

# Examining Ethical Journalism and Media Self-Regulation in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

Ethical journalism and effective mechanisms of media self-regulation are considered fundamental to sustaining public trust and media credibility. In Nepal, despite the practice of the Journalists' Code of Conduct enforced by the Press Council Nepal (PCN), key concerns remain regarding violations of such codes alongside declining media professionalism, and weak complaints handling mechanisms both at the PCN and within newsrooms. This article presents a systematic literature review observing the challenges to ethical journalism in Nepal, with a particular focus on self-regulation among journalists and the efficacy of the Journalists' Code of Conduct. Based on the Social Responsibility Theory of the press, this review covers global and Nepal-focused scholarly literature to identify professional and regulatory elements that undermine ethical journalistic practice. Following a systematic review protocol, peer-reviewed articles, doctoral dissertations and institutional reports were analyzed using inductive thematic synthesis. The review finds that while self-regulation is widely endorsed as a normative ideal, its efficacy in Nepal is constrained by weak enforcement capacity, political interference, absence of newsroom-level accountability systems and low public awareness of complaint-handling at the PCN and within media platforms. A significant gap between normative ethical standards and everyday journalistic practice is evident. The review concludes by proposing context-sensitive approaches to strengthen media self-regulation in Nepal, improve media accountability, and restore journalistic practice following the principles of social responsibility and professional standards. This review is the first scholarly output of the doctoral study which forms a conceptual foundation for succeeding pragmatic study.

## KEYWORDS

Efficacy of Journalists' Code of Conduct, Ethical Standards in Journalism, Media Self-Regulation, Newsroom Accountability, Press Council Nepal, Press Freedom, Social Responsibility Theory

## INTRODUCTION

Journalism has three key roles in democratic society i.e. to inform citizens, facilitate public dialogue and contribute to social unity through coverage of diverse and plural voice in their content. These functions are sustainable only when journalists adhere to ethical standards, professional codes, and remain accountable to the public. Ethical journalism is therefore not merely a professional ideal but a societal necessity. In media, ethical standards are normally articulated through professional codes of conduct and defended through systems of media self-regulation that seek to balance media freedom with social responsibility (Bertrand, 2000; McQuail, 2010).

In Nepal, the media has undergone rapid expansion after the restoration of democracy in 1990. Liberalization of the press, constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and right to communication, and technological growths have contributed to increased diversity in media

further promoting access to information. At the same time, this growth has intensified ethical challenges. Several studies and observations constantly highlight the concerns i.e. Sensationalism, political inclination of journalists and media, business pressures, increasing accusations of misinformation, inadequate fact-checking practice, and imbalanced professional standards (Rijal, 2014; Pant, 2020; Regmee, 2021). These gaps present pertinent questions about public trust in media and the efficacy of existing media regulatory mechanisms including self-regulation practices across different media outlets in Nepal.

Press Council Nepal, a regulatory body responsible for promotion of ethical journalism, has enforced the Journalists' Code of Conduct (CoC) which it expects to be followed by journalists working across various media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers and online news portals. Although PCN was established to safeguard ethical standards in media, resolve public grievances against media content and promote media accountability, its role is questionable. Limited public trust in the current grievance handling system and untrustworthy implementation of the CoC are two key challenges for the PCN which require an immediate review.

This systematic literature review (SLR) resulting from the doctoral study viz. 'Examining media self-regulation and the efficacy of the Journalists' Code of Conduct in Nepal', draws on the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) of the press. The review combines global and Nepal-focused literature to view how effectively media codes of conduct and self-regulatory systems work and facilitate the free flow of information, find existing gaps in the intersections of CoC, self-regulation and press freedom, and identify areas for future analysis.

### ***Objectives***

The general objective is to critically examine existing scholarly literature on self-regulation among journalists in Nepal, with particular focus to the effectiveness of the existing regulatory system i.e. the PCN in addressing violations of code of conduct and complaints handling, and to interpret the findings through the lens of the Social Responsibility Theory of the press.

