

# Media and Democracy in Nepal: A Case for Public-Oriented Journalism

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## ABSTRACT

The argument in this heuristic essay is that Nepal's heterogeneous national identity, its faltering sense of citizenship, and the lack of strong civic culture provide a basis why public-oriented journalism could be an asset in the process of democratization. Following an examination and evaluation of an arduous history of democracy in this developing nation, the paper sets out to identify clusters of public problems, opportunities and the goals of the community of people living in the capital city of Kathmandu. The essay then sets out to spell out some techniques for actually doing public-oriented journalism focused on one of this city's major problems-- bureaucratic corruption. The technique is largely based on Arthur Charity's book *Doing Public Journalism* (1995), and Daniel Yankelovich's model of "public judgment." The paper emphasizes the pragmatic value of public-oriented journalism in a developing, struggling democracy.

## Introduction

If innovation and novelty are things to be cherished, then Nepal, a developing nation in South Asia, does not seem to despise experimentation of new ideas. An article in the *New York Times* recognized this fact when it declared: Nepal's capital Kathmandu, "long a symbol of spiritualism, is now also a center for research and innovation" (Crossette, 1999).<sup>[1]</sup> *The Times* may be right in its observation, but the question remains if innovations and researches have brought any substantial change in the democratic landscape of this great city.

Commentators agree that in the past decade, Nepali journalism, too, has seen innovations. The few positive instances in rural journalism and community radio projects, however, remain overshadowed by a number of problems that confront the local press as well as the public. Although, as one veteran journalist put it, like "a beacon atop the Himalayas," the efforts of Nepalese journalists might have "shone into the lives of people there and in surrounding countries as well," (Koirala, 1999, October 6) the Nepali press has not done as much as it could have in covering issues of public concerns in the local level. Kathmandu's adoration for all things "South Asian," especially following the establishment in 1984 of the permanent secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Subcontinent's equivalent of European Union, has made this city preoccupied with hoards of regional and international agendas. Since 1996, much of that regional attention has been diverted to a bloody internal Maoist insurgency which continues to weaken democracy and threaten press freedom.

Whatever the shift, national issues continue to top the media agenda. Nationalism, national unity in ethnic and cultural diversity, and nation-building have always remained major issues in Nepal (Burghart, 1994, pp. 1-13). More than anything else, *desh nirman* (nation-building), *desh vikash* (national development), and *rastriya rajniti* (national politics), or *prajatantra* (democracy) are all time favorite journalistic jargons. Hence, politics and development remain the two important facets of the Nepali press. The political model of the press assumes that the press as the fourth estate has the obligation to act as a check to the power of the other branches of the state. The watchdog role of the press, however, is concerned to this day more with party politics than with the politics for and by the people. However, in recent years, the idea of "good governance" is being disseminated by the press, the indication of an attempt to make politics more relevant to the lives of the general public.

In contrast, development model, embraced in the mid-80s by some journalists disgusted with the press obsessed with *real politik*, attempts to bring the public, the communities, and the social and economic life of the local people into the media spotlight. Naturally, in an impoverished country like Nepal, *vikash* remains on top of the national agenda. Nevertheless, one can argue if it should be *desh viskash* or *jana*

*vikash* (citizens' development). This is an important point given the failure of the so-called grass-roots Panchayat democracy (1960-1990) in delivering its promises to the people. King Mahendra, the ideologue of that system, could not realize a thriving civil society and an informed, responsible and proactive citizenry largely because he could not make people's empowerment as central to his indigenous form of democracy. The king's attempt at populist politics, seemingly the first-ever organized attempt at participatory democracy in the history of the country, failed to produce the desired results, and finally, it was replaced by the western style parliamentary democracy in 1990. Yet, king Mahendra's unique experiment helped to single out some of the most important factors that contribute to the grim picture of the Nepali problem. For one thing, the party-less grass-roots Panchayat system was more of a response to Nepal's need to maintain its identity amid diversity.

Scholars like Joshi and Rose (1966, p.397), tracing the roots of Panchayat, describe it as an instrument of caste administration and a body in the implementation of Brahmanic social regulations. King Mahendra developed it to a full-fledged political system that granted some autonomy to the villages. However, the emphasis was on nation-building, national identity and national security, rather than human security or the security or prosperity of the general people. Hence, King Mahendra was essentially concerned with the national order-- the international image and security of Nepal-- than with civic empowerment. The King fell prey to the historical circumstances-- the height of the Cold War and Nepal's geopolitical reality. Indeed, there could not have been citizens without a nation. Mahendra's guided democracy had no place for the civil society, special interest organizations and ethnic groupism were outlawed. His *gaon farka andolan* (Back to the Village Movement) was more of a royal decree than a democratic art. And the media, as always, did care little to look beyond the king, and national politics.

