

Coverage of Children's Issues in the Nepali Print and Online Media: Impact of Public Pressure on Media Gatekeeping

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ABSTRACT

The media do not cover all the events and incidents of the day. There is a visible trend across the world that the process of gatekeeping in the mass media outlets could be liberal with the presence of pressure groups. Though the usual trend of low media coverage on children in Nepal has been low, the spikes have been visible time and again with frequent and relentless persuasion of the cause in the form of pressure, advocacy and campaigns. Analysis of the media coverage of child-related issues from five national dailies and three prominent online news portals based on the cultivated data with qualitative and quantitative approaches demonstrate the direct relationship between the pressure and coverage. It reveals that influence over the gatekeeping process would become the potential to cause wider coverage and prominence placement.

1. Introduction

Children related issues are not being given significant coverage in Nepali newspapers and online news portals as well as in the mainstream media in the country. For instance, Nepal's child population of age 14 and below constitutes 34.9 per cent of the total population. (CBS, 2014). Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2014) estimates Nepal's population, at 26.5 million as of 2011, and is projected to grow to 30.4 million by 2021 and 33.6 million by 2031. But the children's issues are not in priority in the process of

gatekeeping in the Nepali newspapers and news portals.

Nepal's ratification of the United Nations Child Rights Convention and the establishment of the plural media system coincided with the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. Albeit the Nepali media in general appears to be aware of the principles enshrined in national and international professional standards such as the guidelines of UNICEF, the International Federation of Journalists and Press Council Nepal on child-friendly reporting. A child

friendly media directive has been declared by the Press Council Nepal (PCN) on February 2017 (PCN, *Baal maitri*, 2017).

According to ADB (2003), social protection consists of five major elements including child protection, to ensure healthy and productive development of the future workforce (p.1). Wider and substantial mass media coverage on children can play instrumental role for promoting strategies towards social protection. However, As the International Labour Organisation (ILO) states, low knowledge levels on social protection and citizen rights among journalists have placed social protection at the back page of most media houses despite the media's immense potential for enhancing knowledge amongst the general public on the issue (ILO, Consultancy services: Capacity). Voltmer and Koch-Baumarten (2010), in this regard, argue that the media have little, if any, opportunity to influence policy decisions because of the low velocity of coverage. They further view that the news rarely focuses on an issue over a sustained period of time, and thus generates only spotlights of attention that hardly leave any traces in the memory of the audience (p.2). Consequently, there would be infrequent and low public awareness and debate on the matter of social issues including those concerning the children. Hence, media needs to be socialised, capacitated and sensitised for the substantial and effective coverage concerning child rights and to escalate public debates on the concerns of social protection.

Lippmann (1998), argues that the reporters in the world working all day could not witness the happenings in the world. He further states that *'the media and the journalists watch, or rather in the majority of cases belong to, associations which employ men who watch a comparatively small number of places where it is made known when the life of anyone...departs from*

ordinary paths, or when events worth telling about occur' (p.338). His idea is that not every incident appears as news in the media. Different factors influence the media to decide to cover or reject certain issues or events. As held by Lippmann (1998) *'in principle news are covered as per one of the five news values such as sensationalism, proximity, relevance, unambiguity and facticity'*. He also states that *'the news is an account of the overt phases that are interesting, and the pressure on the newspaper to adhere to this routine comes from many sides'* (p.350). Lippmann (1998), in the context of news values, argue that every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, and what emphasis each shall have (p.354). Later, as Watson (2004) notes, Galtung and Ruge identify more news factors that influence the process of gatekeeping. Watson (2004), stating that Lippmann produced his analysis of news values in 1922, explains the news value analysis presented by Galtung and Ruge in 1965 with their model of selective gatekeeping (pp.134-135).

Watson (2004) mentions the following 12 news factors or values as identified by Galtung and Ruge (p.135): frequency, amplitude, unambiguity, familiarity, predictability, surprise, correspondence, composition, eliteness of people, eliteness of nations, personification, and negativity (p.135). Watson (2004) uses the term threshold value as he argues that the bigger, the better, the more dramatic, the more likely the event is to be poised to pass through the gate (p.136). Hence, in case of raising an issue with frequent amplitude, there would be a great chance to get covered in the media.