The specific objectives of this review are:

1. To examine key trends and findings in the literature on the effectiveness of media regulatory systems including the effectiveness of the PCN in addressing violations of the Journalists' Code of Conduct in Nepal.
2. To identify strategies highlighted in the literature for strengthening ethical journalism and media self-regulation in Nepal.
3. To assess the alignment among the Social Responsibility Theory of the press, the Journalists' Code of Conduct enforced by the PCN and media self-regulation practices among journalists in Nepal, with a view to understanding their implications in the public trust towards media.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Review Design***

This study follows a systematic literature review (SLR) approach as the first scholarly output of the doctoral research titled Examining Media Self-Regulation and the Efficacy of the Journalists'

Code of Conduct in Nepal. The SLR follows a systematic and transparent approach, consistent with established guidance for evidence based qualitative synthesis (Johnston, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The main objective of the review is to combine scattered scholarly knowledge, find dominant issues and gaps, and establish a strong conceptual foundation for subsequent empirical research phases.

### ***Data Sources and Search Strategy***

The literature search was conducted across major academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, institutional records, and publications produced by well-known organizations working on media development and press freedom issues. Search strategy included use of the key words and terminologies i.e. ethical standards in journalism, professional standards, ethical journalism, self-regulation, Press Council Nepal, journalists' code of conduct, press freedom, media viability, media accountability, public trust in media and Nepal.

This review is based on a comprehensive search of academic sources. A total of 227 publications were identified through keyword-based searches. Following the screening of the sources based on scope and alignment with the research objectives the doctoral study, 38 studies were selected for analysis, forming the core evidence base for this review.

Both English and Nepali language sources were included, acknowledging English as the dominant language of academic discourse while also incorporating Nepali literature relevant to the study.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

Studies examining efficacy of the journalists' code of conduct, media professionalism, self-regulation; addressing press councils, media accountability systems and prioritizing Nepal or offering global insights relevant to the Nepal, were included in the review. This review does not include editorial content, opinion articles, news commentary, and studies focused entirely on technical media production with no link to ethical and regulatory aspects.

### ***Data Analysis and Synthesis***

Each selected study in this review was taken as a qualitative unit of analysis. An inductive thematic approach was applied to identify patterns related to ethical journalism and media self-regulation (Thomas, 2006). Topics were repeatedly refined and grouped under broader analytical domains that are aligned with the research objectives. Priority was given on conceptual coherence and contextual interpretation rather than statistical accumulation.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study reviews both existing Nepali and English language literature and does not include primary pragmatic data. Considering that this kind of study is appropriate for a systematic literature review (SLR), the authors acknowledge the need for future empirical research so as to deepen the findings. Additionally, despite efforts to locate and review Nepali language literature on the issues under study, the authors affirm that a marginal number of such studies were found and included. Also, differences in regulatory frameworks that guide the enforcement of ethical standards for journalists, of the national media operating systems limit the direct applicability of

global observations in the context of Nepal. These limitations call for the need of empirical studies in future.

## **RESULTS AND EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS**

### ***Global Perspectives on Media Ethics and Self-Regulation***

The global literature included in the study found to have always framed self-regulation of media as a normative tool for connecting press freedom with media's accountability role. Studies reveal there exists a significant variation in organizational effectiveness to uphold ethical journalism and promote press freedom. However, concerns remain about the implementation capacity, media outlets in Australia have developed a fairly acknowledged voluntary self-regulatory system in response to the discomfort media has faced that of the direct government control, (Andrew, 2019). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Leveson inquiry marked a critical moment, formulating a new independent self-regulator aimed at promoting public trust following a few main ethical scandals (Fielden, 2012).

Studies from India and Nigeria show that while media ethics and the formal regulatory body such as press councils exist, their impact is often undermined by interest groups mainly political and business entities that are considered to have negatively affected media to adhere the professional obligations under such tools (Pepple & Acholonu, 2018; Tilak, 2020). Repeated ethical challenges for media include misinformation, conflict of interest, and self-censorship. These worrying environments show that both the enforcement of the journalists' code of conduct and adherence to principles of self-regulation are not largely effective.

