

CHINDU SREEDHARAN, EINAR THORSEN and NIRJANA SHARMA



# Disaster Journalism

Building media resilience in Nepal

# DISASTER JOURNALISM

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Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen, and Nirjana Sharma

**Bournemouth University**  
in association with  
**UNESCO Kathmandu**



United Nations  
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Office

**Disaster Journalism: Building media resilience in Nepal**

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# Foreword

Nepal is among the countries that are most prone to natural disasters, as it lies in a high seismic zone. In addition, landslides and floods are frequent during every rainy season.

The devastating earthquakes of 2015 had resulted in loss of thousands of human lives, homes and public property worth billions of rupees. The floods in 2017 and 2018 had caused havoc in the country's south. In March 2019, unprecedented strong windstorms in several villages of Bara and Parsa districts had killed 27 and rendered many people homeless. The rain-induced disasters by end-August 2019 caused at least 133 casualties.

Disasters affect entire communities, and have direct or indirect impacts on journalists and media. It is therefore essential to make them resilient to disasters because they have the vital role of ensuring the flow of information. It is important to include in college and university journalism curricula, lessons on working safely and reporting disasters correctly and humanely.

Media that understand what disasters are about will facilitate participation of the public in preparation of disaster risk reduction policies, as well as strategies on disaster prevention, mitigation and response. Similarly, it is important for media to regularly train reporters on disaster reporting, staying safe and protecting their equipment during disasters.

Nepal is also among the countries that are most likely to be affected by climate change-induced calamities. Nepal's media have therefore the responsibility to inform communities to cope with the possible impacts. UNESCO's recent handbook, *Getting the Message Across*, dealing with understanding and reporting climate change, can assist this process.

The present publication, *Building Media Resilience in Nepal*, covers disaster-reporting, lessons learned and how media can better prepare for the future. This is the second book, Bournemouth University and UNESCO Kathmandu have published to support journalism education in Nepal. I believe the book will be useful to academia, working journalists, media students and anyone interested in disaster risk reduction and writing about it.

**Christian Manhart**  
UNESCO Representative to Nepal





# Introduction

When disasters strike, journalism can save lives.

Affected communities need information during disasters. What has happened? What can be expected? Where are the safe places? Who should survivors contact? What should they do? What should they *not* do?

There are many questions that people need answers for, and the timely dissemination of information is important to save lives, reduce trauma, and facilitate smooth relief and rehabilitation works. Good communication is also required to enhance the relationship among the government, national and international organisations, and the civil society—before, during, and after a disaster. In all this, the news media play a crucial role.

The importance of disaster journalism in Nepal, hence, cannot be overstated. Situated in one of the world's most disaster-prone areas, the nation is particularly vulnerable to calamities. As the 2015 earthquake showed, it is also ill-prepared. Enhancing the disaster preparedness of news media personnel is therefore of great importance to lessen the impact of future events.

This book, a joint effort between Bournemouth University, UK, and UNESCO Kathmandu, is written with that purpose in mind. Arising out of a larger project to strengthen the disaster communication landscape in Nepal, it seeks to present actionable knowledge and practical solutions to journalists, media educators, and media organisations. In keeping with our objective of reaching a cross-section of Nepali journalists and communicators, this book is bilingual.

The first chapter, 'After the quake: challenges to journalism in a post-disaster society', draws from a research study that we conducted soon after the earthquake. Based on semi-structured interviews with journalists and media professionals, it profiles the key issues the national and local news media faced in the wake of the 2015 events, in a bid to understand the requirements of post-disaster journalism in Nepal.

The second chapter, 'News media: before, during and after', focuses on disaster preparedness. Primarily aimed at journalism professionals (as also future journalists), it outlines the roles journalists play in the different phases of a disaster, and lists several 'action points' that reporters and editors can adopt for risk reduction and better communication.

In the third chapter, the focus shifts to the more strategic climate change. Adapted from UNESCO's recent handbook, *Getting the Message Across*, it outlines, for those unfamiliar with the all-important topic, why climate change matters and what journalism can do to help mitigate its effects.

The fourth chapter considers the current state of disaster preparedness in Nepal, through interviews with three key stakeholders. Four years after the earthquake, a journalist, a journalism educator, and the chairperson of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) take stock of the changes in their respective sectors, assessing what more needs to be done.

In the last chapter, we outline recommendations to improve disaster resilience. Besides ensuring the physical safety of journalists, we underline, it is important that media organisations put in place effective post-disaster news strategies well in advance. To help with this, the chapter also provides key resources that disaster journalists can draw on.

**Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen, and Nirjana Sharma**

*September 2019*





# After the quake: challenges to journalism in a post-disaster society

Nepal's disaster preparedness came under revived scrutiny after the 2015 earthquakes, from which the country is still recovering. The nation sees approximately 500 disaster events such as fire, landslides, floods, and epidemic every year. Despite this, disasters have been managed on an ad-hoc basis traditionally, "attended to as and when they occurred"<sup>1</sup>. The Natural Disaster Relief Act (1982), the establishment of the Disaster Preparedness Network Nepal (1996), and formulation of the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (2009) and the National Disaster Response Framework (2013) were all steps in strengthening the crisis management capabilities in the country through legislation and policy-making. But Nepal's disaster response was found lacking in the wake of the 2015 earthquake. Although there existed policies to manage crises, the "framework could not deliver what it seemed to promise", limited, as it were, by both its "structure" and "response capacity"<sup>2</sup>.

## Earthquakes in Nepal

The 11th most earthquake-prone country in the world<sup>3</sup>, Nepal has a history of severe seismological disturbances spanning centuries. The first major earthquake in the region dates back to 1255. Since then, 12 major disasters, with magnitudes ranging up to 8.2 on the Richter scale, have occurred in the country, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions. The death toll in the Great Nepal-India Earthquake of 1934 alone stood at more than 8,000<sup>4</sup>. The comparatively weaker tremors of 1980, 1988 and 2011 together killed 849, injured 6,965, and damaged, at a conservative estimate, more than 92,414 buildings<sup>5</sup>.

The 7.8 earthquake that occurred four minutes before noon on 25 April 2015, thus, was the latest in an extending series of disasters in the region. It affected 31 of Nepal's 75 districts, 8.1 million people. Together with the 7.3-magnitude aftershock

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1 Nepal, P, Khanal, N R and Sharma B P P (2018), Policies and institutions for disaster risk management in Nepal: a review. *The Geographical Journal of Nepal* Vol. 11: 1-24

2 See Disaster preparedness and response during political transition in Nepal, <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/disaster-preparedness-response-during-political-transition-nepal/>

3 UNDP Global Assessment of Risk: Nepal Country Report, [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/UNDP\\_NP\\_Nepal%20Country%20Report.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/UNDP_NP_Nepal%20Country%20Report.pdf)

4 Sapkota, S N, Bollinger, L and Perrier F (2016), Fatality rates of the M w ~8.2, 1934, Bihar-Nepal earthquake and comparison with the April 2015 Gorkha earthquake. *Earth, Planets and Space* (2016) 68:40

5 See EERI Earthquake Reconnaissance Team Report: M7.8 Gorkha, Nepal Earthquake on April 25, 2015 and its Aftershock for a breakdown

that followed 17 days later, it killed 8,794 people and injured 22,300<sup>6</sup>. Nearly 500,000 houses were destroyed and another 288,255 partially damaged<sup>7</sup>, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless to face the upcoming Himalayan winter in temporary shelters. The total economic loss stood at US \$7 billion—more than one-third of Nepal’s GDP.

Since 2015, the national disaster preparedness of Nepal has seen several significant changes. New strategies and policies have emerged, including a milestone legislation—the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (2017), which replaced the decades-old NDRA of 1982. But the debates on improving resilience, of establishing better strategic and operational processes and structures to govern both disaster preparedness and impact mitigation, have paid only limited, if any, attention to the role of the news media in post-disaster Nepal—to the challenges journalists faced, and the requirements for building better news media preparedness in the future.

## News media in Nepal

The Nepali media landscape is characterised by a remarkable number of radio stations. Spread across the country, and particularly serving the rural population, these stations broadcast in a plurality of languages—123 languages are spoken in Nepal, according to the 2011 census—to command substantial reach, higher than the other media forms. Newspapers are centred in the Kathmandu valley, with low overall print circulation owing to “the difficult geographical terrain, the high recurring costs for both publishers and readers, and the adult literacy rate at only around 60 percent of the population”<sup>8</sup>. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in television and digital and social media penetration, but radio enjoys a far greater reach into rural communities across the nation. Compared to the 189 newspapers published daily and 117 television channels predominantly catering to urban audiences, there are 736 FM radio broadcasters, including 314 community. This allows an estimated 98 per cent of the population access to radio (a significant proportion access FM stations via mobile phones).

While the diversity of outlets signal a robust news media system (a point to note here is that, unlike in many other South Asian countries, radio stations are allowed to broadcast news and news-based programmes in Nepal), it must be remembered that professional media have only had a very short lifespan in the country. Till the adoption of democracy in 1999, and the resultant emergence of commercial media houses, journalism was a ‘volunteer’ career<sup>9</sup>. As such, the profession is still nascent in Nepal, facing several training, resourcing and other developmental challenges<sup>10</sup>.

6 Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, <https://www.nepalhousingreconstruction.org/sites/nuh/files/2017-03/PDNa%20Volume%20A%20Final.pdf>

7 UNDP report Rapid earthquake recovery in Nepal, [http://www.np.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/2017\\_reports/Rapid%20Earthquake%20Recovery%20in%20Nepal%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf](http://www.np.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/2017_reports/Rapid%20Earthquake%20Recovery%20in%20Nepal%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf)

8 See Media landscapes: Nepal, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal>

9 Media landscapes: Nepal, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal>

10 See UNESCO report, Assessment of Media Development in Nepal, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002254/225486e.pdf>

It is against this backdrop that we explored the disaster response and experience of Nepali journalists. In this, we were guided by scholarship that documents the impact of natural disasters on news organisations, which chronicled how devastating events lead to changes in routinised news practices<sup>11</sup> and the challenges to their professionalism due to their dual role as victim and journalist<sup>12</sup>. Our main objective was to map the challenges that journalists faced in the wake of the Nepal earthquake—not just in the days immediately after, but also in the recovery phase. How did journalists navigate the challenges they faced? How prepared did they feel, as survivors themselves, to report on the aftermath? What steps are required to improve post-disaster journalism in Nepal?

## Scope of the study

This study primarily draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 46 journalists, editors and other officials responsible for news reporting after the earthquake, including politicians and civil servants, NGO officials and community leaders. Interviewees were from the city areas of Kathmandu and Patan, as well as regional areas affected by the earthquake: Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot and Gorkha. Nearly three-quarter of the journalists and editors interviewed were from radio or newspapers, with the remaining from TV, dedicated news websites or wire services. We analysed the interview transcripts using MaXQDA, conducting an inductive content analysis. This study is also informed by 150 interviews with survivors (including journalists) undertaken for an affiliated post-disaster journalism project (Aftershock Nepal: [www.aftershocknepal.com](http://www.aftershocknepal.com)). We further make use of reflections by participants on that project in our analysis.

## Key findings

The Nepali news media—print, TV and radio channels alike—were ill-prepared for the earthquake. While journalists showed great resilience in the face of a disaster they were personally affected by, their news coverage was affected by several challenges, particularly in the response phase. We categorise the formidable issues that Nepali journalists faced into three categories: journalism practice, journalism strategy, and journalistic identity.

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11 Matthews, J (2017), The role of a local newspaper after disaster: an intrinsic case study of Ishinomaki, Japan. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 27 (5), 464-479

12 Usher, N (2009), Recovery from disaster: How journalists at the New Orleans Times-Picayune understand the role of a post-Katrina newspaper. *Journalism Practice*, 3, 216-232

## Issues of journalism practice

The damage caused by the earthquake to media infrastructure was severe. Together with the general breakdown of infrastructure and public facilities, this complicated newsgathering and publishing, rendering both tasks impossible on occasions. This was particularly true in the immediate days after the earthquake. Editors and reporters spoke about the destruction of newsrooms and destruction of communication infrastructure, besides highlighting blockage of roads and fuel shortage as limiting their news coverage.