For instance, when Nepal Press Institute (established in 1984) did a survey of newspaper content in the mid-1980s, it was found that about 95 per cent of news and views was on national politics, directly or indirectly related to the King, politicians and the government (Koirala, 2003). The establishment of specialized media organizations during the 1990s marked the beginning of concentrated focus on areas of press performance. While Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists. (NEFEJ, established 1986) helped raise consciousness about deforestation, pollution, environmental degradation and its impact on people, Sancharika Samuha (est.1995) monitored gender issues in the media. The formation and growth of Center for Investigative Journalism (1996) and a dozen of organizations concerned with media freedom and performance paralleled with the government's institutional initiatives to nurture the hard-won democracy in 1990. But despite the efforts of these organizations and despite the establishment of democracy; the lives of the general public largely remained unaffected (Pandey, 1999, Serchan 1999).<sup>[2]</sup> Media experts, such as Bharat Koirala, bemoaned (Koirala, 2003) that most of the newspapers, a majority of them political weeklies, thrived on sensationalism and overtly political events and paid little attention to social and economic development.

Political leadership, however, seemed confident about the virtues and future of democracy in the country. For instance, the former Prime Minister K.P. Bhattarai, who was himself a crusading journalist at one time and who wrote against the autocratic Rana Regime (1846-1951), believed that "democracy has a solid future in Nepal" (Bearak, 1999). Such strong faith in the procedural democracy—emphasizing elections, party system, independent judiciary and a free press, etc.—received a heavy jolt in February 2005 when the king took over full power and declared a state of emergency amid an intensifying and bloody Maoist rebellion. The evolution of a substantive, participatory democracy in Nepal has been constrained visibly by the violent conflict and more insidiously by the continued presence of ethnic backwardness, social inequities, casteism, untouchability and discrimination against women and minorities. Despite having set up institutions for good governance, these institutions were not capable of ensuring the same even before the pre-February 2005 environment. The government media, which still holds a greater chunk of the market, could not be free from its subservient role to the ruling political party. The role of judiciary in timely and impartial delivery of justice often remained questionable. The country also saw little transparency in public appointments. The bureaucracy is yet to emerge as a professional and efficient organ of the government.

Corruption, perceived as one of the country's major maladies, was exacerbated by, among others,

discretionary power vested upon decision-makers with little sense of accountability, lack of transparency, no provision for public hearings and low salary structure in the civil services. The Royal Commission for Corruption Control, formed by the King after the February coup, charged several high-level ministers and government officials of corruption and embezzlement, including former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. Throughout the 1990s, the electoral process, another of democracy's important attributes, saw some of the most undemocratic practices, especially with the increase in the influence of money, muscle and public media in elections. Political parties and candidates were often reported to be taking graft and donation from businessmen for election funding.

Where does the media figure in this democratic equation? Issues of accountability and the question of corruption continued to be highlighted by the media, but the factual reportage or the investigative reporting of such issues is aimed more at boosting sales rather than at citizen participation, public mobilization and bureaucratic reforms (TI, 2002).

The crisis of credibility of both public and private sector media worries many a professional who aspires for reforms. Despite some progress in the field, Koirala (1995, p. 150) wrote that Nepali journalists were yet to be conversant with the norms of fair journalistic practice. They had not given up character assassination and confining to individualistic or partisan interest. Women were very few and their voices and problem least covered in the media. Regarding the content of Nepali media, he observed that the most important spaces of newspapers were covered with boring speech, government communiqué, details of *shilanyas* (laying foundations) and inaugurations, politics and election reports. Thus, newspaper could not be taken as reliant means for social change. Although there must have been some progress in press performance over the last few years, Koirala's critique is still relevant here in that it sheds light on the foundational behavior of the Nepali press vis-à-vis issues of importance to the general public.

Naturally, the question is how Nepali citizens could come together to discuss their problems when the very society they live in is so diverse and divided along the lines of languages, castes, gender, wealth, education, influence and power. This problem is not typical of hierarchical and class society; even the classless and supposedly the most democratic nation like the U.S. has, in recent years, seen dialogue gaps in the public arena, especially concerning race relations, neighborhood crime, drugs and so on. Citizens' participation in public affairs, including the elections, is dwindling to the extent that newspapers have devised new ways, such as civic journalism, in an attempt to tackle the problem.

Civic journalism, also called public journalism, is defined in a number of ways (See appendix-I). There is no one common agreement on its definition. Edmund B. Lambeth, who is at times sympathetic to the civic journalism movement, attempts an all-inclusive definition in terms of the goals of this new form of journalism. According to him, civic journalism seeks to 1) listen systematically to the stories and ideas of citizens even while protecting its freedom to choose what to cover; 2) examine alternative ways to frame stories on important community issues; 3) choose frames that stand the best chance to stimulate citizen deliberation and build public understanding of issues; 4) take the initiative to report on major public problems in a way that advances a public knowledge of possible solution and the values served by alternative courses of action; and 5) pay continuing and systematic attention to how well and how credibly it is communicating with the public (Lambeth et al, 1998, p. 17).

Critics will be quick to note that importing a western tool to fix a local problem should precede some forethought. Following Lambeth's definition, my argument is that public journalism—in terms of its focus on citizens—is not absolutely new to newspapers in Nepal. During the party-less system, government mouthpieces often spoke authoritatively to the “citizens” on behalf of the government. However, the citizens were passive consumers of the governmental propaganda. The news media's emphasis on unity, consensus, and compromise; rather than on division or disagreement; portrayed the public as passive actors. Theoretically, the post February 2005 Nepal may not be a democratic state. But the King continues to insist on a multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy and has categorically termed his takeover as only a temporary move in his fight against the Maoists and the corrupt politicians. In other words, if a democratic system recognizing the vital role of citizenship as well as the press in the polity of the country is to be sustained, the problems associated with democracy and governance also deserve a

more democratic news media. With some local adjustment, public-oriented journalism, if not fully public journalism, could be useful in this regard.