### ***Media Ethics, Freedom, and Contextual Constraints***

The literature crossing media ethics and press freedom reveal that ethical journalism cannot be separated from contextual realities. Studies focus on the existing clashes between calls for the independent media and media accountability, mainly in commercially motivated media operating environments (Chaudhary & Chaudhary, 2020). While free press is a prerequisite for ethical journalism, freedom without accountability risks ethical loss of public trust in the media and journalism.

Studies further disclose that journalists' ethical choices are shaped by newsroom environment, media ownership modality, legislative framework, and the societal understanding to value journalism and editorial independence. These dynamics are crucial to rationalize why formal codes of journalistic ethics repeatedly fail to motivate journalists to adhere the former. Calling for the context-sensitive frameworks to address shortcomings, these studies caution against solely normative approaches to media ethics.

### ***Self-Regulation and Accountability Mechanism***

Scholars have suggested a few effective ways to promoting media self-regulation. Media self-regulation can be strengthened through two particular instruments i.e. formal regulatory body with a facilitating mandate and internal systems within newsrooms (Singh & Sharma, 2018; Bertrand, 2000). However, the efficacy of these instruments depends on level of editorial independence in the newsrooms, resources and capacities of the regulatory bodies and critical media content consumption patterns. Substantiating the claim, observations from Kenya and Zambia reveal that disintegrated media platforms and weak implementation of the journalists'

code of conduct are major reasons behind decreasing credibility of such bodies (Obuya, 2012; Youngson et al., 2021).

A study shows that the unchecked growth of digital media landscape warns media accountability. Tendency to run viral content, user-generated content, and algorithmic amplification confront traditional ethical standards of journalism including the grievance handling frameworks (Flew et al., 2021). The study calls for country contextual self-regulatory models with an expectation to integrate modern day digital realities while maintaining core journalistic ethical standards.

### ***Ethical Journalism and Self-Regulation in Nepal***

Studies from Nepal frequently identify a gap between journalistic ethical standards and existing practice among the media. While the Journalists' Code of Conduct enforced by the Press Council (PCN) Nepal is taken as a comprehensive obligatory bearing for media to promote public trust, its enforcement remains limited due to capacities of both the PCN and media institutions (Rijal, 2014; Regmee, 2021). These observations highlight, on the one hand, the growing public trust crisis in the role of the Press Council Nepal as a facilitating body, and on the other, an immediate need for a broader newsroom sensitization on ethical standards.

A study shows that although formal regulatory framework is in place, Nepali media has been long facing credibility crisis. While media outlets in democratic system are fundamentally expected to prepare and disseminate trustworthy information, this does not apply true in the context of Nepal as majority of media have kept themselves under commercial and political pressures (Pokhrel, n.d.).

Studies also disclose that the public trust in the media content has declined due to a widespread lack of awareness of ethical journalism in newsrooms. Political inclination of media, the issue of transparency in media investment, limited practice of media accountability among journalists, and ineffective complaint handling systems are key reasons behind declining public trust in media (Pant, 2010; Acharya, 2015).

Although national policies stress on promoting media accountability, yet appraisals reveal that they insufficiently intersect press freedom with the media accountability (Dahal & Sigdel, 2016). These observations demand for an effective ethical framework to facilitate both press freedom and self-regulation.

Scholarships on practices of ethical journalism in online media suggest for a more systematic verification and fact checking systems in place. A study recommended adopting a clear privacy policy, establishing rectifying systems, and updating ethical guidelines for online media platforms (Acharya, 2010). Another observation shows that the growing online news portals in Nepal continue to face challenges to handle public complaints against the content they produce and disseminate (Acharya, 2019).