### Destruction of newsrooms

Several interviewees described their newsrooms as being fully or partially destroyed. One newspaper journalist in Kathmandu said:

“We didn’t have an office. Our building was damaged and we had a temporary workplace. We didn’t have internet connection, we didn’t have enough computers... there were a lot of technical problems. There had been talk for years about Kathmandu being hit by a big disaster, but everyone was shocked by the extent of it when it happened.”

Another newspaper journalist from Gorkha described how, as “the aftershocks were so frequent” and his office building was so “cracked”, he didn’t feel safe at work. Similar was the case with a Kathmandu journalist who said the “building where we worked as a newsroom had collapsed, and we didn’t know where to work”.

Journalists, hence, were forced to find workarounds. The Kathmandu journalist described how he and colleagues wrote their news reports from a printing press:

“Our publisher and editor were out of town...so our second man and other persons, they just managed to take our stuff into the place where these things get printed. We managed there, and wrote our initial reports on the death toll, on the situation.”

Others, like the journalist from Gorkha, adapted to a more itinerant style of working:

“I spent most of my time in public places like hotels, especially the garden of the Gorkha Hotel. It was all crowded, but I wasn’t feeling safe anywhere except

for open spaces.”

A radio journalist from Kathmandu spoke of how the destruction of newsrooms prevented his team from broadcasting for several days:

“After seven days, one week, we took our equipment from the office [which was destroyed] out to a field. We bought a tent, and we started to broadcast there.”

### Partial destruction of communication infrastructure

Journalists, mostly the editors we interviewed, stressed the difficulties brought about by the destruction of communication infrastructure. They were unable to reach colleagues or sources using telephone, and could not use the internet to communicate or publish. Those who did have access to cell phones experienced severe difficulties connecting to jammed networks struggling to cope with overwhelming demand, and said they often relying on (delayed) text messages.

Communication issues were more acute in regional areas, where some interviewees cited no electricity or radio for seven days after the earthquake. Others based in the capital said there were delays of only a few hours before cell phones were operational, but they still lacked electricity for three days.

At this point, Radio Nepal was an important source of communication, as were other radio channels. A magazine editor based in Patan noted that social media was also a useful source of official information, but only after a week or so after the earthquake:

“Some government officials and agencies, and even the police and army had their Twitter account, their Facebook account. But in the first week, everyone—the government, the media, everyone—was disorganised.”

The lack of generators and batteries further exacerbated the communication situation faced by media personnel. Journalists were unable to power cell phones, computers and other digital devices when they ran out of power. Some journalists described ‘borrowing’ electricity and internet access from friends who had backup generators in their homes. An associate magazine editor based in Kathmandu said:

“By the first evening, I found my friend’s place. Their internet was still working and the generator was working so I set up there.”

## Damage and disruption to transport networks

Blocked and damaged roads, lack of public transport, and a shortage of vehicle fuel prevented journalists from reaching their newsrooms or travelling to affected areas. While several interviewees spoke about using bicycles or mopeds to get around, there was a consensus that accessibility to both sites of destruction and to places of work was a major problem. A Kathmandu-based radio editor spoke of how a “neighbour’s house collapsed and the road was totally blocked... I was helpless.”

Destruction of transport infrastructure delayed journalists from attempting to reach the worst-affected rural areas. Journalists from the Kathmandu area who did visit regional districts described doing so only after days or even weeks. A newspaper journalist spoke about this inaccessibility, acknowledging that the media focus on Kathmandu, sometimes for reasons of practicality, did a disservice to severely affected regional districts:

“It was very hard to go to different districts. We live in Kathmandu, yes.... I think we really didn’t do justice in reporting the real ground level issues.”

The Patan-based magazine editor expanded on this:

“For the first week, all journalists, all media houses, they just focused on the disaster that hit Kathmandu... Until the third or fourth day we didn’t even have an idea that Sindhupalchok was the worst-hit district. I think on the third week of the disaster, we put the Sindhupalchok story on the front page.”

## Physical risks and lack of disaster-reporting preparedness

Many journalists expressed trepidations about aftershocks and buildings collapsing, especially as there were rumours that a bigger earthquake would strike which made them reluctant to travel to remote areas affected by the earthquake. Some interviewees also spoke about security risks, including robberies. One NGO worker from the Nuwakot region described how they felt like:

“We didn’t have information on what’s going on. [A] lot of rumors were going around and many people were also saying that now the biggest earthquake will come. The people were really traumatized, frustrated and irritated from the earthquake that hit but still [a] lot of robberies took place. Lots of security issues were there.”

Interviewees were further worried about finding basic necessities, including shelter, food and sanitation. A magazine editor from Kathmandu spoke about his fears of travelling to remote villages:

“[There might be] no shelter, it’s cold, it might rain, there might be lack of light... you have to find fuel, toilets. These everyday necessities become inaccessible during a disaster and it’s felt most profoundly at night.”

For their part, the journalists who did travel to regional locations said they felt a sense of inadequacy. More than one interviewee spoke about being unsure of how best to go about their jobs—a problem compounded by the fact that they were ill-prepared for the physical demands of the changed ‘site of news’. An editor of an English magazine based in Kathmandu spoke about this:

“The village I went to was in Sindhupalchok. And I was unplanned. I wanted to stay there a few days to cover the disaster, without realising that there was no water. Then at around six o’clock, we started looking for water. People were living on the banks of the river in tents, but we didn’t have anything as such to live there. We didn’t have sleeping bags or anything like that. So I came back to Kathmandu in the midnight. The road was really bad and I fell down several times and there were landslides all over the road. Thank God, it wasn’t raining.”

Another journalist, a freelancer, also from Kathmandu, expanded on how reporters lacked editorial guidance:

“Most journalists did not follow any kind of planning at that time. It was not clear that we could reach Ghokar or Bardin or another remote part of the country. We were just moving towards those areas... we did not have a concrete plan on reporting.”

### Impact on journalism practice

The issues highlighted above influenced the post-earthquake news coverage produced by the Nepali news media, constraining both news production and news gathering, and placing journalists under considerable stress.

The destruction of newsrooms, the breakdown of established processes and communication channels, and the other operational difficulties outlined above affected news production as well as journalistic rigour at a time when these were most crucial. A newspaper journalist in Kathmandu recalled:



“We had limited computers because our newsroom was not functioning and we were shifted to a camp. So many reporters were standing for their turn to write at one computer. Once a reporter finished a copy, the copy-editor would sit at the same computer, and then the designer would take over... It was very hard.”

Like several other interviewees, he spoke of the stress of working in such an environment:

“[I]n that situation, how will you write? You queue up in the line and your time is already passing, and you are already worried about going home because there is no vehicle.”

With limited phone connectivity, severe breakdown of transport infrastructure, and inadequate logistical resources and disaster-reporting and survival training at their disposal, many journalists felt obstructed from carrying out their reporting assignments as well. A freelance journalist from Sindhupalchok, one of the worst-affected districts, recounted:

“All the houses were destroyed, there was no food, people were suffering everywhere. In that situation, there was no transport, no information, no cell phone service, nothing. There were problems collecting news.”

While this was true of the majority of the journalists we interviewed, a few travelled with the Nepali army on helicopters to access regional areas. This practice was both envied by some journalists because of the access it provided, and questioned by others, who noted those who did go by helicopter to remote areas were still very limited in their range and time spent there. They would not, for example, undertake the one or two days of trekking required to reach the most remote villages in the area. There was also resentment towards Western journalists who had access to resources—such as helicopters—that most Nepali journalists did not. A freelance journalist said:

“Some of the [foreign] journalists, they hired helicopters and easily managed to go to the most affected place in Gorkha and the epicentre. But we didn't think about the helicopter. We just thought about the roadway, yeah. So it took time, but we were first to visit that place because the journalists who hired the helicopter, they just went [there] and returned on the helicopter.”

Journalists who did have access to greater resources also expressed a conflict about their professional role as reporters, and having to leave people behind. A journalist

with the Kathmandu Post and Reuters recounted an incident where he was requested by a trekking guide in Gorkha—near the epicentre—for a place on a helicopter:

“I’m not the guy who has the authority... but I’m the face that says it’s probably not going to happen. And then the helicopter leaves and you think then that this guy is probably going to have to walk down this road, and the road is destroyed. So quite a lot of guilt at getting back into this helicopter.”

This journalist also touched upon feelings of guilt over other perks he had access to, and which he ended up rejecting:

“I could have stayed at the hotel the entire time with all the Reuters people, but I didn’t want to. But I was scrounging for breakfast tokens and they were having a hotel breakfast... they didn’t stop laying out this wonderful spread every morning.”

The practical issues faced in their line of duty, thus, can be seen to have impacted the post-earthquake news coverage of Nepal news media negatively. Several journalists we interviewed indicated that they were severely limited in their outputs. While their comments were specifically about the response phase, given that some of these issues—for instance, damages to road transport and communication networks—continued into the months after, it is expected that the news coverage of the recovery phase was also similarly impacted.

### Issues of journalism strategy

Despite Nepal being particularly earthquake prone, journalists described a lack of preparedness for the disaster—personally, as well as in terms of infrastructure. We found this non-preparedness was exacerbated by the lack of structured information management systems in Nepal, the lack of backup mechanisms or procedures for dealing with the crisis, and the subsequent government failure to effectively distribute relief. As a newspaper journalist in Kathmandu said:

“I saw a small boy come, he brought two other boys with him. He said that these two don’t have a father anymore and asked the police if they could look after them. It was total chaos. Nobody had anticipated that this would happen... there was no preparation.”

## Lack of editorial preparedness

The lack of preparedness extended to journalistic institutions, and also to the journalists themselves. There was no back-up plan on how to respond infrastructurally or as reporters. A contributory factor was that despite Nepal being prone to earthquakes and other disasters (flooding, landslides, fires etc), there is no specific journalistic beat devoted to disaster reporting. Interviewees indicated that the lack of such a specialism in newsrooms added to the sense of chaos, and indeed, the slow reaction from some journalists: there was lack of clarity about how to respond and the ownership of different lines of enquiry remained ambiguous.

An official of the National Seismological Centre appeared to be referring to these issues when he spoke about the head-in-the-sand approach that the news media displayed previously:

“Whenever there was any estimation of an earthquake, it got issued [by the media], otherwise there was silence. Nobody was taking any precautions or worrying about it.”

A magazine editor from Kathmandu agreed with this assessment, noting that even though some news outlets did try to raise awareness that an earthquake could hit at any time, this did not translate into preparedness on their own part.

“Ironically, we wanted to raise awareness, we wanted to tell people that you should be prepared for the big one, but our office wasn’t prepared.”

As a consequence, almost all journalists we interviewed described a sense of confusion and uncertainty in the immediate aftermath. They struggled to cope with the severe disruption to their routinised labour, particularly as this was heightened by the fact they could not get hold of senior staff for directions, and also by that many editors and news managers were uncertain themselves at what to do. A freelance journalist, who formerly worked for the Kathmandu Post, spoke about this situation:

“Even the editors were not in a position to give that kind of instruction. We just reported whatever we saw, whatever information we got from the government officials. We were not so prepared to report on the disaster.”

A Kathmandu-based newspaper journalist expanded on the confusion caused by the breakdown in news routines:

“Normally, we would have meetings about twice a day—in the morning, in the afternoon... But immediately after the earthquake we could not sit for meetings.... We also failed to make proper plans. How should we do the reporting for the day? How should we make the story? How should we make the planning for the post-production?”