An underlying common argument that can be derived from Lippmann to Galtung's idea is that exposure to the media or media person can make difference in

terms of coverage. Hence, Lippmann (1998) argues that before a series of events become news, they have usually made themselves noticeable in some more or less overt act (p.339). According to him the events which are not scored are reported either as personal or conventional opinion, or they are not news. Lippmann (1998) further argues that they do not take shape until somebody protests, or somebody investigates or somebody publicly in the etymological meaning of the word, makes an issue of them (pp. 343-344).

Shoemaker et al. (2001) state that in its simplest conceptualisation within mass communication, gatekeeping is the process by which the vast array of potential news messages is winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are transmitted by the media (p.233). In other words, pressure groups and their continuous and rigorous campaigns are to be potential to influence journalists and media outlets.

With reference to news, gatekeeping is the process of selection, treatment and placement or even rejection of any newsworthy items by the particular media outlet. Gatekeeping occurs at different levels of the production of media content within a structure of a media outlet. It begins from the field level when a reporter decide which sources are to be selected to include in a news story. Then, the editors decide which stories are to be covered. But, the very existence of the influencing factors for the media or individual journalists cannot be denied. Hence, this write up argues that media gates could be widened with the help of a campaign by enhancing the frequency, and continuity of the pressure concerning a particular issue or event. Rosengren (1970) argues that journalists will be more likely to cover an event that they perceive as unexpected than an easily predictable event (p.148). An event or an issue is likely to be covered as news if it could attract the media.

Against the backdrop, this paper aims to examine the state of media coverage on children's issues. It has also another objective to demonstrate that the presence of pressure groups as a prominent news factor concerning the coverage of children in the Nepali media in general. Thus, it attempts to explore the role of the frequency and intensity of the activities exerted by the pressure group in assuming good media coverage.

2. Methods and Materials

This paper attempts to explain the media coverage of children through the theoretical lens of media gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define media gatekeeping as the process by which countless occurrences and ideas are reduced to few messages, that the audience are offered in the news media (p.75). The concept of gatekeeping originates from social psychologist Kurt Lewin's study of the selection and distribution of food items in a social system in the 1940s in the United States (Erzikoval, 2018, p.1) (Figure 1). Shoemaker et al. (2002) state Lewin's theory concerning the selection or rejection of items suggest that they pass through channels could be applied to the flow of news (pp.233-34). Shoemaker & Vos (2009, as elaborated by Erzikoval, 2018) mentions that Lewin describes the selection process in terms of metaphors: channels (the grocery store, garden), gates (the entrance to a channel), gatekeepers (shoppers, cooks), and positive (attractiveness of a food item) and negative (a high price) forces that influence the selection and processing of items. Lewin believes that the concept of gatekeeping could be applied in other areas of human activities, including mass media communications (p.1). It is a universal practice in the field of journalism, that reporters and editors follow such selection process.

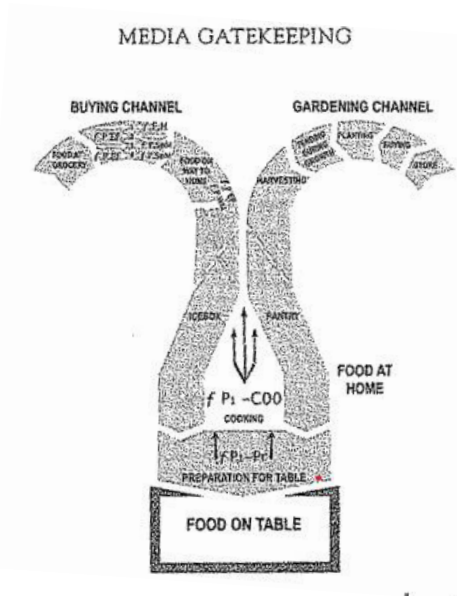


Figure 1: Kurt Lewin's model of how food passes through channels on its way to the table.