Highlighting the need for credible reporting in Nepali media, a study emphasizes that the quality of journalism can only be strengthened with honest adherence to ethical standards (Khanal, 2022). The news consumption patterns in Nepal are gradually changing with access of social media becoming a dominant source of information with these platforms beating traditional media. A study reveals that the content credibility of the legacy media in Nepal is largely declining due to limited adaptation to digital content consumption patterns (K. C., 2025). Validating this claim, an observation reveals that while Nepal's shift towards digital content has

aided public access to information, the traditional journalistic ethical frameworks struggle to address present day digital reporting challenges (Paudel, 2025).

These studies have called to strengthen newsroom cultures towards journalistic ethics to reclaim public trust and to develop effective self-regulation system to prevent direct state control through regulatory bodies.

## **DISCUSSION**

The complexity of interactions across regulatory and professional factors is seen as a challenge to effective enforcement of the journalists' code of conduct in Nepal. In addition, this has limited the facilitating role of the Press Council Nepal. Under the assumptions of the social responsibility theory of the press, the issue of self-regulation is often taken as the main regulatory or self-regulatory system through which the media is expected to protect its editorial independence, maintain accountability and promote public interest (Siebert et al., 1984). However, both Nepali and global observations disclose a major gap between these ethical norms and organizational realities.

The systems of media self-regulation, working modality of the press or media councils and newsroom practices struggle to find a common ground of consensus at the global level. Scholarships recommend that media self-regulation should usually be preferred over direct government control of the media. Adherence to journalistic ethical standards is seen as a key issue of discussion in different contexts. In India, journalists' code of ethics issued by the Indian Press Council functions broadly as guiding principles rather than punishable acts (Tilak, 2020). This reminds that practice of ethical journalism depends not only on institutional systems but also on the moral conduct of the media. This insight tunes appropriate in the Nepali context, where formal journalists' code of conduct exists with ethical compliance remaining largely neglected.

Studies on global practices of the ethical journalism present several intersecting issues both in theory and practice. An observation concludes that the accountable media must promote both individual and social goods, and enable citizens to understand complex challenges beyond national boundaries (Babran and Ataherian, 2019). Traditional journalistic ethical frameworks are insufficient in an era of digital globalization (Ward, 2023). These observations recommend that ethical challenges in Nepali media cannot be viewed alone rather should look within wider transformations in journalism driven by new technology.

A study of Nigeria shows that despite the availability of training institutions and ethical guidelines for media, journalists' knowledge of media ethics and levels of professionalism remain very low (Pepple & Acholonu, 2018). Comparative observations of journalistic ethics across countries i.e. the USA, UK, Australia, China, and Tunisia, identify accuracy, balance, credibility, and the public interest as shared principles, yet also point to considerable variation in their implementation (Zi & Ghanbari, n.d.). Studies on press freedom illustrate how journalists operate within legal and ethical pressures, balancing public interest against national security, particularly in digital media environments (Boot, 2019). In India, business and political pressures were found to be the major factors behind decline of ethical and independent journalism (Chaudhary & Chaudhary, 2020). These observations confirm that there exists an uneasy relationship between press freedom and media ethics.



Global scholarships view the media's internal accountability mechanism as an important approach for upholding credibility and public trust (Singh & Sharma, 2018). Substantiating this insight, a Zambian observation reveals that external interference to media can severely undermine the effectiveness of media self-regulation (Youngson et al., 2021). This calls for support to broader institutional freedom so as to promote self-regulation and safeguard media freedom.

Scholars find that the media landscape in Albania has called for a strong public demand towards independent and accountable newsroom practices. The practice of politically inclined journalism remains a major barrier between normative expectations and journalistic practice. This requires an honest adherence to journalistic ethical standards to enhance media credibility (Skana & Gjerazi, 2024).

When applied carefully, insights from the global studies included in this review, could help explain the existing gaps around ethical norms and their practices in Nepali context. Studies including PCN's introspection indicate that while the Journalists' Code of Conduct, articulate comprehensive ethical concerns and grievance handling systems, weak enforcement of the CoC and limited newsroom-level accountability has significantly reduced their effectiveness (Rijal, 2014; Press Council Nepal, 2019).

