

From Gatekeepers to Algorithms: Political Communication in Nepal’s Digital Media Era

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Abstract	Article Info
This paper examines how political communication in Nepal is being reshaped as digital news platforms shift the work of information filtering from human editors to algorithms. For decades, Nepali political communication passed through a small number of gatekeepers, mainly newspaper editors, radio producers, and television news desks, who decided which political events, statements, and voices reached the public. The rapid growth of internet and social media use, together with the political upheaval of 2025 and 2026, has weakened this traditional gatekeeping model and replaced it with a hybrid system in which algorithms, platform policies, individual citizens, and the state all compete for control over what political information circulates. Using a qualitative, document-based research design, the study draws on gatekeeping theory and the emerging literature on algorithmic gatekeeping to analyse Nepal’s digital news ecosystem, paying close attention to the September 2025 Gen Z protests, the government’s social media registration directive, and the continuing struggle over press freedom that followed. The findings show that algorithmic curation on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok has increased the speed and reach of political information in Nepal but has also weakened editorial accountability, encouraged the spread of unverified content, and created new risks for journalists. The paper concludes that Nepal’s transition from gatekeepers to algorithms calls for updated media policy, stronger digital literacy programmes, and more transparent and locally accountable platform governance. <i>Keywords:</i> gatekeeping theory, algorithmic curation, political communication, digital journalism, Nepal	<i>Corresponding Author</i> Sunil Paudel <i>Email</i> sunilpauldel.np@gmail.com <i>Article History</i> Received: May 22, 2026 Accepted: July 10, 2026 Published: August 06, 2026 <i>Cite</i> Paudel, S., & Khan, N. C. (2026). From gatekeepers to algorithms: Political communication in Nepal’s digital media era. <i>Intellectual Journal of Academic Research (IJAR)</i>, 4(1), 101–116. https://doi.org/10.3126/ijar.v4i1.98348

Introduction

For most of Nepal’s modern media history, the flow of political information passed through a narrow set of hands. State-run outlets such as Radio Nepal and Nepal Television dominated the airwaves for

decades, and even after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 opened space for a private press, editors, sub-editors, and news producers in Kathmandu continued to decide which political statements were newsworthy, which leaders were

quoted, and which events were placed on the front page (Onta, 2006; Kharel, 2010). This arrangement matched the classical description of gatekeeping in communication research: a chain of decision points at which individuals select, shape, and discard information before it reaches an audience.

That arrangement no longer describes how most political news is disseminated. By the start of 2025, an estimated 16.6 million people in Nepal were using the internet, and 14.8 million social media user identities were active in the country, equivalent to roughly 48 percent of the population (DataReportal, 2026). Facebook alone reaches somewhere between 14 and 17 million user accounts, and YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X have all become significant channels through which Nepalis encounter political content (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). Crucially, what a person sees on these platforms is no longer chosen by an editor. It is selected, ranked, and delivered by recommendation algorithms designed to maximise attention and engagement. It is a process that communication scholars increasingly call algorithmic gatekeeping (Wallace, 2018; Napoli, 2019).

The stakes of this shift became impossible to ignore in September 2025. When the Nepal Government ordered the blocking of twenty-six major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, X, and Instagram, for failing to register locally, the move was framed by officials as a matter of regulatory compliance (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). Many young Nepalis experienced it instead as an attempt to silence political dissent. Within days, youth-led protests known as the Gen Z demonstrations had spread through Kathmandu and other cities. Protesters had breached the parliament building. Dozens of people had been killed. The prime minister had resigned, and an interim government had taken office (Teekah, 2025; Paudel, 2026b) Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2025). The episode was, seen as a real-time demonstration of how far political communication in Nepal has moved away from a world in which the state and a handful of editors controlled the flow of information.

This paper argues that Nepal's political communication now operates through what can be described as hybrid or contested gatekeeping. Editorial gatekeepers have not disappeared, but their influence has been diluted by platform algorithms. By ordinary citizens acting as amateur gatekeepers, and by a state that has tried, with limited success, to reassert control through direct such as platform bans and cybercrime prosecutions rather than through the licensing and censorship tools of an earlier era. Understanding this reconfiguration matters because political communication is not a neutral technical process. It shapes what citizens know about their government, how accountability is exercised, whether frustration is channelled into peaceful debate or into the streets Paudel, 2026c).

Existing research on Nepal's media landscape has documented the country's rapid shift toward digital and social media consumption in useful but largely descriptive terms. Reporting adoption statistics and user preferences is done often without connecting them to the theoretical literature on gatekeeping and algorithmic curation (Rupakheti, 2025). At the same time, the international literature on algorithmic gatekeeping has been developed almost entirely with reference to media systems in North America and Europe (Wallace, 2018; Napoli, 2019; Gillespie, 2018). The question of how well these frameworks travel to country like Nepal with a fragile media market, high political volatility, and a recent history of a state-ordered platform shutdown. The September 2025 crisis has not yet been examined through the specific lens of gatekeeping theory. It represents an unusually clear case of a government attempting to exercise gatekeeping power over an already decentralised digital ecosystem, and failing. This paper addresses that gap.