## Nepali Press and the Public

The restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990 ushered in a new era of liberalism, freedom and pluralism in the public sphere. Following the promulgation of the new constitution, sweeping legislative and legal reforms have been introduced, ensuring freedom and dignity of the fourth estate.

In general, the Nepali press upholds the Anglo-American ideals of the press (Pokhrel, 1998). The press often claims itself to be the "Fourth Estate," and given its pivotal role in waging a campaign against the autocratic Panchayat Regime (1970-1990) and subsequently contributing greatly in the restoration of democracy in 1990, the Nepali mainstream press holds significance in the political development in Nepal.<sup>[3]</sup> American media scholar James Carey's observed that journalism and politics cannot be thought as two separate independent domains of activity; rather, they are related actively, symbiotically; and they can only be known via their mutual and active adaptations which are cooperative and antagonistic by turns; one can only be known in the light of the other (Carey, 1999, p. 51). Carey's observation holds true in case of Nepal. But few realize Carey's remark that without journalism there cannot be democracy, and without democracy there cannot be journalism either (Carey, 1999, p. 51). Kathmandu's press-- after all more than half of the 800 plus dailies, weeklies and other periodicals in the country are published in this city-- is preoccupied more with Lippmannian ideal of centralization (national standards, national politics, national economy, and national culture) than with Deweyian ideals of decentralization (local standards, local politics, local economy and local culture). With the exception of a few newspapers, almost all dailies, even two-page tabloids of seemingly local nature, prefer to attach in their mastheads the "prestige" phrase "the national newspaper." So much so that *Sandhyakalin*, the largest selling and the popular local tabloid, claims to be "the national daily" although a cursory glance would suffice to determine its very local taste.

Kathmandu's nine broadsheet national dailies-- actually national in scope--do spare one page each for local issues and this space is regularly devoted to straightforward factual reporting. While private owned media tend to be creative and innovative in some respects, the government owned publications, which include two national dailies, a weekly, and four magazines, devote their entire resources for government propaganda and national politics. The official media are numerically small but very influential and resourceful. In contrast, the private press is numerically superior, free and assertive but deficient in resources. They have to compete among themselves for a limited readership and subsist largely on market sales. One of the reasons for low readership is that Nepal is still predominantly an oral culture, and with literacy rate less than forty per cent and private sector media just over a decade young, Lerner and Schramm's (Belbase & Murphy, 1980) observation that Nepal's communication system is in the initial stage of development may still hold true.

The situation is somewhat different, at least in Kathmandu. The City's 70.62 per cent (*NHDR, 1998, p. xxiii*) literacy rate is the indication, if not of availability then of a good potential of newspaper readership. The city's per capita income of \$400, which is double the national average, is an indication of greater purchasing power of the public as compared to people from the rural areas. But, unfortunately, newspaper sales are extremely low. Even the largest selling dailies do not exceed a circulation of 100,000 copies. The combined copies of all dailies may not even reach 400,000 copies a day, which means less than a quarter of the population of the city rely on newspapers for their daily diet of news and current affairs. This only points to the need to attract more readerships, and one way to do this as they are doing in America is to apply public journalism techniques. Public journalism, touted for its deliberative values, may be used to explore the reasons behind public resignation from the press as well as public affairs.

It appears an uphill task for the Nepali press to build public trust. The largely traditional society has begun to experience market segmentation and special interest movements. Free market and capitalism have economically globalized some alleys and squares of the city at the expense of others. The general public,

which traditionally got mobilized through a common community organization called the *guthi*, now has less and less time for time-consuming deliberations on common problems of the community and the periodic rituals and festivals that are part and parcel of the *guthi* system. Traditional community participation forums, such as the *guthi*, *dabali*, *chautari*, *pachayat*- various names for the old-town-squares-from-New-England type of civic forums, are fast vanishing. Most young people remain glued to musical and segmented FM radios, which now number almost four dozens across the country. The newspapers would have taken the role of the disappearing venues of public participation. But media's role, including newspapers', in contributing to participatory democracy is rather grim. *Nepal Human Development Report 1998*, reflecting on people participation in public affairs, concluded:

The extent to which the media has promoted participation has attracted conflicting views and assessments. It is, however, generally agreed that, with the freedom of the press and right to information available under the new political dispensation, the media has contributed to enhancing government transparency and creating a relatively more informed civil society. Much of the media, however, does not stand independently of the government, political parties, or big business houses for them to be able to play the role of a potent watchdog. The imperative of the need to peddle views and publicity for its patrons takes precedence over a commitment to disseminate news and objective analysis. (NHDR 1998, p. xiii)

Despite diversity-- more than 40 ethnic groups and 12 languages exist in Nepal- political pluralism is a recent phenomenon. The need to mobilize public participation in identifying and solving common problems cannot be understated. *NHDR 1998* (p. xii-xiii) sees the need for some basic reorientation in the organization of polity, economy, and social institutions to make the environment conducive to public participation. The *Report* notes that despite the creation of various local bodies, such as Village Development Committees (VDCs), municipalities and District Development Committees (DDCs), there was little substantive change from the pre-1990 arrangements in relation to their autonomy. The central government continued to hold the power to regulate virtually all aspects of the local governance system, and it can even suspend and dissolve local bodies. The 1997 ordinance made provisions to ensure women and local caste/ethnic group participation as candidates in local election, but it failed to induce legislation, which could enable local bodies to claim and build autonomy. Here again, the Lipmann-Dewey tension is apparent.