Source: Shoemaker & Vos (2009).

As Erzikoval (2018) explains, in terms of gatekeeping in a journalism context, news organisations are channels. She states that the decision points whether a news item would be published/broadcasted and how it would be shaped and presented are the gates. Likewise, professional norms are forces. Finally, the decision-makers or policies are gatekeepers (p.1). Erzikoval (2018) further argues that gatekeeping theory, lobbies and interest groups have been recognised as powerful actors or forces able to control the gates (p. 4).

The gatekeepers determine which information will be passed out to people. However, a gatekeeper is always having its influences like social, cultural, ethical and political. The theory of gatekeeping describes the process through which events are covered by the mass media. It explains how and why certain information is either passed through or is restricted. The selection and organisation

process of the information as per the level of importance and interest depends on a team or a person.

The gatekeepers determine how much of the information gets published or is aired. According to Shoemaker (1991) gatekeeping is the process by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day (p. 1). Watson (2004) states that gatekeeping is about opening or closing the channels of communication. It is about accessing or refusing access (p.123). Shoemaker and Reese (2014) argue that news is a thing, a social artifact that can be read, viewed, or interacted with. Deciding what's newsworthy, on the other hand, is a cognitive exercise, a judgment that any person can make (p.172). Hence, the pressure groups or experts in the area of child rights can make the media to think about providing wider space or substantial coverage on children.

Watson (2004) argues that in studying the news, one needs to explore three linked features viz. production-gatekeeping, agenda-setting and news values. He states that the operation of the first two depends upon the demands of the third which in turn regulates the conventions of news presentation (p.123). The data reveals that impact of the campaign on coverage of children-related issues and events has been visible in the media coverage. The process of gatekeeping in the context of all kinds of news, including the coverage on children depend upon the level of socialisation of the reporters and the desks.

The major technique of collection of relevant data is the content analysis from the selective samples of newspapers and online news portals. To date, as many as 7874 newspapers are registered in Nepal. However, out of those only 919 (19%) were published in 2020 (PCN, 2021). The total number of online news portals as per the record of NPC has reached 2965.

Contents that are related to children's issues from newspapers and online news portals were selected as the sample for the texts to be analysed. The newspapers and online news portals were selected as per the record of PCN. All five national dailies and three online news portals are noted media outlets as per the record of the Council. These media outlets generally represent the trends of the coverage of entire Nepali media landscape. Both hard, the event or incident reporting, and soft, situation or process reporting appeared during 60 days period were examined. The sampling is considered appropriate to such small study with reference to the practice of media research. Data were collected by going through the newspapers and online and entered in the form developed in the google doc. Later, the data were processed by using statistical tools and the description as well.

Different indicators such as news related to protection, i.e. violence or participation, i.e. school attendance, were fixed, searched and counted out of the sample newspapers and online news portals. The study is the outcome of the news concerning the children. The unit of analysis in the study is hard or soft news. All the news items about children published during the same period were documented and analysed. The news stories were identified with their respective codes. Examining, counting, entering in to the data base, processing and obtaining statistics were the different steps in the process of content analysis. The qualitative and quantitative data were cultivated through different processes involving collection, management, and analysis of the data for this paper.

A total of 60 days-content on the coverage of children from eight Nepali media published or appeared between August and September of 2020 were reviewed. Children

related coverage from the five national daily newspapers namely *Gorakhapatra*, *Kantipur*, *NayaPatrika*, *Nagarik* and *Annapurna Post* were analysed in terms of their presentation style and usefulness. Likewise, the contents concerning the children from three digital news portals namely Online Khabar.com, Setopati.com and Ratopati.com published during the same period were analysed. The content analysis has been compared in terms of quantity with the total number of news and views published. The contents concerning children's issues in terms of news from the front, inside and the back page were also examined. The news stories on children regarding context, source and news peg were also examined.

Wimmer and Dominick (2005, p.141) state that quantification is important in fulfilling the objective of the content analysis because it aids researchers in the quest for precision. He argues that quantification gives researchers additional statistical tools that can aid in interpretation and analysis. For the purpose of this paper, news-contents from selected newspapers and online or digital news portals running from Kathmandu were counted and measured with the fixed indicators.