Research Objectives

This study examines how digital platforms and algorithmic curation have reconfigured the classical editor-centred gatekeeping role of Nepali

newsrooms. It assesses the implications of this shift for political communication, press freedom, misinformation, and democratic accountability in the context of Nepal's September 2025 Gen Z protests.

Literature Review

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory has its roots in the social psychology of Kurt Lewin, who described the movement of information through a society as a passage through a series of gates controlled by gatekeepers who decide what passes and what is blocked. The theory entered communication research through David Manning White's classic study of a wire-service editor, widely referred to as the "Mr Gates" study, which showed how a single individual's personal judgement shaped which news items an entire community received. For much of the twentieth century, gatekeeping research treated editors, producers, and news organisations as the primary gates through which political information had to pass before reaching the public. Shoemaker and Vos extended this model into a multi-level theory encompassing individual, routine, organisational, social-institutional, and social-system influences on news selection, providing the analytical vocabulary that later scholars would apply to the digital environment. It is reflected in Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and subsequently revised in later gatekeeping scholarship.

The Digital Transformation of Gatekeeping

The rise of social media platforms has forced a fundamental rethinking of gatekeeping theory. Wallace (2018) argues that classical gatekeeping theory struggles to describe a media environment in which algorithms and ordinary users act as information selectors alongside professional journalists. Wallace proposes a typology of four gatekeeper archetypes operating in the digital news environment: (i) professional journalists (ii) individual amateurs (iii) strategic professionals such as public relations and campaign staff, and (iv) algorithms. All of these interact within platforms that combine centrally controlled and collaborative mechanisms of content distribution. This typology

is a useful starting point for analysing any national media system that has moved online, including Nepal's.

Napoli (2019) develops a parallel argument, showing how a social media driven news ecosystem has shifted gatekeeping authority away from journalists and editors and toward the engineers and executives who design ranking and recommendation systems. As Napoli's notes, this shift represents a case of market failure with respect to the traditional public-interest function of journalism. It is because algorithmic systems are optimised for engagement and advertising revenue rather than for civic value. Gillespie's influential analysis of platform governance makes a related point: recommendation systems carry what looks like a promise of mechanical neutrality, but the choices engineers make about which variables to weigh and which data to include are inescapably political, even when they are presented as purely technical (Gillespie, 2018).

Other scholars have focused on how this reconfiguration plays out in practice. Bro and Wallberg (2015) describe gatekeeping in the digital era as a set of practices distributed across new technological platforms rather than concentrated in a single newsroom decision point. Nechushtai and Lewis (2019) examine what kind of gatekeepers audiences want algorithmic recommendation systems to be, finding that machine-driven curation raises new normative questions about fragmentation and fairness that classical gatekeeping theory was not designed to answer. Thorson and Wells (2016) propose the concept of "curated flows" to capture how strategic communicators, algorithms, and individual users jointly shape the media environment that a citizen ultimately encounters, while Ananny (2016) argues for an ethics of algorithms centred on convening publics, enabling observation, communicating probability, and acting with appropriate timeliness. Together, this literature supports the claim that gatekeeping has not disappeared in the digital era, but it has been redistributed among a wider and less accountable set of actors.

Political Polarisation Through Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

A closely related strand of research examines the consequences of algorithmic curation for political knowledge and polarisation. Pariser (2011) coined the term “filter bubble” to describe how personalised recommendation systems can narrow the range of political information a user encounters, reinforcing existing beliefs rather than exposing citizens to competing viewpoints. Cinelli et al. (2021) provide large-scale empirical evidence that engagement-driven ranking systems can produce measurable echo-chamber effects on social media. This is a finding with direct relevance for understanding political polarisation in newer digital media markets where platform adoption has occurred rapidly and with limited accompanying media literacy education like in Nepal (Rupakheti, 2025).

Nepal’s Media Landscape: From Print Censorship to Digital Pluralism

Nepal’s media system changed twice in a single generation, first from an authoritarian, censored press to a constitutionally protected free press after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. And then from a print- and broadcast-dominated market to an increasingly digital one after the government permitted online news portals to register in 2016 (Dahal et al., 2025). The number of registered online portals grew exponentially, reaching 4,302 by 2024, according to Press Council Nepal records cited in Dahal et al. (2025). This growth occurred alongside a structurally weak newspaper market. Dahal et al. (2025) find that Nepal’s press exhibits only a moderate level of media diversity at the conduct level, with persistent problems of ownership concentration, limited resources for content-monitoring instruments, and inconsistent implementation of internal pluralism guidelines. KC (2019) similarly characterises the Nepali press as fitting a “polarised pluralistic” model, in which media institutions remain closely tied to political actors and a comparatively small, elite readership, a classification that echoes Hallin

and Mancini’s (2004) comparative typology of media systems.