If voters' turnout is any indication of citizenship working, then it must be mentioned that participation has been reasonably high in all elections since 1990. The turnout in the Kathmandu Municipal elections in 1996 was impressive. But voters' turnout alone cannot satisfy the need of participatory democracy. Electoral candidacy and electoral office holding continues to remain highly restrictive in favor of upper caste-groups and men. This holds true within the government and the political party hierarchy as well. Other participants in the public sphere include conservation groups, credit groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Organized groups and associations of varied types have proliferated in recent years. Although many of these narrow-interest organizations do not speak a common language, and are often antagonistic to each other, they, nevertheless, helped to throw out issues and promote participation. *NHRD 1998's* assessment of the civil society seems to invite the press to help bridge the gap among these segmented civic organizations:

Despite its stunted history, the civil society is beginning to come into its own since the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990. The growth of civic associations during this period has been phenomenal. Political debate is now more frequent than before. The latest successful example of the role played by such groups is the withdrawal by the government of the proposed "anti-terrorist bill" [aimed at the Maoist insurgency which has reportedly resulted in the death of 1,300 civilians and police since 1993] which sought to undermine the fundamental rights of citizens...Nonetheless, as of yet, the overall performance of the civil society in promoting participation remains weak. (NHDR 1998, p. xiii)

It may be that Nepali public is still a bundle of what Yankelovich calls "mass opinion," the yet not fully evolved stage of public opinion. He makes distinction between "mass opinion" and "public judgment," (Charity, 1998, p. 4-8) in that the former type accounts to "the shallow, easily swayed, inconsistent and thoroughly changeable public opinion from one poll to another;" the later refers to the "fully developed

form of public views that are rock-solid," unchangeable and constant. According to him, the first kind of opinion, which can't possibly support a democracy, sometimes evolves into the second, which can. Through research, he concluded that public judgment is achieved through a process that involves three stages: consciousness-raising, "working through," and resolution.

Consciousness-raising involves awareness of an issue's existence and meaning. Traditionally, news media have played a major role at this stage of public opinion. As agenda builders, the media have, though unconsciously, helped set the agenda of the community or nation they are placed into. The second stage, "working through," is described as confronting the need for change and options for actions, such as reducing issues to choices, plumbing to core values, spelling out the costs and consequences of each choice. The news media's contribution at this stage could be bridging the expert-public gap, facilitating deliberation, and promoting civility. The final stage, resolution, is the actual making of a stable, responsible choice. Basically, eagerness to learn, active participation in the affairs of the communities, willingness to change are central to public judgment. There is no doubt that Nepal, an struggling democracy, is in dire need of such refined public opinion. Unfortunately, given the peculiar nature of Nepali public opinion, it will be long, if not impossible, before public judgment is achieved in abundance.

One of the peculiarities is explained by Dor Bahadur Bista, Nepal's foremost sociologist, with a flavor similar to that of De Tocqueville of France. Though Bista's critique is based on socio-cultural and religious context rather than political or psychological, he hits an important and yet an unexplored area of public opinion in Nepal. Disgusted with the pace of development in the country, Bista set out to explore the root cause of the perpetuating Nepali problem. Bista starts with the patent failure of Nepal to make substantial *vikash* (progress) and blames the cultural system itself, which encourages evasion of responsibility and a fatalistic attitude for the stagnation. According to him, hierarchy of caste and fatalistic attitude of the public are the root causes of Nepal's backwardness. Fatalism is explained as "the belief that one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful external agency" (Macfarlane, 1994, p.117).

Bista further writes, "Under fatalism, responsibility is continually displaced to the outside, typically to the supernatural. There is a constant external focus for the individual. The individual simply does not have control.... Altruism is suspect. Similarly, one is never obliged to anyone for anything because everything occurs, as it should. No sense of obligation is instilled" (Macfarlane, 1994, p. 117). Responsibility and yearning for change is key to democracy. Resignation and withdrawal do not help to further democracy. In this sense, Bista's idea of fatalism, partly based on the Hindu concept of karma, that one's fate is inscribed on one's forehead at birth and there is nothing that can be done to alter it, provides an insider's analysis of one aspect of Nepali public attitude. This appears in contrast to the situation in western countries where people have an internalized sense of responsibility. Yet, Bista's powerful hypothesis needs to be tested. And public-oriented journalism could play a part in it. It may help to encourage participation rather than resignation, a major prerequisite for democratization of any society.

## **Problems and Opportunities**

William Kirkpatrick (1793), the first Englishmen to visit Nepal in the late 18th century described Kathmandu as a city with "nearly as many temples as there are houses and as many idols as there are inhabitants." Now at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the capital of Nepal may be described as a city with nearly as many newspapers as there are illiterate people and as many political parties as there are social problems. In fact, if democracy were a matter of number, Nepal's surging news media would reflect the growth of a democratic journalism.