Recent studies have shown more persistent gaps calling for a holistic approach to addressing them. One has to minutely look into intersections of ethical standards mainly self-regulation and press freedom, and for that an all-inclusive stakeholder collaboration is needed to acknowledge that ethical practices promote media credibility and help newsrooms to enjoy editorial freedom (Media Action Nepal, 2023). Addressing diversity is key to promote gender-sensitive ethical content especially across the digital platforms; henceforth media outlets should prioritize issues affecting women to ensure the meaningful participation of Nepal's diverse voices in the media through an ethical introspection (Pant, 2022).

One key aspect of this review is to look into scholarships from the perspective of the social responsibility theory of the press i.e. to see whether press freedom is balanced with societal obligations through ethical journalism viz. self-regulation practices. There is an immediate need for wider awareness and realization towards rights and responsibilities of the media. Equally important is to create supportive newsroom culture, build strong self-regulatory systems, and uphold critical media consumption behaviors, all targeted to bolster media accountability mechanisms. The legitimacy of press freedom therefore is inseparable from media accountability, in Nepal's evolving and transitional democratic context. Without media accountability systems in place, press freedom risks losing public legitimacy challenging the watchdog role of the media.

## **CONCLUSION**

The review concludes that while the social responsibility theory (SRT) of the press and the journalists' code of conduct of the Press Council Nepal provide a solid normative and regulatory foundation, their contextual implementation is limited. The institutional capacities of both the PCN and newsrooms; political and commercial interference to the media; and the weak professional practice among journalists are seen as key constraints to this aspect.

On a critical note, while the SRT provides a normative framework for ethical media practice, its western-centric assumptions may not fully align with Nepal's post-conflict and transitional contexts. A study calling for the value of journalistic embeddedness can serve as an alternative i.e. the empathetic and contextually informed reporting (Voss and Hanusch, 2024). This alternative offers a locally grounded approach to ethical journalism and complements the principles of social responsibility theory of the press.

By consolidating global and Nepal-focused literature, the review establishes a conceptual baseline for understanding the limitations for effective implementation and adherence to journalists' code of conduct and the conditions necessary for their effectiveness. Developing internal media systems, strengthening self-regulation among journalists and enhancing public accountability appear to be critical priorities for restoring public trust in Nepali media.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Within the normative expectations of the Social Responsibility Theory of the press, the future studies should empirically examine the relevance of the existing journalists' code of conduct; the effectiveness of complaint handling systems at the Press Council Nepal; and gaps in self-regulatory practices within newsrooms and among journalists. Observing the journalists' code of conduct with two additional aspects: a.) whether it facilitates media to enjoy press freedom, and b.) whether it addresses the growing public concerns over online media content, would greatly contribute to Nepali scholarship intersecting ethical and accountable media. This is needed to assess whether Nepal's existing media accountability systems enable the media to fulfill the major functions of a socially responsible press as articulated by the Hutchins Commission (1947) and later interpreted by Blanchard (1977). Notably, future studies should explore whether complaint-handling systems contribute to more credible reporting, facilitate the media's role as a forum for public criticism and encourage fair coverage of Nepal's diversity.

Furthermore, efforts should be focused on observing the level of public awareness and engagement on the intersections of the independent and accountable media mainly about the media freedom indicators, ethical standards and the PCN's complaint-handling procedures to see whether public contribute critically and constructively to upholding press freedom and strengthening media accountability. When audiences understand how to seek, redress and engage critically and constructively with media, the press is better positioned to function as a credible, free and trusted forum for public discourse. Addressing these concerns is crucial for Nepal and this can be done by a careful alignment of Nepal's journalistic practice with the norms of social responsibility. Adherence to ethical standards and reinforcement of the institutional accountability can help Nepali media to fulfill its watchdog role.

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