### Need for post-disaster training

As a consequence, when the earthquake did strike, journalists were left floundering. Most of our interviewees said they were acutely aware of the lack of training for disaster reporting. A radio and print editor said:

“We don’t have that kind of training, for what kind of story we can give during a disaster or crisis. We didn’t have that kind of idea. Even now, we don’t have that kind of institute to give that kind of training or orientation. And people think that journalists have to know everything, which is very unfair.”

A small section of interviewees said that they had received earthquake training (typically those with wire services, or some experience with international news organisations), or that their news organisation had some contingency plans for physical safety. But none of the respondents described any form of editorial strategy in the event of an earthquake. Only one interviewee described role-play training based on an earthquake scenario, over 2-3 days of 10 hours per day. Earthquake survival kits were often inaccessible or perceived as “collecting dust” in the office.

While journalists said they learnt a lot from their experience of reporting on the earthquake, there was unity of opinion that formal training was needed to prepare them for future scenarios. Drawing from interview and focus group responses, as also our personal experience with post-disaster news coverage for Aftershock Nepal, two areas emerge where support is required: training to provide clarity on the typology of stories and the approaches to newsgathering needed in post-disaster situations, as well as training to report safely from the hostile environment created by disasters. A Kathmandu journalist touched upon the latter point—the need to understand the news necessities in the response and recovery phases—when he said:

“We didn’t think before the earthquake how we should report. Now time has come to think if another disaster comes to Nepal, how should we report about the disaster?”

## Impressionistic reporting and ‘innocent journalism’

Several journalists described a shift in their reporting style in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Their reports consisted mainly of short impressionistic updates and personal or anecdotal observations about destruction. There was a sense of urgency to communicate immediately, but this was coupled with an inability to do so in a wholesome way—as a result of the variety of issues mentioned above.

One newspaper reporter from Gorkha described how the lack of “training and knowledge about disaster reporting” meant they produced more “innocent journalism”, noting that training would likely have made their journalism more formal and conventional. A Kathmandu-based radio journalist spoke of how reporters jotted down their observations of immediate surroundings to put together reports.

“We didn’t have camera at that time, charge also finished, no electricity, mobiles were switched off. We just observed things, houses, and wrote in our notecopy.”

Initial reporting centred on developing an impact scenario—how many people died, how many were injured, which buildings were destroyed and so forth. This was closely followed by concern about food, medicine, sanitation and distribution of essentials.

Whilst this style of reporting—impressionistic as well as focussed on the ‘quantity’ of devastation—was primarily in the immediate aftermath, some journalists said it took up to six months before they began to pursue in-depth and “quality journalism”.

## Dealing with information deficiency, official access and political pressure

The lack of preparedness on the part of government agencies appear to have added to the confusion that journalists faced. There was no clear information-sharing strategy that came into play once the earthquake happened, and journalists lacked access to authoritative sources, and had no processes to rely on to verify information. Consequently, news reports were not always accurate. Whilst this was acute in the immediate aftermath, the ambiguous information sharing also continued into the reconstruction phase. As a Kathmandu-based NGO worker said:

“Lack of information, conflicting information, was there throughout, especially regarding coverage and guidelines. Coordination in my opinion remained a challenge throughout, even now in the reconstruction phase in terms of who’s doing what and how we’re actually coordinating with people on the ground and the government and each other.”

Data from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups highlighted the lack of

access to government sources. They were clear that journalists in the capital had greater access to official sources, and indeed resources to investigate. Regional journalists felt that they could not do ‘quality’ stories because they did not have access to senior officials (who were usually based in the capital). Also, there was a sense of inadequacy among regional journalists at reporting a disaster of this scale—not only because of their lack of access but also because of their limited journalism training and experience. Even Kathmandu-based journalists spoke about lack of information. Quite often, they said they sourced information from international news (direct from ‘parachute’ journalists, or from online publications), or foreign official sources (eg. embassies, army). A magazine editor in Patan spoke about the overall atmosphere of confusion:

“I’ve been covering earthquake reconstruction regularly, but I still can’t explain what’s going on. It’s so complicated, they don’t have compact data. For the first few months I used to rely on the UN humanitarian agency for reliable information, but I think they have stopped updating their data. I [now] need to rely on the National Reconstruction Authority, which is very... their data are not consistent. And then I’m so confused because they say, for example, 200,000 houses were destroyed, but what we wrote back then was that 600,000 houses were destroyed. So yeah, it’s really confusing, the inconsistency. It’s not easy to understand what’s going on.”

A few respondents also pointed to political pressure on journalists. This appeared to be especially prevalent in the regions, and at times led to more relaxed fact-checking or even counter-narratives—for example, claims that NGOs were wasting money—in order to detract from criticism against government failures. An NGO worker in Kathmandu spoke about this:

“Local media definitely needs more fact-checking... There are media outlets that are clearly politically aligned and clearly pushing back against this international media narrative of ‘the government is terrible’. They say, ‘look at the NGOs and how much money they’re wasting’. And you know, they kind of drum up this anti frenzy... everyone gets more defensive, we publish more press releases about how many people we’ve reached—and that’s not the discussion I want to have.”

### Difficulty in returning to ‘normal’ journalism

Journalists described how the earthquake consumed all news reporting. It was omnipresent, shaping all other events in Nepal persistently. Respondents spoke about

how they sought to incorporate it into stories that were not directly related, signalling not only how it affected every part of life but also the ways in which it influenced their thinking about news and journalism. Arguably, this is a consequence of conventional news logic, where the dominant story of such a scale is inflected within other genres (e.g. which sports teams were affected). However, journalists expressed difficulty in shedding this dominance as time passed, which caused problems in returning to conventional reporting and normalcy. A freelance journalist in Kathmandu provided insights into this:

“Everything was shaped by the earthquake—political changes, government changes. Even the constitution-writing process, which was delayed for years, was settled immediately after the earthquake. So what we did is we just covered the earthquake. Even when we covered politics or economics, the earthquake was there.”

Reporters covering niches such as sports actively searched for ways to weave the earthquake into their news stories. A Kathmandu-based newspaper journalist said:

“No one wants to speak about sports issues at a time of crisis, when people are suffering. So we observed and asked some government authority to provide reports about sports that were affected or damaged by the earthquake. You cannot consult common people about sports.”

### Lack of specialist journalism skills

Journalists and editors alike expressed the regret that they did not have the capabilities or resources for investigative journalism. Neither did they feel confident about analysing financial data. Respondents also spoke about being unsure of dealing with traumatised survivors and victims, indicating a need for specialist interviewing skills as well. Speaking of the inadequacy of investigative journalism skills, a magazine journalist said:

“After the earthquake a lot of money came in. And I desperately wanted to track that. [But] I felt unprepared. I ended up writing about the conflict between the donors and the government... but I really wanted to track how much money is coming in, who is raising it, things like that.”

The slow pace of aid distribution was an immediate concern, with monies apparently residing in government agencies for long periods without reaching those it was

intended for. There were also concerns about corruption related to this, and several journalists expressed a desire to have conducted rigorous inquiries into the flow of funds from external donors in the reconstruction phase. But, as an assistant editor for a magazine based in Kathmandu pointed out, Nepali journalists lack the expertise for carrying out such investigations:

“Nepali or local reporters weren’t and aren’t trained in the most important aspect of reconstruction—the money. Where are the funds coming from? Where are they going? The death toll is easily available, the government tells you how many people died... [but] the money coming into a country like Nepal is difficult to follow. The money is coming in from so many different sources to so many different organisations. But what do they do? [T]he government needs to be scrutinised because it’s the biggest player, but even the NGOs, the INGOs, how much money is coming in? What percentage of that is going to salaried workers and employees or going back to the country? That was a challenge.”

Several respondents said they would have liked to move beyond the disaster and reconstruction narrative, to explore the everyday lived realities of survivors. While their voices and images are centrestage when providing a spectacle of suffering in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, this is quickly replaced by aid and reconstruction (or lack of) in the recovery phase. Here journalists called for a greater focus on both reflecting and supporting the human resilience expressed by survivors. However, these stories were not easy to report. A Kathmandu-based radio editor spoke about how human interest stories were important, but were “in kind of a shadow”:

“[T]here are series of stories we can do especially focussed on reconstruction, not only building. Reconstructions of the heart and emotions, because people lost their family members. They are still in trauma. Small children... their parents are gone. What are they going through? The government is thinking about building, planning. That is not enough. And these can be the stories [told by] the media.”

A newspaper journalist based in Kathmandu expanded on the practical difficulties of talking to survivors:

“Talking to patients was another big challenge. They were in a hospital bed and you needed to go in to talk to the family, you needed to convince them. It’s a



very hard thing, you know, in any sort of disaster.”

Another freelance journalist in Kathmandu reflected on how disaster reporting reflected an elite-centric view that neglected already marginalised voices:

“Still we are not able to reach out [to] people suffering the most in the remote part of the country, particularly the underprivileged community. They are not getting proper space in the media. We have not been able to raise their voices in our reporting. I see kind of lapses in giving proper space to these people.”

The 2015 earthquake, as seen above, highlighted several issues with editorial preparedness. While journalists found workarounds in time, it needs to be stressed that planning for disaster reporting, including establishing workflow processes and training, is of utmost importance in Nepal. Some possible solutions are detailed below.

## Issues of journalistic identity

The tension between journalists’ professional identity and their emotive response to experiencing the disaster as survivors emerged as a recurring theme. Respondents revealed a conflict between coping with their (and their family’s) trauma and their perceived professional duty to report.

### Personal vs professional

Several interviewees spoke about struggling to cope with the destruction of their homes, and how that affected their journalism. A Kathmandu-based radio journalist, among the many who spoke about this, said:

“I lived for a month in a tent. My house had cracks. The kids were very scared and they didn’t want to go to the house. The quakes came continuously and I thought, they all thought, they were going to die. I just forgot at the time that I was a reporter.”

An online journalist from Kathmandu described a feeling of “numbness” all around.

“Complete lack of sleep because every five minutes there were aftershocks. Also, everyone had become somewhat numb with the fear of uncertainty. In Nepal there is a term called *satogoye*. It means when someone is in shock or trauma, at that time he becomes numb. So that was the feeling all around. We didn’t know what to do.”

Many journalists were too shaken to work right after the earthquake. The disaster also gave some a different outlook. A newspaper journalist in Kathmandu gave voice to this, when he said:

“We could have been killed that day... so that gave us a new perspective. Till now I am reminded of how I was lucky to survive that day. It’s hard to forget the destruction we saw. We couldn’t live properly and work properly after that. I couldn’t come to my office to write.”

Journalists spoke about how difficult it was to report about a disaster in which they had a personal stake in. They were survivors first, journalists second—and, as such, they struggled to cope psychologically with the situation they were expected to observe and report. A freelance journalist from Kathmandu expressed this in the following words:

“It was very difficult to maintain quality... we just tried to collect the information. We were not able to work properly. There were psychological problems, family obligations. Life comes first, before any other things ... also need to stay safe, before writing anything.”

A radio journalist from Sindhupalchok spoke about how she was “crying with the victims” and how she “just mixed my emotions in my write-ups”. Another, a Patan-based magazine editor, said he was not in the right “frame of mind” and how that affected the quality of his work:

“To get information wasn’t that easy...If I had tried a little harder, then I could have got more information. But I was emotionally disturbed, I couldn’t focus on stories.”

Despite the personal trauma, a section of journalists also spoke about a prevailing sense of duty. One newspaper journalist from Kathmandu expanded:

“In the evening, I called the manager and he said, ‘If you think you can come, you come. We don’t want to pressure you.’ But as a journalist, I felt I should go because it is my duty... so that is why I went to my office. They had shifted our office to this temporary makeshift camp.”

Putting aside “personal obligations” caused some dissonance, but several journalists expressed an element of pride in their decision to keep working. A newspaper journalist from Kathmandu said:

“To be frank, I compromised all my personal obligations. I moved out for reporting. Two days after the earthquake I was the first one to go to the Shorpani, near the epicentre in Gorkha district.”