Too many problems and concerns are naturally overwhelming. This is precisely what a journalism roundtable in Kathmandu, organized by a public affairs journalists group, was concerned with (The Rising Nepal, 1997). The roundtable attempted to identify journalistic goals and responsibilities even before setting out to help raise awareness among journalists, publishers and the ordinary public about the benefits of public setting its own agenda and the newspapers reporting and proding them. A select group of participants, representing the media sector and the civil society, emphasized on the active role of

journalists and newspapers in addressing social problems.

One participant, a popular radio jockey from a local FM maintained that the news stories have to have soul and not the facts alone so that people would be interested to respond and react. A women development worker and a gender specialist did not mind journalists running after negative stories. "These stories also help change the society in their own way," she said. "Positive news alone may not be sufficient for media to run [the news business]." She was alarmed with the trend prevailing among youths, such as drug addiction, and suggested that civic journalism should focus more on them. The head of Nepal Consumers' Forum agreed. He asked journalists to review what share of space was given for social and public interest issues in media outlets. While he alerted that not all journalists were responsible, he said public journalists could work towards increasing the share of public space in the media and welcomed public-oriented journalism as a good beginning.

Another participant raised issues of human rights and alerted that public journalism should not only help the community set its agenda but also help journalists themselves set one. "Public journalists should be trend-setters," he said, "They can work for a broad consensus to raise issues of national interest." One member representing child issues and interests lashed out at news media for giving undue coverage for politics. "Two children killed [in an accident] gets highlighted because there is political interest involved," he said. "While over 300 child deaths daily in the absence of health services go unreported." The participants, most of them representing special interests groups and advocating their causes, nevertheless, agreed on one thing: that public journalism might work for Nepal. The idea that public journalists could "work for broad consensus" is sound especially in the context of Nepal's relatively infant stage of democratic culture which, in recent years, is marred by royal coup, a state of emergency, bloody Maoist insurgency, unprecedented protests and political strikes, a *la* negative participatory democracy. The Maoist insurgency, which has resulted in the deaths of more than 12,000 people in the country over the last 10 years, is an indication of the lack of political consensus and tolerance.

Local newspapers apparently claim to be identifying important issues of the community and championing them. This, however, is seldom reflected in practice. Although lack of adequate resources can often be blamed for the absence of such a practice, perhaps the knowledge about the tools and methods of public journalism could be instrumental in realizing consensual goals. At least an initiation by a newspaper in this regard could go a long way in the practice of public-oriented journalism. And narrative technique, as suggested by Arthur Charity (1995), could be one way to do this.

The daily newspaper, say *Kathmandu Post*, may not need to help the public of a neighborhood in Kathmandu to set an agenda. Most commonly, neighborhood problems and issues are obvious: drinking water, drug addiction among youth, violence against women, child labor etc. The broad agenda is already there, and the need is to "work through"(Charity, 1995, p. 5). In contrast, the entire Kathmandu community's agenda looks already overcrowded. How much say does the public have in identifying these problems is altogether a different question. The problems come with opportunities and goals of the community. Kathmandu's major social problems- worsening security situation, pollution, shortage of drinking water, congestion and traffic, frequent price hikes on goods of daily consumption, unemployment/declining economy, street crime, frequent political strikes, garbage disposal, corruption, lack of health care, child labor/exploitation, violence against woman, rising education cost, food adulteration, drug addiction among youths, lack of adequate housing-- compete fiercely for media attention.

Clearly, it would be much better if the community facing these problems could decide which problem(s) require(s) immediate attention. However, more than being specific problems, the problems I cite here are unrefined and broad problems; or to borrow from Charity, they are "clusters of problems" (Charity, 1995, p. 9). Actually, the problem is there are so many problems. But this should not be disappointing. There are positive trends as well, and the newspapers can cover them vigorously. For instance, street crime rates are lower compared to many other world cities, tourism has boosted the economy of the city during peace times, and Kathmandu has been recognized regionally for its well-preserved traditions and cultures amid modernization.

## Public-Oriented Journalism: Applying Charitian Narrative Techniques

Charity's book *Doing Public Journalism* (1995), borrowing largely from Daniel Yankelovich's theory of public judgment, is a storehouse of the many different techniques of public-oriented journalism (See Table 2). Yankelovich's model of public decision-making that Charity describes as "an invitation to invention" provides the framework for the entire public journalism initiative. He proposes a philosophical model of public journalism, which, he claims, provides a "powerful example of how insights into the way people make decisions can be turned into concrete newsroom goals for making those decisions easier" (Charity, 1995, p. 4).

