalism. If we’re too stubborn and only do hardcore investigative reporting, we won’t survive.”

~ IDI, India

Collaborations and independent newsrooms in India

Several prominent independent newsrooms in India collaborate with each other for various reasons despite having different structures, working cultures, principles, and business models. For instance, Newslaundry, The News Minute, The Wire, Scroll, and The Caravan joined together in 2023 for election results day coverage for state assemblies and continued the collaboration for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as well. Their election discussion was simultaneously streamed on all of their individual YouTube channels. The primary reason for the collaboration is to pool the resources of small independent news outlets together and amplify their work, as they are individually small players in the landscape with different regional, thematic, or reportage focuses. While it might not be working as an effective strategy for all subjects owing to the differences, elections were a topic that worked well for such collaboration, as a research participant observed.

Collaborations are perceived to be an effective option when news outlets want to work on big stories that need a lot of resources and manpower in terms of investigation and fact-checking, and also when faced with time constraints to analyze large chunks of data. Apart from this, other organisations do have story-based collaborations with other news organisations, domestic and international outlets. Another domain where different outlets join hands is to co-publish the stories in different languages. This kind of arrangement could happen between outlets, but also between an outlet that works on the stories and individuals who would publish them in another language.

Collaborations are not easy to build for the reasons stated earlier. An outlet's principle of not having content they collaborated on behind a paywall disallows collaborations with outlets that use paywalls. Thus, such business questions become important considerations. Further, different processes, for example, fact-checking and corroboration, that organisations follow could also restrain collaborations.

Apart from synergies in terms of content, there is at least one unique experiment that is happening in the independent media scene where two established digital-native outlets are collaborating on the business side as well. The News Minute, a digital outlet focusing on South India, and Newslaundry, a pioneering digital outlet based in Delhi, currently offer bundle subscriptions for their content and now have a common production, social media, outreach, and accounts team. Announcing the alliance in 2023, they stated that,

“This coming together will maximise the strengths of the two organisations and be a force multiplier. Newslaundry’s focus on news critique and long experience in both audio and video formats, and The News Minute’s tradition of outstanding ground reportage, is a combination that we are confident will throw up cutting-edge shows, reports, and projects that are compelling in form and intent, and important as public interest journalism.”

These examples suggest a potential future where collaborations of like-minded organisations may aid smaller and growing organisations in terms of sustainability through offering collective resources to leverage.

Chapter V

Key Conclusions

- Trends from all three countries show routine intimidation of news media by the governments using financial and security agencies. The majority of research participants across the three countries agreed that the government's attitude towards news media (especially if it is critical) is aggressive, which is reflected in policies and laws. In India, around fifty percent of our participants who are in editorial positions shared that policies for news media in the country are hostile towards revenue and funding.
- Corporatisation of media ownership is widespread across countries and cross media ownership emerged as the norm. There is also lack of transparency which makes it harder to evaluate the situation.
- Legal instruments for accessing information are largely dysfunctional across countries. There are attempts to dilute and/or criminalise information access through new acts or laws. In recent times, governments across the three countries have been introducing or amending digital and broadcasting laws that have been criticised by civil society actors as threatening freedom of expression. The rules and guidelines in some of the laws are stringent and violations may result in compromising the viability of news organisations.
- News outlets and journalists are increasingly threatened with defamation and other criminal charges for critical reporting or any critical stance opposing current governments or populist views.
- Self-censorship has dramatically increased, owing to the chilling effects of potential responses from state and non-state actors towards journalists and news organisations. Interviews and round table discussions in our research reveals that mob attacks are perceived to be an increasing threat to news media and journalists in Nepal and Bangladesh.
- Social media trolling and gendered online violence toward journalists and news media organisations have become common.
- Regulatory bodies and associations or unions that are supposed to represent journalists' and press organisations' interests are weak and heavily politicised.
- The financial stability of many news outlets is deteriorating across countries.
- Mainstream and legacy news media continue to depend on advertisements as their primary source of revenue. Nepal and Bangladesh data from this research, in particular, emphasises a market saturation
- Patronage from private and state advertising and corporate ownership, whether overt or covert, undermines editorial independence, leading to preemptive censoring, absence of reporting on certain issues, biased reporting, etc.
- While the digital turn has been the biggest transition of the last decade, news media outlets are yet to meaningfully generate revenue from it.
- The digital landscape is dominated by big tech companies, resulting in a lack of a level playing field.