Similar was the experience of another journalist, who started freelancing when he could no longer print his own paper

“My family suffered and I suffered a lot of loss. In that situation I didn’t care about my family... only my work. I just kept working. I lost being able to print my own paper because of the earthquake, that’s why I started freelancing and writing for other publications.”

A magazine editor from Kathmandu said he was motivated by the opportunity to do “some good” by reporting, but also emphasised the importance of taking care of his parents.

“It’s your job as a reporter, as a journalist, to share the story... you are at the centre of the world’s attention, you want to use that to do some good. But you have to ignore some of that... I had to report back, clock in at work, and clock in at home as well. Had to spend those few hours at home. Because this is when my parents were also staying in tents. So you have to go, they aren’t young people, they’re worried, they’re old... have to take care of their parents who are even older. It’s hard, but other people have it even harder.”

The personal and psychological stress that journalists were under continued even after the immediate danger passed. Respondents indicated that going to work was an escape and perhaps a way of coping. A Patan-based wire service journalist provided insights into this sentiment when he said:

“I slept in a school for a couple of nights. When I finally got back home I was a bit worn out and panicky. I’m still that way. I still notice if there’s a roof over your head. So when you’re in a field the first thought is, oh, it’ll be alright if it happened again.”

### Cultural specificities

Nepal is a collectivist culture where great emphasis is given to social norms, community and family (including extended family) responsibilities. In the ‘afno manche’ family support system here, the needs of the ‘inner circle’ take priority over other obligations. In this case, it meant that many journalists delayed returning to work.

Kathmandu was severely affected by the tremors. This aggravated the issue of capital-centric reporting as many reporters who were based there felt unable to travel to report from regions near the epicentre. As a newspaper journalist put it, “As a journalist I have a responsibility towards society, but as a son I have my responsibility towards my parents.”

Traditional gender roles also came into play, as in the case of this female newspaper journalist based in Patan.

“My family force me... please leave your job, please leave your job. Just leave this job and apply for other types of work. This is not suitable for you. It’s family and society... for ladies, it is not an open society.”

Some journalists described how bearing witness in the name of journalism played out badly with some victims. A newspaper journalist in Kathmandu said:

“It was a dilemma for us because people get irritated when journalists ask them about what they lost, what they had to suffer, because they were already heated up. They were also irritated by the government lacking to provide them relief. One of our friends, a photographer, had his camera broken when he was taking photographs of people getting rescued. They asked him why he was taking photographs instead of helping the rescue operation.”

## Commitment to advocacy and direct intervention

Echoing previous research<sup>13</sup>, we found a clear commitment to advocacy of their national identity and resilience with our respondents. Many journalists spoke about how their country would bounce back, as also feeling compelled to help out with the relief operations both during and after work time. This is a known phenomenon for journalists reporting from crisis situations, where they may blur professional boundaries (as impartial observers) and become part of the story (though not always reported).

A TV journalist from Kathmandu said, “We talked to different organisations and arranged food and clothing, and I myself went to give it to people.” The same journalist described pushing aid workers to provide additional support to a victim, using the threat of filming them as leverage to make an intervention. “We thought, ah, at least we did something. And that difference was made by the camera probably,” he said.

Respondents described how they, as journalists, were the first to reach certain locations, and thus were able to provide officials with information to follow-up and provide aid. A newspaper journalist from Gorkha said:

<sup>13</sup> Usher, N (2009), Recovery from disaster: How journalists at the New Orleans Times-Picayune understand the role of a post-Katrina newspaper. *Journalism Practice*, 3, 216–232

“We supplied our information to the media as well as to the DDRC [Disaster Risk Reduction Portal]. The government had their own information network but it would take them long time to obtain the information and help people. As journalists we have good information supply so at that time I did not wait to break the news, rather I supplied it to the DDRC, so that they could help maximum people in need.”

Others set up makeshift information centres, as described by a radio editor from Kathmandu:

“We established information centres, just one table, one or two chairs. We didn’t think that people would come. After some time we realised, oh, we need some more chairs. People came from the village... so we needed some water also.”

On the other hand, some journalists considered helping out, and then decided that their journalistic work was where they could be most effective. A magazine editor discussed this choice he faced:

“At this point when people need to be taken out of the rubble, should I invest my energy in collecting stories, or should I invest my energy in collecting food supplies? Because that was the initial reaction of most people: band together, send supplies out. So balancing that was a challenge. And I was grateful to our team, because at some point they told us the best way we can help is by doing what we do, by telling the stories. And that’s when I started to go out to report stories.”

However, he also said that journalists had to display their solidarity and show they were helping out more tangibly than just telling stories.

“While you’re at it [reporting], if you’re going to a village, carry something. Because at that point, people don’t want to talk to journalists. They haven’t eaten for three days. [Y]ou say, ‘I’ve come from Kathmandu,’ the first question you’ll get is, have you brought tents? Have you brought food? Have you got medicine? If you say, ‘No, I’m here to see how you feel about the situation,’ they might punch you.”

## Criticism of parachute journalists and international media

International journalists were widely criticised by those we interviewed. They were perceived as engaging in self-centred reporting, lacking understanding and appreciation of local context, not having sufficient knowledge of locations and

reinforcing decades of poverty-reporting.

An NGO worker and translator for international journalists in Kathmandu described how a group of international journalists tried to coerce victims to show more emotion.

“Right after the earthquake, on the second or third day, I started working with a news channel. There were a group of British journalists with celebrity status coming over to Kathmandu, which was already devastated by the earthquake. I had a bit of a moral crisis, a sort of an ideological war with them because as soon as they came, I heard them saying that there is nothing award winning here. When I took them to areas where people were cremating the bodies of family members, that British guy asked me—I was working as a translator—to ask the victims who had lost their family members to display some emotions, to ask them to describe the pain, and that they shouldn’t look expressionless. [Here’s] a place which has been so devastated, people are already living in so much trauma, turmoil and crisis... and then a journalist comes and all he needs is an award-winning story.”

International journalists were generally perceived by our respondents as having fulfilled the stereotypical parachute role—arriving for a short stint, conducting top-down observations, and then leaving. One interviewee noted that a member of the international media “had to leave because their princess was giving birth to a baby, and it was more important for them to cover this news”. Respondents also said international journalists chased locations that suited them (e.g. Khumbu region with Mt Everest) and that they had the wrong “mindset”, filing anecdotal stories that exploited the tragedies of survivors.

Some international news organisations, such as NBC<sup>14</sup>, experimented with new forms of reporting in the aftermath, with drones being used to obtain aerial footage of devastated areas. Citizens worried for their safety due to the proximity of the drones and the Nepal government was concerned that footage of valuable heritage artefacts could be “misused later”<sup>15</sup>. Soon after the 25 April earthquake, the Nepal government banned the use of drones without permission.

Some respondents observed that international media failed to recognise Nepal’s problems prior to the earthquake (e.g. poverty, lack of regulation, lack of investment in infrastructure, bureaucracy, recent civil war and so forth), and that this compounded the effect of the earthquake.

Another criticism of the international media that emerged was that journalists only focused on the negative: destruction, suffering, relief failures. Respondents felt they

<sup>14</sup> NBC News crew briefly detained in Nepal for using a drone, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2015/05/nbc-news-crew-briefly-detained-in-nepal-for-using-a-drone-207144>

<sup>15</sup> Nepal bans use of drone, <https://in.news.yahoo.com/nepal-bans-drones-060217482.html>

ignored positive stories of human resilience and successes such as the speed of opening up for tourism again.

Several respondents criticised the lack of attention on the recovery phase in Nepal, and crucially the sustained fuel blockade, for which the Nepal government blamed India. The international media was criticised for “viewing Nepal through an Indian lens”—effectively using their connections in Delhi, rather than hearing out local sources in Nepal. Several interviewees also commented on the spike in attention on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, and the absence of any attention before and after.

## Summary

This study identified a range of post-disaster challenges experienced by Nepali journalists. The issues of journalism practice impacted the everyday reporting of earthquake news, highlighting the need for strengthening the physical safety aspects — both of journalists as well as media houses. The other challenges, which we broadly categorised as issues of journalism strategy and journalistic identity, underline the need to go beyond physical safety to build disaster resilience. Sound pre- and post-disaster news strategies need to be developed, and relevant editorial skills trainings provided to strengthen the Nepali news media (see Chapter 5 for specific recommendations). It is also important that resources are invested to develop culturally specific guidelines that national and regional journalists can draw on. Crucially, a support system that ensures the emotional wellbeing of journalists, who are not just reporters or editors but also survivors, needs to be put in place.



Residents of Sangachok in Sindhupalchok district. A complaint of villagers in remote areas was that their struggles after the earthquake were rarely reported in the news media.

Photo: Patrick Ward





## CHAPTER 2

# News media: before, during, and after

The disaster response of a community, to a large extent, depends on the dissemination of disaster information within that community. Being prepared, and knowing what to do, can save lives. The news media play a vital role in this, educating communities and promoting awareness among individuals about their civic duties to help prevent and mitigate the impact of disasters.

The previous chapter outlined how the Nepali news media responded to the 2015 earthquake and the challenges journalists faced in its aftermath. Here we take a step back to look at the importance of effective disaster communication, the roles and responsibilities of journalists in preparing a community to face disasters, and how the news media can contribute in the relief and recovery phases. In the latter section, the chapter outlines good practices that disaster journalists can adopt.

## Communicating disasters

The advancement in communication technology, an increase in the numbers of educated people, and the development of the early warning system have contributed hugely in reducing the risk of disasters. There are several examples where the lives of thousands of people have been saved by the use of the media. At the same time, dissemination of incorrect information could put lives at risk.

In 1970, some 300,000 people were killed and 1.3 million displaced by a storm in south-eastern Bangladesh. When another storm with the same intensity hit the country in 1985, only 1,000 people lost their lives. This was the result of the significant support from the communication sector to the community in disaster preparedness, and the help they received to develop their capacity to cope with hazards.

In between 1950 and 1959, some 1,400 people in the US were killed in storms. However, the advancement in communication and increased level of awareness significantly decreased the loss between 1983 and 1992, when only 521 deaths were recorded. Similar positive impacts are visible in India and Nepal.

In 2014, the side of a mountain broke off near the Jure village in the Sindhupalchowk district of Nepal, blocking the Bhote Kosi river. The prompt information flow from the local media, in coordination with the police, saved many people. After listening to the radio, many moved to safer places. Similarly, when there was a flash flood in the Seti river in 2012, in Kaski in western Nepal, an eyewitness

informed the local radio station. The radio journalist asked the people downstream to take shelter, thus saving many lives.

## **Informing the communities**

The media have the responsibility to support the creation of safe communities by providing citizens the information and knowledge they need to survive disasters. Journalists can collate and disseminate the experiences, knowledge, skills, and the technologies that communities in other disaster-prone localities have adopted.

The information provided by organisations to the media and public must be accurate and reliable. This is important to help boost the capacity of communities to deal with disasters and minimise losses. Similarly, the collaboration among the government, researchers, experts, scientists, and national and international non-government agencies help identify different strategies to cope with the effects of a disaster. The media also play an important role in bringing the state and non-state players together when needed.

The issues of the vulnerable and marginalised communities need to be raised with a due priority at the time of disasters. Similarly, every individual, especially the affected, have the right to know about the financial support the government's relief fund receives, and how that is being allocated. The media have the responsibility to scrutinise such spending and keep the public informed. Maintaining transparency in the distribution of the relief funds supports good disaster management.

## **Media and risk reduction**

There is much competition among schools, colleges and universities in Nepal to offer journalism courses, with the advancement and proliferation of print, broadcast and internet medium in the country. Different training institutes are also providing short- and long-term training in journalism and reporting.

However, disaster reporting is a new concept in the Nepali context. Much of the news media only report the disaster event—whether it is a fire, earthquake, flood, landslide or an epidemic. Media houses appear to lack the planning required for in-depth disaster reporting. Not much has been done towards developing the skills, knowledge and resources that journalists need in such situations. The mindset of the Nepali society, which attributes disasters to supernatural causes, is often visible in the news coverage of disaster events.