Yankelovich's research about public opinion-- what steps public pass through to travel from mass opinion (shallow and easily swayed opinions, the pejorative "public opinion" of political diatribes, which can't possibly support democracy) to public judgment (rock solid and unswayed opinions, which can support democracy) and how journalists can make a difference in this process is the theme of the book. In the following passages, attempt has been made to exactly see what kind of difference could be made in the journalistic profession in Nepal by the application of narrative storytelling techniques of civic journalism to address the problem of bureaucratic corruption. According to Yankelovich's public decision making model, public journalists can work through the entire process while traditional journalism is limited to consciousness raising end of the decision making scale (See Figure 1):

Figure 1

<b>CONCIOUSNESS RAISING ►</b>	<b>WORKING THROUGH RESOLUTION ►</b>
Traditional journalism's focus	Civic journalism's main focus

The following is a more detailed explication of the processes (See Table 1):

**Table 1**

**Public Journalism & Public Opinion**

This portion of the table is based on Arthur Charity's *Doing Public Journalism* (1995). Charity, drawing heavily from Daniel Yankelovich's *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1991) proposes a philosophical model of public journalism which, he claims, provides a "powerful example of how insights into the way people make decisions can be turned into concrete newsroom goals for making those decisions easier." (Charity, 1995, p. 4)

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**MASS OPINION TO PUBLIC JUDGEMENT**

**Daniel Yankelovich Model of Public Decision-Making: "An Invitation to Invention"**

Yankelovich's research about what steps public had to pass through to travel from mass opinion (shallow and easily swayed opinions, the pejorative "public opinion" of political diatribes, which can't possibly support democracy) to public judgment (rock solid and unswayed opinions, which can support democracy) and how journalists could make a difference in this process.



## CONCIOUSNESS RAISING >> WORKING THROUGH >> RESOLUTION

I. **Consciousness Raising:** Awareness of an issue's existence and meaning -- Helping the public to set an agenda (Chapter 2) in the absence of obviously important stories/issues/problems

II. **"Working Through":** Confronting the need for change/ options for actions

- Reducing issues to choices (Chapter 3)
- Plumbing to core values
- Spelling out the costs and consequences of each choice
- Bridging the expert-public gap
- Facilitating deliberation (Chapter 4)
- Promoting civility

III. **Resolution:** The actual making of a stable, responsible choice

- Prodding action on the public choice (Chapter 5)

--Charity, Arthur. *Doing Public Journalism* (1995).

Agenda setting is not a problem for Nepali journalism, and a large number of journalists have traditionally assumed an activist role in public issues. However, a systematic, rational agenda and its implementation is different from erratic one. Once, say *Kathmandu Post*, decides to carry out a public-oriented journalism project on corruption in bureaucracy, the first thing it could do is to convene a forum of the cross-section of the public: The police, the victims, the Commission for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority (CIAA), government officials, and all other concerned citizens. The newspaper may not always afford costs involved in convening such forums, so it may like to join hands with other public-oriented service organizations, such as local *guthis* and youth clubs. The participants would be encouraged to discuss the issue, its reasons and the goals of the community to combat or eliminate corruption. Corruption, however, is typical of every society, whether developed or developing democracies, or even authoritarian regimes. Charity (1995, p. 96) cautions that even half a dozen issues that top a city's or a state public agenda are almost always so large that they will always take months or years to deliberate over and act upon. In light of the already elaborated problems, this holds true to Kathmandu. And naturally, corruption alone cannot and should not be the only issue.

The next thing to do is to frame the issue of corruption. Citing Kettering Foundation's framing projects, Charity (1995, p. 66) notes that the way a problem is framed almost predetermines the kind of solution we will find. Hence, the framing panel's guiding principle in this should be consensus. For instance, the question to ask is: Does Nepal have a *corruption* problem or *poverty* problem? The approach is to listen to the maximum and possibly all variety of citizens' perspectives about corruption. Until now, citizens hardly have any civic forum to speak out their ideas, or even solutions to the problem due to lack of public space. While Nepali society is still communal, characterized by interdependence and mutual engagement, it is "fatalistic" (Bista, 1991) and this often leads even the most pro-active initiatives to failure and doom. Hence, special care should be taken about the sustainability of any project or program. Nepali public opinion is more of Yavelovich's "mass opinion" and owing to its unpredictable nature, even the brightest public policy might be doomed. But this is no reason to retract from good projects that can work for the better.

Once the issue is framed, say corruption is identified to be the result of low salaries, lack of self-discipline, and accountability, then the newspaper can move ahead with especially designed projects to address these issues. Long term mega projects may not be viable for Nepali newspapers because the economic costs of convening regular citizens' forums run high. But even from an economic point of view, if readership is to be boosted, and circulation and revenues increased, then it may be worthwhile to take some financial risks as well. However, due to the overcrowding of issues and problems, it does not seem

viable to do long-term mega projects on corruption. Hence, after framing is done, it may be pragmatic to opt for what Charity describes as simply applying “ideas about strategic facts and democratic arts to ordinary, unspectacular news coverage, day in and day out” (Charity, 1995, p.96). Narrative technique, which has been popular in Nepali media—though it is often aimed at arousing human interest of the reader rather than seeking to help citizenship work—can be applied on a regular basis.

According to Charity (1988, p. 89), the goal of the narrative should be building civic capital, bridging expert-ordinary gap by finding the public’s starting point, refusing to accept jargon, asking good questions, not wasting space on non-strategic facts, using a physical format that puts citizens on charge, and applying the “ten arts of democracy” (active listening, creative conflict, mediation, negotiation, political imagination, public dialogue), helping in deliberation by setting a deliberative role rather than an adversarial role, acting as a facilitator and bulletin board for community action (Charity1995, p. 89; also see Table II of this paper). Master narrative can be used, such as setting the story loud, dramatic; and leaving the story open, using logos, flag progress, and informing what's going to happen next.