- While more and more news outlets perceive an audience-centered revenue model as the future, it currently faces several challenges, including the general reluctance of the audiences to pay for news.
- Many news organisations are moving (or planning to move) away from a traditional ad-centered revenue model towards a bouquet model with multiple revenue streams including subscriptions, donations, grants, events, resource offerings, dedicated funders/angel investors, and owner funding.
- A handful of independent news outlets in India have started implementing business models that completely reject advertising to insulate themselves from pressures that come with ads.
- Economic instabilities make the labour conditions of journalists extremely precarious, especially as evident from the Bangladesh and Nepal data.
- The interview data reveal a general consensus among many industry professionals regarding the value of audience relations in terms of news media viability. Understanding and strategising to bring current and potential audiences close, especially on digital platforms, has emerged as an important step at the moment.
- Audience trust in mainstream media has been declining. Several journalists attribute the reasons to hyperpartisan content and the clickbait attitudes of news media.
- There is an urgent need to assess and invest in news literacy and digital literacy for the general news consuming population.
- AI usage in newsrooms is widespread, though there is lack of internal institutional policies.
- Several news organisations face financial constraints that limit meaningful investments in digital technologies.
- The digital ecosystem faces systemic disruptions like Internet shutdowns and brings competition from big tech platforms for news outlets.
- The lack of women in leadership positions and the skewed gender and minority ratio in news media continue. There are a few independent media organisations in India that report higher numbers of women journalists or are completely women-run news outlets.
- Inadequate salaries are a deterrent to journalists sticking with the profession for a long period. While wage recommendations are present in some countries, they are often unrealised.
- Investments in ground reporting have drastically reduced across countries over time.
- Women journalists continue to face gender bias on personal and systemic levels. Essential newsroom policies and accountability structures are either absent or underdeveloped in many news outlets. Independent and small newsrooms tend to formalise policies as they expand rather than having them in place when they start operations.
- Structured capacity building and training are either limited or completely absent in newsrooms. Institutional journalism training is perceived by senior newsroom professionals as having a limited effect in preparing young people for the demands of the journalism profession.

Chapter VI

Media Viability Strategies

CAPACITY FOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

As the key findings show, many news organisations have realised that the predominant traditional business model centred on advertisements is no longer sustainable for running news media operations. On the one hand, the flow of advertising money to news outlets has drastically transformed over the past decade, especially with the growth of digital media and its increasing dominance in the ad market. Competition from big tech platforms further adds to this precarious situation for news outlets. The partisan approach of governments in distributing ads undermines the viability of ad-dependent outlets, particularly the small and regional ones. At the macro level, the broader economic conditions of the countries also affect institutions that are potential advertisers.

On the other hand, several independent news organisations, especially in India, reject advertisements to insulate themselves from the pressures that may accompany them. While many across India, Nepal, and Bangladesh have yet to see substantial revenues from paywalls or audience donations, a handful of news organisations in India have been fairly successful in turning these into meaningful revenue streams. Several others hope to follow suit. Data from Bangladesh and Nepal during our research suggest that even legacy media are beginning to refurbish their revenue models as ad revenues decline considerably.

While there is no one-size-fits-all business model, given the diverse contexts, orientations, and structures of news outlets in these countries, tailored support mechanisms to develop sustainable business models and diversify revenue sources are essential, particularly for small and independent news organisations. The experience of many independent outlets in India shows that relying heavily on a single revenue stream (such as

grants) may not be sustainable in the long run, as such funding dries up at some point and may come with caveats as well. Hence, a bouquet model tends to be a practical approach to cushion outlets from collapse when one revenue stream drops or pauses for some reason.

What emerges from the research is the need for capacity building and resource support for news media outlets and journalists aspiring to become media entrepreneurs to develop and understand the business side of news.

Currently, while there is support for upskilling journalists to deepen their skills in the profession or to understand safety concerns, or for technical capacity and capacity for fact-checking and debunking information, there is little by way of consistent training and skilling for business development.

INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Our research shows that a gap exists in capacity building for young reporters in newsrooms. Different factors contribute to this, including outlets not investing enough or showing sufficient interest in training new reporters (in several cases, they cannot afford the financial resources or time) and insufficient journalism education that fails to prepare young people for the newsroom. In some cases, outlets replace experienced reporters, who might draw higher salaries, with freshers who require much lower pay. This replacement creates a void in experience within newsrooms. While there is a broad agreement that practical learning is the primary way to sharpen journalism skills, support mechanisms like mentoring from senior journalists would be a value-added programme in terms of capacity building.

Collaborative approaches that enable the young to learn how to develop a nose for news or navigate ethical dilemmas from older colleagues, and older, more experienced journalists to understand newer technologies by working closely with younger journalists will serve to strengthen the profession and its viability in the long run.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Developing good relations with the audience is turning out to be very significant for the viability of news media organisations. Our research, like several others, reiterates the trust gap between the audience and news media in all countries. Among other things, hyper-sensationalisation and hyperpartisanship in news and related programs (particularly television prime-time debates and clickbait on social media) in the mainstream media largely contribute to the audience losing trust in news outlets. Increasing audience trust and reliance on news outlets can positively contribute to the viability of news organisations. Forging a loyal audience for journalism could also translate into increased readership or viewership, thus leading to a willingness to pay for the news.