Though media actively covers disasters, journalists rarely disseminate information to help with the preparedness before the disaster, or follow up on reconstruction and recovery issues in the aftermath. They fall short in terms of planning and strategising,

and often function on an ad hoc basis. Below, we outline the responsibilities of journalists in the different phases of the disaster and provide several areas of focus.

## Disaster preparedness

Disaster preparedness helps reduce the effects of a disaster. During the pre-disaster stage, the media can sensitise people by imparting knowledge about safety, actions the communities could take for disaster mitigation, and best practices they could follow. It can also hold discussions and dialogue to strengthen disaster policies, and advocate for better social inclusion in disaster risk management planning.

In the pre-disaster period, it is important the news media publish and broadcast content highlighting information such as:

- ▶ The effects of disasters and how they can be minimised and mitigated.
- ▶ Disaster mitigation measures, why they are important, and how they can eliminate or reduce the impacts and risks of hazards. The spending on disaster mitigation, in fact, needs to be seen as an investment.
- ▶ Natural disasters do not just take a toll on lives and properties but also affect sustainable development in the long term, thereby pushing the public into the vicious circle of poverty.
- ▶ Risk reduction targets aimed at creating awareness among people to save their lives and livelihood. It is better to reduce the effects of disasters through early preparedness rather than focusing on rescue and relief in the aftermath.
- ▶ It is the responsibility of the government to safeguard its citizens. It is, therefore, necessary to integrate a policy of disaster risk reduction in the nation's sustainable development strategy.
- ▶ Buildings and structures of public places like schools and hospitals must be stable to reduce the risk to communities. It is the duty of the government to ensure such structures are resistant to disasters, so that they can provide shelter to those affected.
- ▶ An early warning system is very effective in saving lives and properties. If there are sirens for warnings, that could be a tremendous help in limiting loss of lives.
- ▶ Safety information that people can use during disasters, including how they can access resources and skills training.
- ▶ A safe and clean environment is important. Citizens have the duty to protect the environment to reduce the risk and the impact of disasters.
- ▶ Climate change, how it is connected to disasters, and why climate change adaptations must go hand-in-hand with disaster risk management (see Chapter 3 for more).

## During disasters

During a disaster, as information is scarce, people only know what they see. Radio or amateur radio can be a big help in informing communities about the intensity and the effect of the disaster. Based on this information, people from affected areas can decide whether to stay in the same place or go elsewhere. The media can inform the people about relief and rescue operations, and support and reconstruction works, and also ensure the voice of those affected are heard by the authorities concerned. The main contributions that media can make during a disaster are:

- ▶ Providing timely and fact-based information to the general public.
- ▶ Informing people about the steps that need to be taken immediately.
- ▶ Informing people about the works done by the government and other supporting agencies.
- ▶ Disseminating information regarding the situation of marginalised and excluded communities to the authorities.
- ▶ Facilitating communication of the affected communities with their family members, relatives or friends.
- ▶ Highlighting the issues of the affected people.
- ▶ Disseminating information about the possible risks and threats in the aftermath of the disaster.
- ▶ Monitoring rescue and relief efforts have been carried out adhering to the existing international practices.
- ▶ Informing relief and rescue operators of the needs of the affected.

## After the disaster

In the weeks and months after the disaster, even after the rescue operations are over, the media continue to play a crucial role. These include:

- ▶ Providing information on the different kinds of support provided by the different agencies and organisations.
- ▶ Providing information to relief workers via local media, particularly community radio stations, about the specific local needs of affected people.
- ▶ Providing opportunities for survivors to share information, experience and concerns regarding the disaster.
- ▶ Coordinating between aid agencies and affected communities.
- ▶ Helping humanitarian agencies to find people in need.
- ▶ Offering constructive debates and critical reporting to motivate agencies to improve operations.

## Reporting disasters: good practices

The news coverage and the writing style during a disaster have to be distinctive from other situations. Disaster news should help save lives and bring relief to affected communities. Such news materials should be useful and practical. It is important that the news reporting of disasters is for the affected people—not merely about them. Coverage must incorporate information about food, safe settlement, emergency medicine, cleanliness, nutrition, education, and mental health. Similar to news coverage in other situations, truth, impartiality, balance, credibility, editorial integrity and independence are foundational while reporting disasters.

Every reporter covering a disaster must answer the basic questions. What happened? When did it happen? Where did the disaster affect the most? Who has been affected? Why did it occur? How can the people remain safe and get the needed support?

Good preparation will help reporters improve the quality of their coverage. Below are several steps a journalist can take for effective disaster reporting:

- ▶ **Literature review:** Study news articles and other available material related to the disaster. This will give a clear idea on what has been covered, what has been missed out, what angles to explore etc.
- ▶ **Contacts:** Prepare a list of contacts of people and organisations involved in the rescue and relief efforts.
- ▶ **Information verification:** Rumours are common during disasters. It is therefore important to verify information.
- ▶ **Witnesses and affected:** Gathering first-hand information is important. Speak to as many people as possible; compare it with information received from other sources (administration, hospitals, humanitarian agencies, etc). This will help in the verification process and flag up anomalies.
- ▶ **Information management:** Not all information collected will be fit to publish. Segregation of information, therefore, is necessary.
- ▶ **Information analysis:** It is necessary to keep in mind that news dissemination is primarily targeted at the affected people. Therefore, deciding which information will be useful to the targeted population is necessary before developing a news story.
- ▶ **Prioritising information:** Which information needs to be disseminated first should be ascertained.

The need for the affected people is different in the different phases of disasters. The media coverage should reflect this. Broadly, there are three stages to the reporting of disasters, and the priority of journalists should vary accordingly.

- ▶ **The first phase (at the time of the disaster):** The information on remaining safe is what the affected people need most at this time. Humanitarian support might not be available immediately after the disaster strikes. Support and cooperation among the affected count the most until rescue support is available. The media, therefore, need to prioritise their content keeping this in mind.
  - ▶ **The second phase (some days after the disaster):** After the rescue phase, people need to know what sort of supports are available for them, chances of reoccurrence of disaster, and whether it is safe for them to return to their homes and localities. Dissemination of the information about the losses alone is not adequate during this period—rather, media coverage should be targeted at supporting the restoration of normalcy in affected areas.
  - ▶ **The third phase (recovery and reconstruction):** With the effects of the disasters waning, people want to return as much as possible to their previous lives. The media coverage at this period should be targeted at answering how people can return home, send their wards to schools, and resume work. In case people have lost their shelters, the media should inform on what support the government is providing for the reconstruction and how long will it take.
-

## Practical tips for the journalists

### While interviewing victims

- ✓ Always respect the dignity and self-respect of the affected community.
- ✓ Make sure who you are talking to and why.
- ✓ You might know many things but do not portray it while interviewing.
- ✓ Your questions must not discourage the interviewee.
- ✓ Sensitively handle questions related to the killed or missing in the disaster.
- ✓ Ask for permission from relatives before you write about missing people and publish or broadcast their pictures.

### While writing about the affected

- ✓ Be considerate about the lives of the affected.
- ✓ Verify information is factual and reliable.
- ✓ Try to provide maximum details about victims and the related pictures
- ✓ Avoid content and photographs that might add to the pain of victims.

### While reporting trauma

- ✓ Before you approach anyone or begin an interview, be clear about what you want out of it.
- ✓ It is important to acknowledge and be aware of your own feelings.
- ✓ Check whether it is right to ask a difficult question.
- ✓ Use active listening skills—appropriate eye contact, non-verbal signalling of interest and engagement, mirroring the movements of your interviewee, etc.
- ✓ Structure your discussion—it will give both your interviewee and yourself a sense of containment and relative safety.
- ✓ Be confident and clear—and stick, certainly in the beginning phases of your interview, as far as possible to the facts of what happened.
- ✓ Understand that simple, open questions work best.
- ✓ Be curious.
- ✓ Reflect.

*Source: DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma*

### The Do's

- ✓ Remain safe.
- ✓ Have proper planning in place.
- ✓ Paint the real picture of the disaster-affected community.
- ✓ Develop background for writing stories.
- ✓ Have patience (remain calm) while writing or broadcasting.
- ✓ Mention the source.
- ✓ Give references.

### The Don'ts

- × Do not run after rumours.
- × Try to clear any confusion that persists in the course of reporting.
- × Do not hurry for interviews.
- × Do not assure victims of help.
- × Do not get influenced.





## CHAPTER 3

# Climate change, disasters, and the media

Disasters unfold in the context of climate change and are often linked to global warming, deforestation or forest degradation. For many people around the world, including a significant cross-section in Nepal, this connection is not always obvious. Understanding climate change and how it impacts and induces disasters is of utmost importance to a post-disaster society such as Nepal. This chapter, adapted from a UNESCO handbook for journalists on climate change, explains why it is one of the most important 'stories' of our times and how journalism can help mitigate its effect.

The Earth's climate has always changed but because of human activities, it is now changing faster than it has for thousands of years. This change poses threats to food and water security, to political and economic stability, to livelihoods and landscapes. However, it also creates opportunities for politicians, business leaders and communities to act in ways that bring benefits for all. It can create opportunities for new business models and innovations, new routes to sustainable development, and new ways for ancient knowledge to have an impact at home and in the wider world.

## The injustices of climate change

Climate change is inherently unfair. The countries and communities that are most at risk from its impacts, and are least able to adapt, are those that have contributed least to the problem. If poorer nations pursue economic growth by the same means, from which industrialised nations have benefitted—such as by burning coal and clearing forests—they will only add to the climate change problem. Indeed, when the richest nations insist that all nations—including the poorest ones—should act to limit climate change, the poorest nations find themselves in the unenviable position of asking richer nations for help to do so. Depending on the situation, they do not always get the finance and technology they need.

The international negotiations on climate change is vulnerable to brinkmanship, as some countries wield considerable power while others have little to bring to the table other than moral arguments. Nations exposed to natural hazards and environmental disasters of this kind can do little when industrialised nations fail to act to limit climate change, or even break promises they have made in the past. In addition, when richer nations provide 'climate finance' in the form of loans not grants, they are in effect asking poorer nations to pay to fix a problem richer nations created. There is also

inequity within countries, as it is the poorest communities that are most vulnerable to effects of climate change. Again, these tend to be the people who have done the least to contribute to the crisis.

These ethical and moral aspects of climate change have prompted the concept of “climate justice”, which civil society organisations have used to call upon governments and others to recognise the rights and needs of the climate-vulnerable poor. Climate justice activists call for the equitable distribution of resources to tackle climate change and for climate-vulnerable people to take part in making decisions about how the money is spent. These ethical conundrums, of how to ensure fair opportunities for all people and how to ensure that nations and people act according to their responsibilities and capabilities, are at the core of the climate change story at local, national and international levels.

## **Why media coverage matters**

Climate change is not going away. It will get worse before it gets better. For people to seize the opportunities and reduce the risks, everyone will need to know more about climate change. The way the media covers it will affect how well societies deal with the problem. Climate change will become an increasingly important issue for journalists to cover in order to provide open discussion and access to information for a local response to the global issue of climate change.

As climate change takes hold, people will demand information about what is happening and what they and their governments can do about it. Wise and responsive media managers will see that climate change presents an opportunity to grow and better serve these audiences. Three of news media’s important roles—informing audiences, acting as watchdogs and campaigning on social issues—are especially relevant. Media coverage will also provide a vital link between scientists and service providers upon which much will depend.

For journalists in Nepal, coverage of climate change means several things. At the local level, it can save lives, formulate plans, change policy and empower people to make informed choices. Through informed reporting, journalists can shine a light on the wealth of activities that people are already undertaking to prepare for climate change. On an international level, it can bring stories from Nepal to global audiences and help encourage the rich and powerful countries, their citizens and the companies based there, to act in solidarity with climate vulnerable communities.