## **Table 2**

### **Charity House of Public Journalism Tools**

#### *How Journalists can Make Public Judgment Easier and Accessible to Citizens?*

##### *I. Public Listening: How to figure out what issues the public wants to discuss?*

Community conversations, citizens’ panels public forums, polls, focus groups, clip-out ballots/surveys, call-in shows, mock grand jury, mock legislature, pizza parties, letters, town meetings, columns, public framing of issues, story telling

Apply Rural Southern Voice for Peace (RSVP) Techniques/questions (Charity, 1995, pp. 20-23) for Hearing Citizens (building proper atmosphere, ask questions that can lead to self-awareness and change, ask clarifying questions, let the person have his/her full say, empathize, be truly interested)

Keep in touch with the community by putting listening in the job description, asking people to send in thoughts and questions, putting together a panel, organizing conversations among citizens, letting citizens ask questions directly, going out into the community, finding out where citizens talk.

Build civic capital by committing to the long term, by setting up a press people regard as fair, by doing easy things first, by showing respect for ordinary people, by demonstrating that good people are not alone, by making meaningful participation fun.

##### *II. News Coverage: How to supply the information readers need to discuss them?*

Telling the facts: issue framing, (a panel studies public listening, what do people say is causing the problem, emotions/values/first causes behind those descriptions, third list of pragmatic approach, comprehensive vision of problem, naming the problem), Meaningful Chaos factors that interest people to public affairs (connections, personal context, coherence, room for ambivalence, emotion, authenticity, sense of possibility, catalysts, mediating institutions), choices based on core values, strategic facts, putting expert information in public terms, going back and forth from deliberation to reporting, deliberation: tapping citizens for ideas (Chap. 5),

spotlighting a public consensus (Chap 5), complementary action (Chap. 5).

Telling narratives: civic capital (Chap. 1 & 2), the master narrative (set it loudly, dramatic; leave the story open, use logos, flag progress, inform what's going to happen next), bridge expert-ordinary gap (find the public's starting point, refuse to accept jargon, make a list of good questions, don't waste much space on non-strategic facts, use a physical format that puts citizens on charge, the "ten arts of democracy"(active listening, creative conflict, mediation, negotiation, political imagination, public dialogue, p. 89), deliberation: setting a deliberative role rather than an adversarial role (Ch. 4), acting as a facilitator and bulleting board for community action (Ch. 5). 3. Facts and Narratives together

### III. Public Judgment: *What role could media play in the public discussion process?*

Help foster dialogue/deliberation among the public: use letters and op-eds to get the deliberative message across, interviews with concerned citizens, and imaginative, creative deliberate columns.

The problem viewed as: not my or your but our (shared) responsibility, fellow problem solvers not friends or adversaries, not who won or who agreed but a public judgment about what is best

Achieving the goal: Be easy on other people, but tough on the problem, focus on the problem and mutual confidence will develop, dig down until I find what really concerns me, what motivates my attitudes and actions, ask myself what I really need, explain these needs to others in a way they can relate to, try to understand and appreciate what my fellow citizens believe, feel and need; consider all options together, both pro and cons; work towards a choice every one can go along with, invent new options consistent with the choice that everyone can go along with. (p.104-105)

Use resources to make job easier: study guides and supplements, readings on deliberation, training and organization, training from peers, work/volunteer with citizens and make experience your teacher, on-line newspapers opportunity for civic journalism practice for their unconventional nature.

### IV. Citizens' action: *How to help citizens act?*

Most social problems too big to solve. "Complementary actions" (David Mathews)

Role of Journalists: Hearing the public consensus, acting as a watchdog, maintaining people's awareness of the public voice.

Making the paper's public voice box a standard feature of the editorial page, making the civic environment easier to act, holding every one responsible.

Acting for the long haul (progress reports, public agenda pages, and special reports. 3. Facilitators and watchdog, "fair minded participant in a community that works" (Davis Merritt, quoted on p.150)

Charity, Arthur. *Doing Public Journalism*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1995.

By all means, the newspaper's approach needs to be deliberative, rather than adversarial. What is striking about public-oriented journalism is it encourages multiperspectivism, a quality lacking in most newsrooms in Nepal. Democracy cannot thrive, or even not grow healthy unless diversity of not only opinions but also of approaches of doing things are encouraged. One can argue that many of these techniques have already been applied in the Kathmandu newspapers. My own observation as a working journalist in Nepal for more than a decade is that there has never been a concentrated effort on giving the public a say in their day-to-day life, and the issues of their concern. Newspapers have applied some of these techniques to address their business interests, to speak to the consumers and their clients, but they have largely failed in their social obligation to provide the public with options for decision-making and public actions. Since most news outlets claim to be the Fourth Estate and attending to "public interest," a widely acknowledged goal of journalism, one would expect more from Nepali newspapers.