This underlying financial and structural weakness matters directly for gatekeeping theory, because a press that lacks resources for professional editorial oversight is poorly positioned to compete with well-resourced global platforms for the attention of Nepali audiences. Maharjan (2022) documents how Nepali newspapers have shifted from a hopeful embrace of digital transition in the early 2010s to a more uncertainty-driven approach as advertising revenue has migrated to digital platforms. But Subedi (2022) shows that online news outlets in Nepal continue to struggle to build sustainable financial models, leaving many dependent on the same platform algorithms that determine whether their content is seen at all.

Social Media and Political Communication

Direct empirical evidence on political news consumption in Nepal remains limited but is growing. Rupakheti (2025) finds that Facebook, YouTube, and X have become the dominant sources of political news for urban youth in Kathmandu, displacing television and newspapers. However, radio and television retain their importance in rural Nepal, where internet access remains uneven. The same study finds that algorithmic personalisation on these platforms fosters filter bubbles and exposes users to unverified content. This pattern erodes trust in both social and traditional media simultaneously. This dual pattern, rising platform reliance in cities and continued dependence on broadcast media in rural areas. It is consistent with national internet penetration data showing that, at the start of 2025, close to 44% of the population remained offline (DataReportal, 2025), and with reporting on the persistent urban-rural digital divide affecting fixed broadband access in particular (Joshi, 2024).

Press Freedom and Platform Governance

Nepal’s press freedom environment provides essential context for understanding how gatekeeping authority is currently contested. In

the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Nepal ranked 87th out of 180 countries. It is the highest ranking in South Asia. Yet, the index simultaneously downgraded the working conditions for Nepali journalists from “Problematic” to “Difficult,” citing pre-September government crackdowns, new restrictive laws, and the social media ban that helped trigger the Gen Z protests (Dixit, 2026; Dudraj, 2026). Domestic monitoring organisations paint a similarly troubling picture. The Federation of Nepali Journalists recorded 131 cases of press freedom violations between May 2025 and April 2026, including physical attacks, threats, and cases of professional insecurity, with 139 media professionals directly affected during the Gen Z protests alone (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026). Freedom Forum documented 97 incidents over the same period, up from 68 the previous year, while Media Action Nepal recorded 71 incidents affecting 78 journalists and 10 media organisations, noting a rising pattern of cyberbullying and coordinated harassment directed at women journalists in particular (Freedom Forum, 2026; Media Action Nepal, 2026).

These press freedom indicators are directly connected to platform governance. The September 2025 social media ban was preceded by a government directive in August 2025 requiring all social networks operating in Nepal to register with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology within one week. When the deadline passed with only a handful of minor platforms complying, the ministry ordered the blocking of twenty-six major platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram, and Reddit (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). Legislative proposals that had been pending before the unrest, including a Media Council Bill, a Social Media Operation and Regulation Bill, and amendments to the Information Technology Act, remain unresolved. That will shape whether future platform governance in Nepal moves toward transparent regulation or toward further blunt restriction (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026).

Gen Z Protest 2025: A Critical Case

The Gen Z protests of 8 to 13 September 2025 offer a uniquely well-documented case of gatekeeping conflict between a state and a decentralised digital public. The immediate trigger was the government’s blocking of the twenty-six platforms. But, the protests rapidly broadened into demands for government accountability, an end to corruption and nepotism, and the resignation of the ruling coalition. It was symbolised by the viral “Nepo Kids” campaign that circulated on the very platforms the government had tried to shut down (Teekah, 2025; Paudel, 2026b). Protesters used virtual private networks, the Discord messaging platform, and QR codes to coordinate outside the blocked mainstream applications. Observers described as a largely leaderless, digitally coordinated movement (Participedia, 2025). By 9 September, protesters had stormed the parliament building; Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned; the army occupied Tribhuvan International Airport; and Sushila Karki was appointed interim prime minister, with Balen Shah later assuming the premiership following elections in 2026 (Teekah, 2025). The episode illustrates, both the limits of state attempts to reassert editorial-era gatekeeping through platform bans and the vulnerability of a decentralised digital public sphere to real-world violence once mobilisation moves offline.

This study adapts Wallace’s (2018) typology of gatekeeper archetypes, professional journalists, individual amateurs, strategic professionals, and algorithms, as its core analytical framework. While extending it, accommodates a fifth actor that is unusually visible in Nepal’s recent experience: the state acting directly on platform infrastructure rather than on content producers. Where classical gatekeeping theory assumed that the state’s main lever was licensing, censorship, or pressure on editors, Nepal’s 2025 experience shows a government attempting to gatekeep at the level of the network itself, by blocking platforms outright.