## What is the story?

Climate change is not just a story: it is the context in which so many other stories will unfold. As such, it is not a subject solely for science or environment reporters to cover. That is why it is essential for all journalists, editors, media owners and journalism educators to understand at least the basics of climate change and realise that there is more to it than carbon dioxide and disasters. Contrary to popular belief, this is an issue full of stories that can sell newspapers and attract new audiences online, in print and on the airwaves.

Here is just a small sample of the kinds of stories journalists can tell. These are all real stories that journalists reported on recently in the Asia Pacific region:

- ▶ Indonesia's government considers new regulation on peatlands in order to reduce emission from fires provoked by deforestation.
- ▶ Floods in Bangladesh and Nepal are causing an outbreak of diarrhoea, malaria and dengue.
- ▶ The effects of global warming on the sea level is causing concern among the islanders in the Pacific who are reluctant to relocate to less vulnerable places.
- ▶ CCTV web is being used in a Thai city as an instrument for flood warning.
- ▶ India's decision to build 'green houses' will cut down the country's carbon footprint, helping to accomplish climate goals.
- ▶ Small-island states substitute diesel for cheaper and cleaner energy.

## 11 things every journalist should know about climate change and sustainable development

### 1. How we know what we know about the climate

Scientists use weather stations, balloons, satellites and other instruments that measure the properties of our climate and atmosphere to create a picture of the current situation. This includes measuring temperature on land and the surface of the sea, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the intensity of storms, the density of forests and the sources of greenhouse gas emissions. To get a picture of our past climate scientists use different methods. One way is to study the rings that form in tree trunks with each year's growth. Their size and other properties reveal something—but not everything—about the local climate in the year that each ring grew. Another approach is to drill out long cores of ice and examine the contents of the small air bubbles within the ice. The bubbles contain a sample of the air and scientists can use

its properties to estimate the temperature, precipitation, concentration of greenhouse gases and amount of forest fires at the time the ice formed. They have analysed gas trapped in ice cores to understand how our climate has changed over hundreds of thousands of years. To get a picture of our future climate, scientists use computer models that draw upon thousands of pieces of information about the current and past climates to make projections about what will happen if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise.

## 2. The difference between climate and weather

Weather is what we experience from day to day; climate refers to the average condition a place experiences over many years. Climate variability refers to natural changes through which the conditions differ from the long-term average. This can include periodic changes in rainfall linked to monsoons or to the natural events called “El Niño” and “La Niña” through which ocean currents affect rainfall. Climate change, by contrast, refers to long-term (decades or longer) trends such as the increase in the global average temperature over the past century. It also includes long-term changes in climate variability such as changes to the number and scale of droughts, floods and other extreme events. When scientists and policymakers talk about “climate change” today they tend to mean the portion of climate change that human activities cause, or, “anthropogenic” climate change. In recent years, there has been a move towards adopting the terms “climate catastrophe” or “climate crisis”, to signal the scale of change and urgency of action required to adapt to or mitigate impact.

## 3. How human activities affect the climate

Some gases such as carbon dioxide and methane can trap heat in the Earth’s atmosphere, through a phenomenon scientists call the greenhouse effect. Many human activities emit these greenhouse gases. When we burn fossil fuels such as coal and oil to produce electricity or drive cars, or when we clear forests to grow crops more of these emissions reach the atmosphere. Ever since the start of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-18th century, these gases have increased in concentration. At the same time, the Earth has experienced a gradual warming. This global warming is the cause of the climate change that scientists say we need to understand and limit.

## 4. Impacts of climate change

The immediate impacts of rising temperatures include rising sea levels, less predictable weather and more extreme events such as droughts, floods and storms happening more

often. The changing temperature and rainfall patterns can produce additional effects on water supplies, crops, animals and their pests and pollinators, and on organisms that cause disease. They can also have physical impacts on infrastructure, and all of these impacts can combine to create additional social, economic and political impacts. While it is difficult to prove that any single event is the result of climate change, many climatic trends and events that have been observed already are consistent with scientific predictions.

## 5. Mitigation and adaptation

The two main strategies for reducing the threat climate change poses are mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation refers to any activities that reduce the overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This includes efforts to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar, or to improve energy efficiency. It also includes efforts to plant trees and protect forests, or to farm land in ways that prevent greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere. Adaptation refers to activities that make people, ecosystems and infrastructure less vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This includes things like the building up of defences (both human-made or natural) to protect coastal areas from rising seas, switching to drought or flood resistant crop varieties, and improving systems to warn of heatwaves, disease outbreaks, droughts and floods.

## 6. Use climate change storytelling to contribute to REDD+

REDD+ is “reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation” by offering incentives to developing countries to reduce emissions from clearing lands, including mangroves. Fifty-five per cent of the world’s mangroves are housed in the Asia Pacific region and sadly, more than 48 per cent of the global total loss of mangroves from 2000-2012 happened in Indonesia alone, with Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Myanmar also contributing. So REDD+ and deforestation is a critical issue for the region. Journalists can use storytelling from communities who live near mangroves to inform their countries’ nationally determined contributions on CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions.

## 7. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and UNFCCC

The main scientific authority on climate change is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which the UN set up in 1988. The IPCC gathers thousands of scientists to review the global body of knowledge about climate change and summarise it in reports that policymakers can use. Every few years the IPCC produces an

Assessment Report. Before the IPCC published these, scientists first review them and then governments review and endorse them. The 5th and latest assessment report was released in 2014 and it was agreed that the warming of the climate was unequivocal and that the human influence on this rapid change was clear.

## 8. The UN Framework Convention on Climate

Change The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an international treaty that nearly 200 governments adopted in 1992 with the aim of preventing dangerous climate change. The signatories come together on a regular basis to review progress and negotiate new action during the Conference of Parties (COP). Through this treaty, COP3 produced the Kyoto Protocol, the agreement that required some industrialised countries to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases. At the COP21 in December 2015, the Paris Agreement produced and brought about unprecedented cooperation for governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

## 9. The Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement builds on the UNFCCC and for the first time brings 178 nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects, with enhanced support to assist developing countries to do so. As such, it charts a new course in the global climate effort. The Paris Agreement's central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Additionally, the agreement aims to strengthen the ability of countries to deal with the impacts of climate change. To reach these ambitious goals, appropriate financial flows, a new technology framework and an enhanced capacity building framework will be put in place, thus supporting action by developing countries and the most vulnerable countries, in line with their own national objectives.

## 10. Sustainable Development Goals – No One Left Behind

Heads of State, Government leaders, UN High Level Representatives and civil society met in September 2015 at the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 Goals represent a universal, ambitious, sustainable development agenda, an agenda of the people, by the

people and for the people. At its core, is a pledge to leave no one behind. According to the Report on the World Social Situation 2016, “Underpinning the renewed focus on inclusion and social justice is the realization that the benefits of social and economic progress have not been equitably shared.”

## 11. Vulnerability and resilience

There are many kinds of vulnerability. Low-lying coastal countries and small islands face risks very distinct from those that landlocked or mountainous nations face. Small countries whose economies depend on few sectors are vulnerable in ways, which bigger countries with large populations of poor citizens are not, and vice versa. Organisations that have tried to make sense of these differences include non-profit organisation DARA and the Climate Vulnerable Forum. They developed the Climate Vulnerability Monitor to assess and track changes to the vulnerability of 184 countries. This index considers each country’s exposure to extreme weather events and other climatic risks, its sensitivity to environmental change, dependence on environmental goods and services, and its economic, technical and political capacity to adapt to climate change.

Within countries, the picture becomes even more complex, as the vulnerability of individuals and communities varies greatly, as does the extent to which different businesses, economies, ecosystems and infrastructure are vulnerable. At all scales, vulnerability is linked to wealth and power: often it is the poorest and most marginalised of people who are most vulnerable. That said, rich people and wealthy countries are not immune to the effects of climate change. Across all groups, the very old and the very young are most at risk from any health-related impacts of climate change, and, in general, women are more vulnerable than men are. Mortality rates during extreme weather events are often greater for women than they are for men, as women face many social, economic and other barriers that limit their capacity to protect themselves. The same groups of people most vulnerable to climate change impacts tend also to be the ones least able to adapt.

When storms or floods hit cities, generally the urban poor are hit hardest in terms of deaths and injuries. Most houses in informal settlements are poorly built and thus more likely to collapse when hit by storms or floods. Many informal settlements develop on dangerous sites such as floodplains or unstable slopes because housing on safer sites is too expensive. As a result, large sections of the urban population are very vulnerable to any increases in the frequency or intensity of storms, floods, landslides or heat waves, droughts, and to increased risk of disease, constraints on water supplies or rises in food prices.

Many factors affect resilience, the ability to deal with disturbances and return to normality soon after. They include diversity (as when farmers grow many kinds of





Communities in Nepal are vulnerable to different impacts of climate change-induced disasters.  
Photo: Nirjana Sharma

crop, or when economies do not depend largely on a single sector), adaptability (as in flexible governance, capacity to respond fast to change), strong reserves (finances, food, knowledge and biodiversity, such as seed banks), and strong social capital (such as leadership and social networks).

## **Gender dimensions of climate change**

Climate change is a global phenomenon; as such, all people are vulnerable to its impacts. And, yet, one major demographic in particular disproportionately bears the brunt of shifting weather patterns: women. The fact that the world's women must suffer the consequences of a warming planet more acutely than their husbands, brothers and fathers is made all the more ironic by the fact that women have repeatedly found themselves at the margins of the political decision-making process. And, yet, while an increasing number of stories highlight the human costs of climate change, few recognise the inherent gender dynamic present when discussing the causes, impacts and response to global warming.

In the strictest sense, there is an argument to be made that climate change has claimed the lives of more women than men. A 2006 London School of Economics paper studied 4,605 natural disasters in 141 countries and found that, particularly in countries with a high level of discrimination against women—not being able to move freely without a male escort, for example—casualties were higher among women than among men. With the number of weather-related natural disasters having quadrupled in the past two decades, a pattern that is only predicted to exacerbate in the future—our changing climate is set to further endanger women's lives.

But the threat climate change poses to women is hardly limited to natural disasters. Often constrained by laws and cultural norms that limit their economic opportunities, many women in developing countries depend upon agriculture. Indeed, women produce roughly 60 percent of the world's food and in Asia the number of women that have a role on agriculture of livestock system is very high. Even within the already challenging sector of subsistence agriculture, women face additional obstacles like land ownership restrictions (women own approximately one per cent of the world's land) which allow for very few women to gain financial control over any productive land upon which they may farm.

What does climate change mean for women in agriculture? Desertification in arid regions forces women and girls to spend more time to travel further to collect scarce resources such as water and firewood—leaving less time for education or other means of generating income. Lower crop yields due to drought or flood lead to emptier pockets after the harvest and emptier plates for children. And with rising temperatures driving up the risk of certain diseases, women, as the primary family caregivers in many communities, must devote time to sick family members that they would

otherwise spend in their fields, on other work or studies.

As climate change worsens in developing countries, threatening in particular the livelihoods of families heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture, women around the world can expect to face even greater hurdles in achieving sufficient education, greater economic opportunities and gender equality.

This gender imbalance on the local level is mirrored on the global scale, as evidenced by the dominance of men across the international decision-making process. One need look no further than to the heavily skewed gender composition of the major summits on climate change. There has yet to be a conference of parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at which at least one-third of negotiators were women, or at which women comprised at least one-fifth of delegation heads.

Women are also underrepresented in the world's leading body of climate-change researchers—the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—whose reports inform the UNFCCC negotiations. There has been some improvement in terms of gender balance in the composition of the IPCC's senior management that includes the IPCC chair, three vice-chairs, eight working group co-chairs and vice-chair. There are currently eight women serving in the panel's senior management from five women in 2007.