In India, we increasingly see that digital news outlets are investing in understanding and building strong relations with their audiences. They achieve this through audience interactions online and offline and by building communities around a specific brand. These relations go beyond traditional feedback on content and include actively engaging with audience experiences and suggestions for the news outlet. Thus, these efforts retain audiences and create deeper engagement and loyalty among them. Support to understand (research) and forge long-standing (strategies for) relationships with the audience seems to be an important area to focus on for news media viability.

STRENGTHENING NETWORKS AND SELF-REGULATORY BODIES

Much of our primary data points to weak journalists' networks (associations/unions) and press self-regulatory bodies, which add to the vulnerabilities of news media outlets in these countries. Many new media professionals are skeptical about the effectiveness of such bodies (owing to a lack of transparency, their hyperpartisan nature, and their general ineffectiveness) in advancing the interests of their community (whether in labour conditions, support, economic difficulties, etc.) and the free press. Working to strengthen these networks and self-regulatory bodies seems vital to raising the collective voices of news media workers and their interests.

LEGAL SUPPORT FOR JOURNALISTS AND JOURNALISTS' SAFETY

Given the political climate within which news organisations and journalists work across countries, reliable legal support mechanisms could be a significant way to support journalists today. While we observe sporadic support and social capital that play into obtaining legal support for journalists and news organisations from the primary data of this research, the absence of a stable legal support structure is glaring. It exacerbates the vulnerabilities of journalists who often find themselves extremely vulnerable in the absence of safety nets.

CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR INTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND GENDER SENSITIVE NEWSROOMS

Our primary data indicate that in many places, formal internal organisational policies are either underdeveloped or absent. While advocacy

efforts have continuously called for greater gender sensitivity in newsrooms, there remains a gap in translating these calls into practice. Consistent support in both areas would help improve labour conditions in newsrooms. It would help smaller organisations that grapple with time and resource constraints to develop everything from scratch and learn about best practices in the industry.

Personal Reflections from Research Participants

INDIA

I studied Mass Communication from X University. When we were young, we wanted to read the news on TV. However, as I grew and received encouragement from others, my dreams changed to writing. Once I started working, I realized that my strength is in field reporting, not desk. I was with community media for five years and left my job during the pandemic. The creation of my digital platform was organic and unplanned. I launched it on Labour Day. I did not have many resources during the early months of the channel. I had no money to hire staff, so the channel operated for around six months without a video editor. I knew only audio editing. The style of the channel was born out of necessity in that sense. I opened my selfie camera, held it, and reported live from remote places in central and eastern Indian states. I would use the back camera to show the location and then turn it back. It was kind of raw footage, without editing, without logos.

As the work progressed, I started travelling alone in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam. Logistical challenges started to grow as well. The biggest difficulty remains the lack of resources and stable revenue to operate the channel. I did not own vehicle, nor could I afford to pay for one. So I had to figure out a way. Often, I seek out people who are willing to take me on their bike to villages on the agreement that I will cover their fuel and food expenses. I have travelled 100 kilometers by bike to reach villages for reporting. Beyond that, there are always significant personal risks for women reporters. We don't have access to basic

amenities such as washrooms when we travel. On top of all, the fear for safety is there. I have been to remote villages and got stories. I didn't even know anyone when I went to some of those villages.

I still don't know what brings audience traction. When I do research-heavy and development issues, audiences do not prefer to watch those. Once, I casually made a video of food being made when I visited a village, and it went viral. The milestone for us was a video I did using my phone from Chhattisgarh. That video garnered 50 lakh views. It enabled me to monetize the channel.

Now I have a small team. I handle all the reporting; we have two part-time permanent staff, one graphic designer, and one video editor. The channel doesn't earn me any income. I do different things to earn my living, including small amounts I receive for providing training and university lectures I give. I rely a lot on freelancing to sustain myself and the channel. I write for different media outlets as a freelancer. I sometimes get organisational contracts for media production. I remember when I had a tough period of no work for a significant amount of time, an old colleague helped me get a podcast project. That helped me sustain for a year. I try getting smaller production jobs with different organisations, and fellowships that get me money, and I invest that into my channel.

Now I also see that people who would be willing to spend money on ground stories won't be able to support the channel because of legal issues. There are some things with FCRA, non-governmental organisations, and support for news stories and all. But they could have me as an individual consultant. So they support me rather than the channel.