Alongside Napoli's (2019) account of algorithmic gatekeeping and Gillespie's (2018) analysis of platform governance, this extended framework allows the study to trace how gatekeeping authority in Nepal is currently distributed across and contested among, newsroom editors, platform algorithms, citizen-activists, and state regulators.

It convincingly demonstrates that platform shutdowns, opaque recommendation systems, and engagement-driven virality did not merely transmit protest narratives. Rather they actively co-constituted them, amplify some voices while marginalising others and thereby reconfiguring the very architecture of political communication (Koirala, 2025). This resonates with recent Nepali scholarship that emphasises the need to contextualise universal theories, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs or models of consumer influence, within the country's distinct socio-cultural and economic realities, where collectivism, precarity, and digital illiteracy mediate how citizens interpret and act upon algorithmically curated content (Karn et al., 2025; Mishra & Mishra, 2024). Likewise, just as work on influencer marketing in Nepal and India shows that perceived authenticity and relational engagement outweigh informational content in shaping consumer behaviour (Mishra et al., 2026; Mishra, 2024), the present study suggests that trust in political messages now depends less on institutional journalistic authority and more on platform-native cues of credibility and affective resonance (Koirala, 2025). By foregrounding the cascading failures of platform governance, policing, and state credibility during the protests, the article extends emerging debates on digital rights, AI-driven disinformation, and public accountability in Nepal, positioning algorithmic gatekeeping not as a neutral technical process but as a deeply political mechanism with profound implications for democratic deliberation and press freedom (Celestin et al., 2025; Koirala, 2025).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, document-based research design, following an

approach broadly similar to the desk-research method used by Dahal et al. (2025) in their analysis of Nepali media performance. A document-based design was chosen for three reasons. First, the phenomenon under study, the reconfiguration of gatekeeping through digital platforms and algorithms, is best understood through a synthesis of existing empirical studies, institutional reports, and documented events rather than through a single new primary dataset, particularly given that the algorithms operated by global platform companies are proprietary and not open to direct researcher access. Second, the September 2025 Gen Z protests constitute a recent, ongoing, and still-unfolding event; a document-based design allows the study to incorporate the most current verifiable reporting and institutional monitoring data available at the time of writing. Third, this approach is consistent with established practice in Nepali media and communication research, where desk-based and secondary-source analysis has been used effectively to assess system-level phenomena such as media diversity and press freedom (Dahal et al., 2025; Paudel, 2025b).

Data sources fall into four categories. The first is peer-reviewed and institutionally published academic literature on gatekeeping theory and algorithmic gatekeeping, drawn primarily from journals such as *Digital Journalism*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, and *Communication Theory*, alongside the foundational work of Napoli (2019) and Gillespie (2018). The second is Nepal-specific academic literature on media diversity, political communication, and social media use, including (Dahal et al.; 2025; Rupakheti, 2025; Paudel, 2026c), and related scholarship published through *Nepal Journals Online* and international journals. The third is institutional and organisational reporting on Nepal's digital and press freedom environment, including the Nepal Telecommunications Authority's Management Information System reports, DataReportal's Digital 2026 Nepal report compiled with Kepios analytics, and press freedom monitoring published by Reporters Without Borders, the Federation of

Nepali Journalists, Freedom Forum, and Media Action Nepal. The fourth is verified journalistic and encyclopaedic documentation of the September 2025 Gen Z protests, drawn from established outlets including Reuters-sourced reporting, Britannica, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, and Participedia, cross-checked against multiple independent sources wherever possible.

Analysis proceeded through qualitative thematic coding. Documents were read and organised around themes derived from the study's theoretical framework. Themes coded were editorial gatekeeping capacity, algorithmic curation and platform behaviour, citizen and amateur gatekeeping, state regulatory and platform-blocking actions, and press freedom outcomes. Within each theme, evidence was triangulated across independent sources before being incorporated into the findings, and figures reported by different organisations. For example, differing press freedom violation counts from the Federation of Nepali Journalists, Freedom Forum, and Media Action Nepal, are presented alongside one another rather than reconciled into a single number.

This design has clear limitations, which are discussed further in a separate section before conclusion. It does not include original survey or interview data with Nepali journalists, platform users, or policymakers, so its conclusions describe patterns visible in existing documentation rather than newly generated primary evidence. Because the September 2025 protests and their aftermath remain a live policy issue at the time of writing, in mid-2026, some details, particularly regarding pending legislation, may change after this paper is completed.