The implications of women's absence from these two leading bodies of climate change researchers and responders are profound. Women represent over half the global population, and not only does their disempowerment prevent us from understanding the true extent to which climate change is disrupting the way of life for our most at-risk communities, it also perpetuates the antiquated narrative that women are mere victims rather than agents of change. Indeed, from growing drought-tolerant crops in Kenya to drawing upon indigenous knowledge to protecting farmlands against monsoons in India, women around the world are demonstrating that adapting to and mitigating climate change is possible.

This institutional exclusion is slowly decreasing. In 2012, the nearly 200 governments at the UN climate change talks agreed to promote gender equality in the negotiations. Still, this decision is non-binding, and only “encourages” equal representation of genders in future negotiations. The UNFCCC also launched the “Lima work programme on gender” in a climate summit in Lima, Peru in 2014 which made gender consideration a standing agenda item. On December 12, 2015, Parties to the UNFCCC agreed on the landmark Paris Agreement which highlighted that “climate change is a common concern of humankind” that must consider gender equality and the empowerment of women. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 13) adopted in 2015 and came into effect in January 2016 also included targets that focus on raising capacities for effective climate change-related planning and management for women, youth and marginalized communities.

## **The climate change story in Nepal**

Nepal has serious concerns regarding deforestation and forest degradation. Its forest cover has fallen from 60 per cent in the 1960s to 29 per cent in the 1990s and it still has a descending trend. The forest area decreases at an annual rate of 1.7 per cent per year. Nepal has two active projects ongoing, explained by the fact that the country's engagement with the FCPF began in 2008 but Nepal is still in the process of implementing its REDD+ package. Updates about the country's REDD+ progress are available through website

Many organisations along with the Government of Nepal have begun programmes to support efforts that aim to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation and to find opportunities to develop REDD+ mechanisms. The Himalayan Community Carbon Project (HCCP) was developed in 2010 with the purpose of supporting rural communities in Nepal to benefit from international voluntary market for ecosystem services. This programme enables the participation of grassroots stakeholders and communities in managing forests, resulting in direct implications for the climate change scenario and poverty reduction. In addition, WWF Nepal in collaboration with Winrock International has developed a project, which aims to conserve the biodiversity, forests, soils and water heads of the Terai and Churia Hill to ensure the integrity of the area through the creation and implementation of early action forest carbon projects.



## CHAPTER 4

# ‘Even now, the media do not have their contingency plan’

The devastating earthquake in 2015 affected every sector indiscriminately, the media being no exception. Journalists, media houses and academic institutions faced many difficulties in reporting the disaster and its aftermaths, and providing education. Against this backdrop, UNESCO Kathmandu caught up with a journalist, a university professor teaching journalism, and the chairperson of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, to understand the current needs of the journalism sector. Four years after the disaster, our interviewees spoke about the difficulties that news media personnel and media educators continue to face in Nepal. Edited excerpts from the interviews:



**Pragati Shahi**  
*Journalist*

**You have done environment and disaster reporting for a long time in Nepal. What are the challenges for Nepali journalists in reporting disaster as per your experience?**

Natural disasters such as floods and landslides are frequent in Nepal. In my experience, media houses, including my own, had no plan or organised discussions or consultations for journalists covering disasters. Firstly, there is no proper training from the media houses, and it is in occasional

workshops/training organised by the other organisations that journalists explore and learn about how to report on disasters and why it is essential to communicate. Secondly, our reporting is more focused on crisis on hand, or we can say, only when the disasters occur, and lacks to provide expansive scenario including preparedness, historical background and analysis.

There is also dearth of resources, including information on historical background of the disasters, access to government database and officials during the time of disaster to provide a comprehensive scenario and disseminate accurate information.

Finally, the most important thing is the safety and adequate resources and support from the editorial team/media house to report on disasters. In most cases, especially when reporting disasters like floods and landslides that occur frequently, it is no different than reporting any other events for local journalists. This means a disaster event is not treated differently than other day-to-day reporting assignments for local journalists unless there is huge loss of lives and properties.

**What were the first approaches your media made right after the earthquake to let the correct information flow? How was the safety of media persons taken care by your media after the disaster?**

When the devastating earthquake hit the country, including Kathmandu, where my workplace was located, the first few hours were chaotic. The building that housed our media was damaged and we were relocated to a new place and had limited resources and space to continue our work. However, the essential role of a journalist was to let correct information flow about the situation to the public. We were told to consult and communicate with concerned policymakers, officials and experts to come up with the most accurate information about the situation. While in the first couple of days, it was breaking news period—reporting on impact of the disaster from across the country and also about the frequent aftershocks that followed the mega-disaster. It gradually moved towards longer-term aftermath along with response and relief works. Nepal Earthquake 2015 was the worst disaster witnessed in nearly a century and had left people in complete fear and trauma. Disasters are stressful conditions and the biggest challenge for me was to assure my family that I was fine and safe at work.

I remember receiving a call from our news coordinator asking about our whereabouts on the day when the devastating earthquake struck. There were no special safety measures taken care of by the media after the disaster. We were told to consider our safety first while visiting the damaged sites or affected families as aftershocks of the earthquake were still being experienced, but not much was done to ensure the safety itself like support for transportation or providing vehicles to reach the site, safety equipment or post-disaster psychological counselling, among others.

**Did your media organise disaster reporting training or journalists' safety training before or after the disaster?**

No. Not just my media, I don't think any other media houses in Nepal have that either.

**Nepal continues to suffer from a massive loss of life and property due to flood and landslide. How do you evaluate the journey of media preparedness in reporting and responding to the disaster from 2015 till now?**

As mentioned above, our reporting and policy-level interventions when it comes to disaster is focused on aftermath of the disaster and response-based than preparedness. Majority of the media reports are on events relating to deaths and destruction of disasters than providing a comprehensive scenario on why this disaster happens and what needs to be done to mitigate. Talking about the earthquake in 2015, there had been some reports on studies done by some organisations like National Society for Earthquake Technology, Earthquake, Technology, Safe, Communities (NSET) on the extent of destruction if a mega-earthquake hit the country, but the looming threat was never internalised or we can say the warnings were ignored and our preparedness was almost zero. When the mega-disaster struck, everyone was overwhelmed, and the media was not an exception. The preparedness level was almost zero.

After the earthquake in 2015, the level of awareness and attention from the media to report on disaster and preparedness has gradually improved. There are increasing reports on disasters preparedness and not only deaths and destructions. Five years down the line, since the mega-earthquake struck the country, the reports on reconstruction and rehabilitation of the damaged structures and settlements still make headlines in Nepali media.

**As a journalist, what would be your recommendations for Nepali media, policymakers and the academic sector for building media resilience?**

Many media organisations do not have policies or commitments addressing journalists' safety at all. There is not enough done to prepare contingency plan, consult and discuss on situational awareness before or at the time of disaster, providing emergency kits and most importantly providing psychological and emotional care support for the journalists covering disasters. The disaster resilience communication and networking should be prioritised by all the concerned stakeholders including media organisations.

For policymakers, it is essential to incorporate disaster resilience thinking into policymaking and development programming that will ultimately help to build resilience capacity of different sectors including media. The policymakers should internalise the importance of disaster resilience and mainstream at all levels.

The academic sector can play a significant role in awareness-raising initiatives through partnerships and coordination with private and government entities. They can help in strengthening community resilience by generating knowledge on issues related to disaster risks, preparedness and building resilience and let the information accessible to the public.



**Professor Chiranjivi Khanal**

*Head, Central Department of Journalism, Tribhuvan University (TU)*



**What is your take on the contemporary practice of disaster journalism in Nepal as the professor of media studies?**

It has been a general phenomenon of Nepali media until now that disasters are reported based on incidents only. In the last couple of months, we have read or heard about the flood and landslide-based catastrophes in parts of the country. Our media hardly cover the issues of disaster prevention and mitigation. The newspapers, the community radios, televisions should have started questioning the responsible authorities about the government’s preparedness even before the monsoon, which could have alerted the officials to take important measures on time. The pre-disaster reporting and analysis are missing from the mainstream media, which shows the lack of planning in the newsroom to inform the large numbers of citizens about the impacts of disasters.

**How do you assess the role of the Central Department of Journalism in preparing the journalists for effective disaster reporting?**

The Tribhuvan University’s Central Department of Journalism has been raising this important issue ever since the 2015 earthquakes. We are clear that disaster journalism must be incorporated into the curriculum of journalism and mass communication. The university is currently working on revising the curriculum of the Humanities and Social Sciences stream to introduce a four-year bachelor’s degree programme. We want to take it as an opportunity to include environmental reporting, reporting on climate change and the disasters in our bachelor’s programme.

The Central Department will form a committee of subject experts where we also plan to invite the professors of environment science to simplify the technicality of climate change and disaster-related terms and definitions for media students. The media has been focusing on beat reporting, but now we are highlighting on the specialised reporting and investigative reporting. The new course of study will have a chapter on the types of disasters Nepal is facing, and how media can help communities and duty bearers prepare on time. Major theoretical perspective on ecology, ecosystem, human society and climate change will go along with practical fieldwork for the students, so

that they report with some experience when they work for media.

**What has been the role of the government and development organisations to strengthen disaster journalism in Nepal given the disaster vulnerability of the country?**

There has been some realisation among the stakeholders that we can prepare our communities against the impact of disaster in the best way if we prepare the media sector to work effectively in all stages of disasters. After the earthquake, this issue has been highlighted at different national and international forums.

But sadly, we do not see a visible intervention in the media sector, or the academic sector as most of the attention has been drawn towards reconstruction, though that has also been sluggish till now.

The media and the academic sectors are in urgent need of resources and expertise to train the journalists and ensure their safety because the country is facing one after another disaster every year.

**As a head of TU's Central Department of Journalism, how do you assure that your students, who are future journalists, get adequate knowledge on disaster reporting by the time they graduate?**

This year in April, I participated in the three-day international event jointly organised by UNESCO, Asia Broadcasting Union and the government on climate action and disaster preparedness, which was useful in many aspects. We had an exchange of ideas with media professors and experts from several countries. I also had an opportunity to present our current challenges in offering the media studies in lack of resources and expertise.

As mentioned above about the new journalism curricula for four-year bachelor level, the interaction with the international community also gave me more ideas in moving forward. Currently, there are 290 students at master's degree and 35 in MPhil. There are 15 students at the PhD level on media. More students are at bachelor's level—total 84 colleges affiliated with TU are running the journalism courses. Therefore, I am also initiating to revise the existing journalism curricula at different levels.



**Govinda Acharya**

*Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ)*

**Nepali journalists are directly or indirectly impacted by the disasters the country is facing every year. What has been the role of FNJ for the safety of journalists and strengthening disaster journalism?**

The FNJ has kept a record of the journalists and their families affected by disasters since 2015. We provide immediate support for livelihood and medical treatment, identifying the damage caused. The FNJ has its chapters in most of the big media houses, and we also ask the concerned media houses to provide financial support to their staff reporters impacted in any type of disaster.

However, we realise this is not sufficient. Our small support can contribute the victim a bit to uplift themselves from the situation. But we need good planning. Even now, the media do not have their contingency plan. We have been raising this issue with the publishers and broadcasters so that they can immediately respond to the calamities in a systematic way.

Safety of journalists and their equipments during disasters are our major concerns, as our journalists have always worked as first responders in big disasters.

**How are the journalists involved in the government's Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) process? Is there any example of good practice in last four years?**

The DRR policy has seen media as an important stakeholder. At the national level, the central chairperson of the FNJ is a member of the DRR committee and same is the case at district levels.

What concerns us is these committees are active mostly during monsoon only when several incidents of floods and landslide occur in many places at once. The DRR mechanisms should be active throughout the year.

In the last couple of years, we have seen an improvement in the early warning systems to inform the communities residing nearby river embankments. The hydrological and metrological offices are also active on social media and provide updates time to

time. The Telecommunication Authority have been coordinating well, sending mass sms to the people to stay alert and the messages are also being broadcasted through local radio. But it is still too early to claim whether that has prevented the casualties significantly. This year alone, 133 people have lost their lives in floods and landslide by August-end.