The narratives, by all means, could include interviews with ordinary citizens-- not just victims of corruption but the tainted faces, and the police as well. Quoting all range of sources ensures pluralistic approach to problem-solving. Except for a few occasional investigative pieces, newspaper stories on corruption mostly concern speeches made by leaders. The superficial media treatment of this grave problem can in no way help the public work through or even reach a resolution. Stories on corruption are regular but they do more to raise-consciousness not necessarily about corruption itself but about the tall talks of the leaders. A few years ago, the Prime Minister claimed in one story, for example, that the government was working out a plan "to completely wipe out corruption in the country in the period of five years" (Nepal News, 1999). Coincidentally, he was addressing the inaugural function of 19th convention of Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) in Kathmandu. There is no denying that, as the Prime Minister noted, one of the most important jobs of the government [in a democracy] is to control corruption and ensure clean and transparent government. The problem is how to do it. He called upon "all journalists to extend their supporting hands," but failed to elucidate how they could actually support him meaningfully and to the effect that they could help make some difference in the existing state of affairs. There was no single follow-up story on such a dramatic announcement by the Prime Minister in the press. This suggests that journalism in Nepal has failed to carry out its duties responsibly. Public-oriented journalism would take it as an opportunity, and if a narrative was to be run subsequently, journalists would dissect the governmental version of the plan aimed at wiping out corruption, narrate the public version of the reactions, bring together all possible public voices about the problem and help citizens decide whether corruption is to be wiped out within five years, or never.

Stopping corruption may not be possible, but publication might alter things for the better. This very hope in the goodness of public action and participatory democracy is what makes public-oriented journalism more appropriate for a place like Kathmandu, a capital of an almost exterminated democracy. Public journalism's emphasis on cooperative and collective approach to problems is in line with Nepal's own traditions of collective and integrative approaches to public affairs, though ritualized. Sharing of responsibility among citizens is something that is badly lacking. Public-oriented journalism, by encouraging or even compelling people to be pro-active and self-asserting might help fill this void. It may take years to achieve even a nominal change, but that is what Charity hopes can help to "invest new options consistent with the choice that everyone can go along with" (Charity1995, pp.104-105).

As "fair-minded participant in a community that works"<sup>[4]</sup> public-oriented journalists can do more than just complain about status quo. They can be responsibly active in civic life. Charity recognizes that *most* (original emphasis) social problems are too big to solve and calls for "complementary action" as suggested by David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation. In deed, most problems in today's complex world require complementary action. And narrative technique, due to its potential to follow-up issues and events in detail with all possible options for action, could be effective at soliciting decisions from a largely unsophisticated public. Additionally, narratives can help address the lack of reading habit among the Nepali public by virtue of their being engaging and compelling.

## Conclusion

It may be that the greatest gift of public-oriented journalism is its role in invigorating the idea of citizenship at a time when globalization has made the very concept of the nation, nationalism and citizenship somewhat redundant. The narrative technique of public journalism promises an effective framework for a craft-based public-oriented journalism. This can serve as a pragmatic tool for Nepali journalism, which cannot carry out ambitious public journalism projects given the resource constraints.

As a developing nation, Nepal may be a periphery to the first world. But within Nepal, Kathmandu's neighborhoods are also peripheries to the neo-rich suburbs. Public-oriented journalism holds the potential to bridge this gap. It may as well help explain "citizenship" in the context of the changing social and demographic patterns. Kathmandu's public, as they live in a cosmopolitan city, many share many elements of global citizenship on the macro-level. But the public identity at the micro-level cannot be supplemented by the nationalizing or even internationalizing forces of globalization and democratization. Public-oriented journalism could create a public space, reminiscent of the traditional *chautari*, *dabali* or *pahchayat*, where people find opportunities, both soci-political and religio-cultural, to connect to one another, to their immediate neighborhoods, and to the society at large. It might, thus, help explain democracy and citizenship in the global as well as the local context. In this, the role of press as a facilitator is significant.

As this heuristic study indicates, Yankelovich's public judgment may be hard to attain to a larger degree in Nepal at this moment. His model is largely based on the (western) public—well-informed, well-educated and largely trained under mature democratic systems. Nepal's case is different. Even democratic electoral participation is a recent culture in Nepal. This indicates the need to reform the entire polity and civic culture in favor of a lively and thriving, accountable and prosperous democracy. This is where public-oriented journalists could step in and make a difference. Kathmandu, a metropolis of over one million people, deserves a better press and a deliberative public to realize the fruits of innovation and research.

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## Notes

1. Crossette notes the national and regional popularity of Bharat Koirala's idea and introduction of wall newspaper to educate rural, illiterate and semi-illiterate people as well as Sagarmatha FM radio in Kathmandu, the first private radio of its kind in South Asia. She also reports that Kanak Dixit's *Himal* magazine champions the idea of a "South Asia without borders," ([www.himalmag.com](http://www.himalmag.com)) and provides fairly a wide range of perspectives to issues and events of the region.

[2] Pandey writes that despite the fact that Nepal observed the 10th Constitution Day recently, many people don't know what democracy is. He writes that due to widespread illiteracy and deteriorating socio-economic conditions, villagers have little time to ponder on what democracy is all about.

[3] The Nepali (language) press, although largely based in exile in northern India in the initial stage, also contributed in the overthrow of the hereditary and dictatorial Rana Regime (1846-1951), following which British model of parliamentary democracy was installed in Nepal. The elected government was, however, replaced within 18 months by the Panchayat System, the brainchild of King Mahendra. For details about Panchayat democracy, see Joshi and Rose (1966).

[4] Davis Merritt, quoted, in Charity, Arthur. (1995). *Doing Public Journalism*. New York: The Guilford

Press, p. 150.

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