Results and Discussion

Digital News Ecosystem in Nepal

Nepal's transition toward a digitally mediated political communication environment has been unusually rapid. At the last of 2025, DataReportal (2026), using data compiled with Kepios, recorded 16.6 million internet users in Nepal, representing

an online penetration rate of 56 percent of the population of 29.6 million, alongside 14.8 million active social media user identities, equivalent to 50% of the population. These figures sit alongside a markedly higher subscription-based penetration rate reported by the Nepal Telecommunications Authority, which recorded internet penetration above 140 percent of the population by 2024 when counting mobile data subscriptions, a discrepancy explained by the prevalence of multiple SIM ownership and by differing methodologies between subscription-based and individual-user-based measurement (Joshi, 2024).

Facebook remains the dominant platform in Nepal, with an estimated 14 to 17 million user accounts, equivalent to roughly half the population, followed by Messenger, Instagram, YouTube, and, at far smaller scale, X and LinkedIn (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). TikTok occupies a distinctive position in Nepal's platform landscape, having been the subject of an earlier, temporary government ban in 2023 and 2024 before being reinstated, and it was one of only five platforms that complied with the government's 2025 local registration requirement, alongside Viber, Nimbuz, Bitak, and Popo Live (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). This platform-by-platform variation in registration compliance is itself a form of gatekeeping outcome: it determined, by administrative rather than editorial means, which channels of political communication remained legally accessible to Nepali citizens in the days before the September 2025 unrest.

This digital growth has not been evenly distributed. Nearly two-thirds of Nepal's population lives in rural areas, and rural communities remain disproportionately reliant on traditional broadcast media and largely excluded from the digital news ecosystem that increasingly shapes urban political discourse (Purkuti, 2025; Rupakheti, 2025). Joshi (2024) documents a persistent urban-rural divide in fixed broadband access even as mobile penetration has grown, meaning that the algorithmic gatekeeping described throughout this paper operates unevenly across the country, concentrated among the urban, younger, and better-

connected population that also formed the core of the September 2025 protest movement.

Transformation From Editorial Gatekeeping to Algorithmic Curation

Applying Wallace's (2018) typology to the Nepali case shows all four gatekeeper archetypes operating simultaneously. But with editorial gatekeepers occupying a visibly weaker position than in the pre-digital era. Professional journalists working for outlets such as Kantipur Media Group, Annapurna Media Network, and Nepal Republic Media continue to produce original political reporting, but Dahal et al. (2025) find that these same organisations exhibit only moderate performance on independent measures of media diversity, with ownership concentration, limited internal pluralism, and constrained resources for content-monitoring functions. A media system operating under these financial and structural constraints is poorly positioned to compete for audience attention with algorithmically distributed content produced by individual amateurs and strategic professionals, the second and third archetypes in Wallace's typology.

Individual amateurs, from independent YouTubers to citizen journalists reporting through Facebook Live, and strategic professionals, including political party communication staff and public relations operatives, have both gained influence precisely because platform algorithms do not distinguish systematically between professionally verified reporting and unverified amateur content when ranking material for distribution. Thapaliya's (2022) comparative study, cited in Dahal et al. (2025), found substantial variation in how much of their published content different Nepali newspapers shared on Facebook, with some outlets posting only a quarter of their stories while others posted more than two-thirds, illustrating how post-publication distribution decisions, made partly by editors and partly by platform algorithms that reward certain formats of content, now function as a second, largely invisible layer of gatekeeping that operates after a story has

already passed through a newsroom's traditional editorial process.

The fourth archetype, algorithms themselves, is the least visible but arguably the most consequential. Rupakheti (2025) finds that algorithmic personalisation on Facebook, YouTube, and X is a central driver of both the appeal and the risk associated with political news consumption among Kathmandu's youth: personalisation increases relevance and engagement, but it simultaneously narrows the range of viewpoints users encounter and increases exposure to unverified political content, consistent with the filter-bubble effects described by Pariser (2011) and the empirically documented echo-chamber dynamics identified by Cinelli et al. (2021). None of Nepal's professional journalism organisations, regulatory bodies, or press councils currently have visibility into, let alone authority over, how these ranking systems operate, which represents a significant accountability gap relative to the editorial-era gatekeeping model that Nepal's press freedom institutions were designed to oversee.

Gatekeeping Crisis: 2025 Gen Z Protest as Evidences

The events of September 2025 provide the clearest evidence available of how Nepal's gatekeeping system has been reconfigured, precisely because they involved the state attempting, and failing, to reassert control at the level of platform infrastructure. On 25 August 2025, the Council of Ministers directed all social media platforms operating in Nepal to register with the government within one week; when the deadline expired, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology ordered an immediate block of twenty-six unregistered platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram, and Reddit, effective 4 September 2025 (Fiscal Nepal, 2025). Officials described the action as a matter of regulatory compliance and platform accountability, but it was widely experienced by younger Nepal's as an attempt to suppress a growing wave of online criticism directed at corruption and the privileged lifestyles of politically connected families, a

phenomenon that had already coalesced around the viral “Nepo Kids” hashtag campaign (Teekah, 2025; Paudel, 2026b).