Therefore, we have been demanding the government to make the DRR mechanisms more effective and ensure journalists' participation in all stages of disaster prevention and mitigation at all levels of the government.

### **What are under FNJ's plan for building media resilience?**

We have drafted the security policy for journalists particularly for conflict, non-conflict and disaster situations. This year, we have received a project from UNESCO's International Programme for Development of Communication (IPDC) to prepare guidelines for the safety of journalists.

We will do a study in selected media from across the country to find out the security threats for journalists. The study will cover the disaster-related safety threats as well. Upon receiving the responses and recommendations, safety guidelines will be effective.



# Recommendations and resources

The purpose of this book is to support efforts to strengthen the disaster communication landscape in Nepal. As such, it has sought to present actionable knowledge and practical solutions to journalists, media educators, and media organisations—based on research-based evidence. In this final chapter, we outline further recommendations to improve disaster resilience that are of specific relevance to Nepal, and indeed other countries that experience natural disasters. Besides ensuring the physical safety of journalists, it is important that media organisations put in place effective post-disaster news strategies well in advance. To help with this, this chapter provides both a series of recommendations that need to be acted on at the local and national levels, as well as key resources that disaster journalists can draw on.

News media play an integral role in disaster management and public awareness campaigns relating to risk mitigation. Resilience is therefore not solely about being prepared—physically and editorially—for when disaster strikes, but also contributing to the advancement of knowledge about risk mitigation and disaster response to foster behavioural change. Journalists should be producing, publishing and broadcasting awareness programmes on climate change, floods, landslides, fires, storms, earthquakes and other disasters. This is to promote an understanding of why and how such events happen, as well as how to respond to such events when they do occur to minimise the loss of life and property.

## Building resilience for journalists

- 1. Personal safety and professional operational contingency plan.** All journalists should consider both personal safety needs and professional contingency, includes having ready access to earthquake survival kits, backup batteries for phones/laptops, and electricity generators for sustained downtime.
- 2. Prepare and maintain relevant contacts for a range of disaster scenarios.** Journalists should prepare a contact list of disaster management experts before a disaster strikes. This list could include experts on urban risk, early warning systems, climate change, environment, health, development, and gender inclusiveness, as well as reference material on disaster-prone areas.

3. **Maintaining contacts with relevant authorities.** Contacts in the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, Department of Water-Induced Disaster Prevention, the Disaster Management Division (under the Ministry of Home Affairs), Disaster Management Authority, security agencies and humanitarian organisations working in rescue, relief and recovery are important sources of information. Regularly updating facts about disasters and maintaining contact with such officials is important.
4. **Identifying disaster-prone areas and maintaining stocks of the needed tools and materials for emergency scenarios.** Journalists and newsrooms should maintain a state of constant preparedness that includes regularly reviewing their disaster response routines and management plans.
5. **Regular training in coping with disasters for journalists.** Operational drills and role-plays should be repeated on an annual basis at least. This will prevent the perception of risk-mitigation equipment and procedures as unlikely and hypothetical scenarios.
6. **Regular discussion within media houses about the government's steps on disaster risk reduction, planning and strategy.** Journalists have the responsibility to assess if necessary steps are being taken and informing the public about such steps.
7. **Develop guidelines for embedded journalists who travel with army or aid agencies to affected areas.**
8. **Establish redundancy locations and routines for newsrooms.** Several innovative approaches to keep newsrooms working emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake. These can be developed into contingency solutions—such as, solutions for makeshift newsrooms or pooling of resources.
9. **Risk-mitigation partnerships.** News organisations can agree to draw on each other's resources in the event of one (or more) falling victim to disasters.

## **Building capacity for news investigations**

1. **Develop editorial strategies for dealing with disaster situations.** These should include:
  - ▶ Different risk scenarios (ranging from small impact to those that destroy the newsroom or production facilities), and operational solutions for dealing with each.
  - ▶ Pre-agreed areas that should be considered in disaster situations (contextual issues, questions that should be raised, etc). This is important given the chaotic scenarios

in the immediate aftermath of any disaster.

2. **Capacity building workshops for journalists focussing on how to report key questions after a disaster** (and not just on how to cope with physical challenges and safety). This should not be considered as a one-off, but rather an ongoing professional development need that should be continuously updated. This might include:
  - ▶ Understanding the role of media in disaster management.
  - ▶ Engaging with seismological data, understanding disaster cycles, knowing what questions to ask and of whom, and engaging with broader context beyond their regular beat.
  - ▶ Dealing with sensitive issues and how to interview survivors / vulnerable peoples, as well as understanding the motivations and needs of aid agencies and emergency services, and development of ethical guidelines for such scenarios. This should include engaging with those NGOs and survivor support groups to understand their experiences of being subjects of disaster reporting.
  - ▶ Promoting the knowledge and skills of the communities in disaster risk reduction.
  - ▶ Learning how to interrogate disaster prevention measures, and how lessons can be learnt from impact and recovery phases—and indeed the extent to which lessons from previous (domestic or foreign) disasters have been learnt.
  - ▶ Exploring how journalism about survivors can be sustained in productive ways in the long-term (beyond news coverages on anniversary occasions).
  
3. **Training for specialist journalism skills to investigate post-earthquake issues.** This might involve:
  - ▶ Investigative reporting.
  - ▶ Techniques to investigate large datasets—for example, about aid distribution, or financial data, or crime statistics.
  - ▶ New ways of engaging audiences with such stories (either visualisation, interaction, or new narrative constructions).
  
4. **Establish routines for fact-checking and verifying disaster-related information,** and engaging with other information-clearing organisations (both domestically and internationally). This should engage with official sources, but journalists should also develop independent strategies for coping in the event of information deficiency or operational inefficiency by national institutions or government. Shared information resources should not be restricted to quantitative information, and journalists should consider sharing or pooling of information to lessen impact on survivors.



## Building resilience for the future

1. **Newsrooms and journalists should be integral to national disaster risk reduction plans.** There is a need to establish agreed lines of communication and areas of responsibility in terms of information dissemination between media organisations and government agencies, emergency services, NGOs etc. Media organisations (either directly or through umbrella associations) should establish partnerships with emergency management authorities, and—given their central role in information dissemination—be involved in disaster management process.
2. **Establishment of collaborative media network to share experiences and best practices for disaster resilience and response.** Journalism federations or associations have a role to play here, though it is important that there is also direct interaction between newsrooms and journalists. This network should include disaster management professionals and specialist organisations, such as the National Seismological Centre in Nepal. International collaborations should also be sought here, for example through UNESCO and similar inter-governmental organisations.
3. **Establish peer-support networks for journalists experiencing personal trauma.** These networks could be in partnership with national and international organisations to draw on existing best practices.
4. **Engage in regular promotion and reporting of national disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.** This would act as a preventative measure, supporting resilience.
5. **Establish a system for delivering continued post-disaster journalism capacity building for Nepali journalists,** working with international networks and organisations such as UNESCO, to disseminate guidelines and training in a widespread and persistent manner.
6. **Develop educational interventions** (e.g. sample curricula, learning materials and strategies). These can be used to ensure journalism education at all levels in Nepal includes considerations of disaster impact and recovery, and ensures future journalists are equipped to deal with both physical and reporting challenges of disaster scenarios.



A damaged house in Bhaktapur four years after the earthquake.

Photo: Nirjana Sharma

## **Key resources**

### **National journalism organisations and networks**

**National Seismological Center Nepal**

<http://www.seismonepal.gov.np>

**Press Council Nepal**

<http://www.presscouncilnepal.org/en/>

**Federation of Nepali Journalists**

<http://www.fnjnepal.org/en>

**Nepal Journalists Association**

<http://nja.org.np>

**Nepal Press Institute**

<http://www.nepalpressinstitute.org.np/>

**National Union of Journalists, Nepal**

[nujnepal@gmail.com](mailto:nujnepal@gmail.com)

**Nepal Press Union**

<http://www.nepalpressunion.org.np/ne/>

**Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal**

<https://cijnepal.org.np>

**Photojournalist Club, Nepal**

<https://pjclub.com.np/>

**Sancharika Samuha - Forum of Women Journalists and Communicators**

<http://www.sancharika.org>

**Working Women Journalist (WWJ)**

<http://wwj.org.np>

## International organisations and networks

### **The International Federation of Journalists**

<http://www.ifj.org/>

### **South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN)**

<https://samsn.ifj.org>

### **Federation of Nepali Journalists, UK**

<http://fnjuk.org>

### **Reporters Without Borders**

<https://rsf.org/en>

### **Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma**

<https://dartcenter.org/>

### **UNESCO Office in Kathmandu**

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kathmandu/>

## Guidelines and practical resources for journalists

**Covering Conflict in Disaster-Affected Communities:** A Manual for Journalists (CDAC)  
<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/contentAsset/raw-data/f504295f-6287-4867-bbb8-fd060a4c8232/attachedFile>

**Covering Recovery:** The Challenges of Preparing for Major Disasters (Dart Center)  
<https://dartcenter.org/resources/covering-recovery-challenges-preparing-major-disasters>

**Climate change & disaster reporting tools (Public Media Alliance)**  
<https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/tools/climate-change-tools/>

**Disaster and Crisis Coverage:**  
a manual for journalists (International Center for Journalists)  
<https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Manuals/Disaster-and-Crisis-Coverage-a-manual-for-journalists>

**Nepal Disaster Management Reference Handbook (Relief Web)**  
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/disaster-mgmt-ref-hdbk-2012-nepal.pdf>

**Disaster and Emergency Preparedness:** A Practical Resource Guide (Start Network)  
<https://start-network.app.box.com/s/cydwvi0avcninmxjfa0d31oa18dha8>

**Reporting on disasters:** Andrew Harding (BBC)  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/reporting/article/art20>

**Reporting on disasters:** (Earth Journalism Network, 2016)  
<https://earthjournalism.net/resources/reporting-on-disasters>

**RTDNA Guidelines:** Hurricanes and other Natural Disasters (RTDNA)  
[https://rtdna.org/content/guidelines\\_for\\_hurricanes\\_and\\_other\\_natural\\_disasters](https://rtdna.org/content/guidelines_for_hurricanes_and_other_natural_disasters)

**Trauma & Journalism:**  
A Guide for Journalists, Editors & Managers (DART Centre)  
[https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE\\_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf)

**Getting the Message Across:**  
Reporting on Climate Change and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific: A Handbook for Journalists <https://en.unesco.org/getting-the-message-across>

**Disaster reporting:** (Nepali report by Jagaran Media Center (Nepal))  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244830.locale=en>





Journalists of the  
Nepal Republic  
Media working  
from a makeshift  
newsroom in  
Kathmandu in 2015.

Photo: Kamal Pariyar



# About the authors

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**Dr Einar Thorsen** is Associate Professor of Journalism and Communication, and Deputy Dean of Research and Professional Practice for the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. His research concerns online journalism, citizens’ voices, and news reporting of crisis and political change—linked with protecting freedom of speech, human rights, and civil liberties—especially for journalists, vulnerable people, marginalised groups, and in contexts or countries where such liberties are being curtailed. He tweets *@einarthorsen* and can be emailed at *ethorsen@bournemouth.ac.uk*

**Nirjana Sharma** is the head of Communication and Information Unit at UNESCO Office in Kathmandu since 2016. She brings to UNESCO her first-hand experience of journalism during many difficult times faced by Nepali media followed by the instability during political crisis, as well as the natural disasters, to design concrete programmes for responding to the need of media development in Nepal. She was a reporter for The Kathmandu Post from 2010 to 2012 and a correspondent at Republica from 2012 to the beginning of 2016. Both the English daily newspapers are published from Kathmandu. She tweets *@NirjanaSharma* and can be emailed at *ni.sharma@unesco.org*