There are many challenges. One is the financial challenge, as I have explained. But God forbid, if we ever get into any legal issues, if an FIR is filed against our channel or someone shuts down ours, we don't have any backup plan or money to handle the cases. We are not prepared for any of those situations. Second, we don't have resources. We are always doing two jobs to keep the channel alive. It stresses me greatly

NEPAL

My early years in journalism were shaped by a difficult environment. I started in a team that was mostly women with a male manager who was openly misogynistic. He used to force the team to stay long hours despite us completing our tasks and lashed out at anyone for calling him when he was late to meetings. Once the team received a horrific email filled with curse words for making a necessary edit to a copy. This appalling behavior costs him his job eventually.

Harassment was not limited to superiors. Women journalists often have to face crude jokes and unsolicited messages from colleagues, rumors connecting them to male colleagues, comments on clothing, personal belongings, etc. It signals that newsrooms throw constant gendered struggles at women who just wanted to go about doing their job.

We also witness ethical violations from newsroom leaders who used their positions to obtain favours from elites. I have received intimidating calls related to my reporting on women's rights. During one attack on a newsroom, perpetrators shouted sexual threats at female journalists.

whether I am able to afford rent on time. Striking a balance between sustaining myself and quality content is critical. My skill is ground reporting, but most of our time goes into doing others' work. For a few thousand rupees, we do others' work for months only so that we can survive, to keep my channel alive. Third, we have a huge vacuum of a senior mentor. We never had one. We desire to learn a lot, and we have not received mentorship from any quarter.

A few months before the Gen Z revolution, the then foreign minister Arzu Rana Deuba had a senior journalist arrested because he dared to report against her son, Jaiveer Singh Deuba. The warrant was issued after her son filed a complaint over a YouTube video alleging links between him and the Hilton Kathmandu. Such matters, Pathak claimed when he contested the warrant at Patan High Court, fall under the Press Council Nepal and not criminal persecution. Following the recent attacks on media offices, mobs were searching for individual journalists around residential areas. Having first-hand experience of it, I can testify that the instance was petrifying and it puts journalists and their families a great mental and physical risk

Journalism largely remains precarious, poorly paid, unsafe, and politically fraught here. Salaries are often delayed, and threats are common. Your hard work doesn't mean you will reap its benefits as appraisals and promotions are erratic, and there is this mistrust among the public that doesn't allow journalism and journalists to flourish. And I can say without a shadow of doubt that it's even more difficult for women as compared to men.

BANGLADESH

When you are a reporter in the field, you are also the producer of the story. Others with you are to support you and the story you are trying to report. So my understanding was that I could guide the camera person to take the shots as well. I don't know how this happens everywhere else; my observation, as far as Bangladesh goes, tells me that my cameraman often made me feel that they didn't listen to me. When a male colleague asks the same, they do get the shots. It happened in multiple places. The approach of other people, like "Oh! She is a woman," only faded gradually, especially after senior positions started coming my way. A man, just by being a man, gets respect by default. I had to achieve that with my work and time. My organisation slowly understood that I could take care of and lead the operations. After that, difficulty started coming from outside, like the government. Even though I was the decision-maker, the official communication would always go to the chairman. They knew that I led, but they did not feel comfortable.

I specifically remember one grant event. It was a collaboration between an international organisation with a government department. The department and the news outlet I was heading then were to sign an agreement as part of the grant. The grant proposal was made under my leadership; I did the presentation and competed with many other people. After many rounds of evaluations, a small fund was on its way. But then, during the ceremony, a top official in the department refused to sign and asked our Chairman to come. I worked on the grant. I held decision-making power in the organisation, and I was supposed to receive it. But it was difficult for them to accept that a woman was running the newsroom; she was a decision-maker. They used to ask why a woman was running it, or if something bad happened, they would say, "You've left the channel in the hands of a woman." These things have happened. I have realised through my journey that women in newsrooms face hardship at every level.

Chapter VII

Limitations

While the IPDC-UNESCO media viability research aimed to be as extensive and comprehensive as possible, the research had a number of limitations. Finding sources from print media outlets in India to interview as part of the primary research proved challenging in the absence of work environments which provided journalists with the autonomy and independence to share their experiences of working in the industry. Additionally, while the research was carried out with a feminist perspective and conscious efforts made to have female representation in the interviews and other phases of the process, representation from other gender identities including transgender people and non-binary gender identities was lacking.

This limitation was likely due to varied reasons including a lack of adequate representation of journalists from different gender identities in news media outlets, and probable work environments which prevented such journalists from bringing their entire, authentic selves to their workplace. Further, the political instability in Nepal affected the participation of people from the country in the in-depth interview phase.

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Index

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