The state’s attempt to gatekeep by blocking platform infrastructure proved strikingly ineffective at containing political communication. Protesters and organisers, most prominently the youth-led group Hami Nepal, used virtual private networks to bypass the block, coordinated logistics and medical support through Discord servers, and circulated information through QR codes distributed at protest sites, demonstrating the resilience of decentralised, citizen-level gatekeeping even when the platforms typically used for such coordination are formally inaccessible (Participedia, 2025; Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2025). Far from containing dissent, the ban appears to have intensified it: protests escalated rapidly after 4 September, and by 8 September, clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Kathmandu had turned deadly, with reports of dozens of fatalities and thousands of injuries as the unrest spread to other cities (Teekah, 2025; Deccan Herald, 2025; Paudel, 2026b).

The political consequences were significant and swift. Parliament was breached, numerous government buildings including Singha Durbar, Nepal’s central administrative complex, were set ablaze, the army was deployed and took control of Tribhuvan International Airport, and Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned within days of the ban being imposed (Teekah, 2025). Sushila Karki was subsequently appointed interim prime minister, the House of Representatives was dissolved, and Balen Shah was elected in the 2026 elections that followed. The social media ban itself was lifted amid the unrest, but the underlying grievances that the protests exposed, corruption, weak governance, and a pattern of fourteen changes of government in seventeen years, remained unresolved (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2025).

For gatekeeping theory, the central lesson of this episode is that in a media environment where citizens act as their own distribution networks, a state’s attempt to reassert editorial-era control

through network-level blocking does not restore the state to the position of primary gatekeeper. Instead, it removes legitimate, traceable channels of political communication while leaving encrypted and circumvention-based channels intact, shifting political discourse toward less accountable and less verifiable spaces even as it fails to prevent mobilisation. This finding is consistent with international scholarship on the effects of government-ordered internet shutdowns on political mobilisation, which has found that such shutdowns can render state anxiety visible to citizens and thereby intensify, rather than suppress, street-level mobilisation.

Consequences of the Protests and Press Freedom

The Gen Z protests also had direct and severe consequences for Nepal’s press freedom environment, which in turn affect the capacity of professional journalists to function as gatekeepers going forward. The Federation of Nepali Journalists documented that the protests alone directly affected 139 media professionals, and reported that media institutions including Kantipur Media Group, Nagarik, Nepal Television, and Radio Nepal suffered arson and vandalism, with institutional damage estimated at roughly 600 million Nepali rupees and private property damage to journalists and media entrepreneurs estimated at a further 180 million rupees; five journalists were reportedly injured by gunfire during the unrest (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026). These figures illustrate a further, often overlooked dimension of the gatekeeping crisis: physical newsroom infrastructure, not only algorithmic distribution, was directly disrupted by the political upheaval that platform governance decisions had helped to trigger.

Misinformation, Weak Editorial Authority and Declining Trust

A further consequence of algorithmic gatekeeping in Nepal is the weakening of the professional verification function that editorial

gatekeeping traditionally performed. Rupakheti (2025) identifies rapid, algorithmically amplified information sharing as a key driver of misinformation and political polarisation in Nepal, compounded by comparatively low levels of digital literacy among the wider population. This dynamic was already visible in Nepal's recent election cycles. During monitoring conducted with support from Meta, the Center for Media Research–Nepal identified a substantial volume of online misinformation circulating during a one-month election campaign period, including a widely shared but fabricated claim about internal party instructions that was subsequently fact-checked and found to be false by journalists at the source outlet it was falsely attributed to, and by independent fact-checking initiatives such as Nepalfactcheck.org (Tactical Tech, n.d., as reported in Influence Industry Project case study). Social media was also used during election periods to demean or spread unverified negative claims about opposing candidates, illustrating how strategic professionals, the third archetype in Wallace's typology, actively exploit the absence of consistent algorithmic or editorial verification to shape political narratives (Paudel, 2026a).

The consequence, as Rupakheti (2025) argues, is a decline in public trust that affects both social and traditional media simultaneously: audiences exposed to unverified content on algorithmically curated platforms become more skeptical of political information in general, including the professionally verified reporting that continues to be produced by Nepal's newspapers and broadcasters. This represents a significant departure from the classical gatekeeping model, in which the trustworthiness of a small number of editorial gatekeepers could, at least in principle, be maintained through professional norms and institutional accountability mechanisms such as the Press Council Nepal's Journalists' Code of Conduct (Dahal et al., 2025). In an algorithmically curated environment, no equivalent accountability mechanism currently governs which political content is amplified and which is suppressed.

Platform Governance After the Protests and Press Freedom

Nepal's position in international press freedom rankings presents an ambiguous picture that requires careful interpretation. The 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders ranked Nepal 87th out of 180 countries, the highest ranking of any South Asian country and an improvement from 90th the previous year, comfortably ahead of India at 157th, Pakistan at 153rd, Bangladesh at 152nd, Bhutan at 150th, and Sri Lanka at 134th (Dudraj, 2026; Dudraj, 2026). Yet the same index simultaneously downgraded the operating environment for Nepali journalists from "Problematic" to "Difficult," a classification change attributed directly to pre-September government crackdowns, newly restrictive legislation, and the social media ban that helped trigger the Gen Z protests (Dixit, 2026). This apparent contradiction, an improving comparative ranking alongside a worsening domestic reality, illustrates a broader point about press freedom measurement: relative regional standing can obscure a genuinely deteriorating trend within a single country.

Domestic monitoring bodies confirm this deteriorating trend using independent methodologies. The Federation of Nepali Journalists recorded 131 cases of press freedom violations between May 2025 and April 2026, including 51 cases of abuse and threats, 30 serious cases of physical attack on journalists or media materials, 18 cases of professional insecurity, 26 cases of obstruction or occupation of media premises, two arrests, and one death of a journalist under circumstances that remained under investigation (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026). Freedom Forum documented 97 incidents of press freedom violations over roughly the same period, an increase of more than forty percent from the 68 incidents recorded the previous year, directly affecting 145 media professionals, 123 men and 22 women (Dudraj, 2026; Freedom Forum, 2026). Media Action Nepal separately recorded 71 incidents affecting 78 journalists and 10

media organisations, and specifically highlighted a rising pattern of gender-based cyberbullying and coordinated online harassment directed at women journalists, alongside growing exposure of online and multimedia journalists relative to their television and print counterparts (Dudraj, 2026; Media Action Nepal, 2026).

Restrictions have continued under the government that succeeded the interim administration. Reporting from Dixit (2026) documents journalists being barred from covering events at the Prime Minister's Office, the arrest of a YouTuber under Section 47 of the Electronic Transactions Act over posts deemed derogatory toward the prime minister, a warning from the Ministry of Information and Communication that disseminating unverified content could result in cybercrime charges, and a directive issued in April 2026 instructing federal ministries to publish official information and advertisements only through state-owned media outlets. The Civicus Monitor (2026) further documents specific cases in mid-2026, including surveillance and source-disclosure pressure directed at a senior journalist covering a government minister, the seizure of a district-based journalist's equipment while covering a protest, and a death threat against a journalist following the publication of a critical news story. Taken together, these developments suggest that while Nepal's comparative regional standing on press freedom remains relatively favourable, the domestic institutions responsible for professional, editorial-style gatekeeping are operating under growing pressure at precisely the moment when algorithmic platforms are assuming greater responsibility for distributing political information.

Legislative reform remains unresolved. The Media Council Bill, the Social Media Operation and Regulation Bill, and proposed amendments to the Information Technology Act were all pending before the Gen Z protests and remain under consideration, meaning that the legal framework governing platform registration, content moderation, and journalist protection

in Nepal is still being written at the time of this study (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026). How these bills ultimately balance platform accountability against freedom of expression will substantially determine whether Nepal's next phase of gatekeeping reform moves toward transparent, rights-respecting regulation or toward a repeat of the blunt, network-level restriction that helped trigger the September 2025 crisis.

Nepal to Hybrid Gatekeeping Model

The findings presented above support an extension of Wallace's (2018) four-part typology of gatekeeper archetypes to include a fifth actor that is unusually visible in the Nepali case: a state that gatekeeps at the level of network infrastructure rather than through the licensing and editorial-pressure mechanisms characteristic of earlier authoritarian and hybrid media systems. In the classical model that dominated Nepali political communication before 1990, the state gatekept primarily through direct control of broadcast media and censorship of the press. In the algorithmic era, Nepal's state has instead attempted to gatekeep by blocking the platforms through which algorithmic curation occurs, an approach that the events of September 2025 show to be both disruptive and ultimately ineffective at controlling political discourse, precisely because decentralised citizen coordination, the "individual amateur" archetype in Wallace's typology, proved resilient even when formal platform access was blocked.

This suggests that Nepal's current political communication environment is best understood not as a simple replacement of editorial gatekeepers by algorithmic ones, but as a genuinely hybrid and actively contested system in which five actors compete for influence over what political information reaches citizens and in what form: financially constrained professional newsrooms (Dahal et al., 2025); platform algorithms optimised for engagement rather than civic value (Napoli, 2019; Rupakheti, 2025); individual citizens and

amateur activists whose coordination capacity was demonstrated during the Gen Z protests (Participedia, 2025); strategic professionals, including political party communicators, who exploit gaps in verification (Influence Industry Project case study); and a state that has, so far, relied on blunt network-level intervention rather than transparent platform regulation. None of these actors currently holds the kind of stable, accountable gatekeeping authority that editorial institutions held, at least in principle, during the pre-digital era, and this absence of accountable gatekeeping authority is arguably the single most significant finding of this study.

This hybrid gatekeeping model helps answer the study's three research questions directly. The evidence shows that algorithmic curation has not simply added a new gatekeeping layer alongside editorial gatekeeping; it has actively displaced editorial authority in the specific sense that Nepali audiences, particularly urban youth, now encounter political information primarily through platform-ranked feeds rather than through edited news bulletins or front pages (Rupakheti, 2025). The September 2025 crisis demonstrates that platforms and algorithms functioned simultaneously as a target of state control and as a resilient infrastructure for citizen mobilisation, with decentralised coordination tools proving more durable than the state's capacity to restrict them (Teekah, 2025; Participedia, 2025). The reconfiguration documented throughout this paper creates clear risks, weakened editorial accountability, rising misinformation, and escalating threats to journalists (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2026; Freedom Forum, 2026; Media Action Nepal, 2026), alongside a genuine opportunity: the same decentralised infrastructure that proved resilient to government blocking also enabled a scale of civic mobilisation and government accountability, culminating in a change of government, that Nepal's editorial-era media system had rarely if ever achieved on its own.

Implications and Recommendations

Several practical implications follow from this analysis. First, pending legislation, particularly the Social Media Operation and Regulation Bill and the Media Council Bill, should be designed around principles of platform transparency and proportionate accountability rather than around the blunt registration-and-block model applied in 2025, which proved both disruptive to legitimate political communication and ultimately ineffective at achieving its stated regulatory goals. Requirements that platforms disclose how political content is ranked and moderated, for example, would address the accountability gap identified in Section 5 without resorting to network-level shutdowns.

Second, given that roughly a third of Nepal's adult population remains illiterate and nearly half the population remains offline (Dahal et al., 2025; DataReportal, 2026), media and digital literacy programmes need to be extended well beyond the urban, socially connected populations who dominate current platform use, so that citizens across the country are better equipped to evaluate the unverified content that algorithmic curation increasingly surfaces alongside professionally produced journalism.

Third, the structural weakness of Nepal's professional press documented by Dahal et al. (2025), including ownership concentration, limited resources for self-regulation, and inconsistent internal pluralism, needs sustained attention if editorial gatekeeping is to remain a meaningful counterweight to purely algorithmic curation. Policy support for financially sustainable, professionally independent journalism is not a nostalgic defence of an older media order; it is a practical requirement for maintaining any verified, accountable channel of political information alongside the algorithmically distributed content that now dominates most citizens' daily information diet.

Fourth, the safety of journalists, particularly digital-only reporters and women journalists who

face disproportionate levels of online harassment according to Media Action Nepal (2026) and Freedom Forum (2026), needs to be treated as a distinct policy priority connected to, rather than separate from, platform governance reform, since much of the harassment documented in recent reporting occurs on and through the same social media platforms this paper has examined.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should guide the interpretation of its findings. The document-based, qualitative design does not include original interviews or survey data collected directly from Nepali journalists, platform users, or policymakers, and its conclusions should therefore be read as a synthesis of existing evidence rather than as new primary findings. The proprietary nature of platform recommendation algorithms means that no researcher, including this one, can directly verify how Facebook, YouTube, or TikTok rank and distribute Nepali political content; the study infers algorithmic effects from documented user behaviour and secondary research rather than from direct algorithmic audit. Finally, because the political and regulatory situation in Nepal was still actively developing at the time of writing, in mid-2026, with legislative bills pending and press freedom conditions continuing to shift, some details presented here may be superseded by later events, and readers seeking the most current information should consult ongoing reporting from the organisations cited throughout this paper.

Conclusion

Nepal's political communication environment has moved decisively away from the editor-centred gatekeeping model that characterised the country's media system for most of the post-1990 democratic era. Algorithmic curation on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok now plays the leading role in determining which political information reaches most Nepali citizens, particularly younger, urban audiences, a shift that

international gatekeeping scholarship anticipated but that has rarely been examined in a transitional democracy experiencing this magnitude of concurrent political upheaval. The September 2025 Gen Z protests offered an unusually clear demonstration of the consequences of this shift: a government's attempt to reassert control through a blanket platform ban failed to contain political mobilisation, instead triggering a chain of events that led to the resignation of a sitting prime minister and a change in national leadership. This paper has argued that Nepal's political communication is now best understood through a hybrid gatekeeping model involving financially constrained editorial institutions, largely unaccountable platform algorithms, resilient citizen and amateur networks, strategic political communicators, and a state still searching for an effective and legitimate regulatory role. Addressing the risks this reconfiguration creates, weakened editorial accountability, rising misinformation, and mounting threats to journalist safety, while preserving the genuine democratic opportunities it has also produced, will require Nepal's policymakers, media institutions, and civil society to move beyond both nostalgia for editorial-era control and reliance on blunt platform bans, toward a more transparent and genuinely accountable model of digital media governance.

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