Besides content analysis, key informant interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were conducted with journalists, activists, editors of the national dailies and online news portals, and Child Rights Activists respectively.

A total of five KIIs and one FGD were carried out. During the FGD, participants were asked to present their views on three questions regarding the state of media coverage on children's issues or the quality of the coverage. The answers were recorded and compiled.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Number of child related news

Analysis shows that among the total 9832 news stories published in selected five newspapers for two months, around 5 per cent are related to children (Figure 2). Likewise, out of the total news stories on children published during the period of study, as many as 21 per cent were published in the front pages of the newspapers. The majority 78 per cent of the news stories are published on inside pages and one per cent on the back.

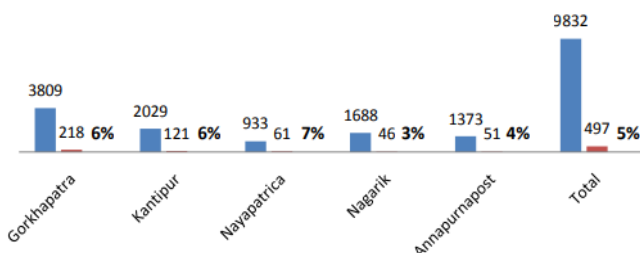


Figure 2: The ratio between the news stories and the news on children.

Source: Aryal and Dhital, 2020.

The news stories related to children occupy 5 per cent (as many as 497) of the total stories published in the newspapers. Out of them, the highest number of news stories was published in *Gorkhapatra* where it covered 44 per cent of total child-related news. Most of the stories on children were not fully focused on children's issues. Some of them were included just because of a single word or sentence on children.

The news stories entirely, or partly, focusing on children accounted to 36 per cent and 24 per cent respectively; whereas 40 per cent of news stories on children were included in data as they have touched the issue. In the total number of child-related news stories, as much as 33 per cent were on child development. News regarding the survival, protection and child participation, was as much as 31 per cent, 28 per cent, and 1 per cent respectively. About 8 per cent news-

stories were not directly related to any of the four themes.

During the KII, the editors admitted that generally, while respecting news values, they give less priority to the news related to the soft tissues. However, the editors state that in case of external pressure and public interest, they cover issues related to children. For instance, during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, the coverage on women was at its highest. The editors hold that they use to be suspicious about the sponsored news, directly related to the I/NGOs (International/National Non-Governmental Organisations) activities and campaigns. However, they give priority to the news linked to the general public. They admit that there are not any standing instructions in regards whether or not to give priority to the news on children as such. Nevertheless, they state that the priority of a news story mainly depends on the news values. The editors view that the greater the potentiality to create an impact on a larger number of people, the greater the chance to get importance and prominence.

During the FGD¹, the child rights experts state that the news outlets, broadly, do not abide by the obligations to provide space for the children and are not committed to being inclusive. News stories related to

1 A Focus Group Discussion was organised online among the participants comprising from senior to young Child Rights activists along with the experts in the field. The participants were from the government agency, UN Agency, INGOs, NGOs, and the networks working for child rights in different parts of country. Brij Mohan Kuswaha, Bara; Madhu Dawadi; Milan Dharel; Nupur Bhattacharya; Prakash Khatiwada, Hetauda; Rajan Burlakoti; Sanjog Thakuri Sunnima Tuladhar, Shiv Paudel; and Tilottam Poudel were the participants of the discussion held in September, 2020.

children from outside the Kathmandu valley get less space and importance, in comparison to the news from within the valley.

While analysing the cause of low level of substantial coverage of children's issues, the child rights activists, researchers and the experts during the FGD admit that they need to raise the frequency and intensity of analysing the state of children. Thus, they stress the need of socialising the journalists on issues concerning children. According to them, the child rights groups can provide journalists with exposure to the appropriate socialisation. Likewise, they could help journalists to get rid of stereotypes. Any materials on the abuse or exploitation of children need to be able to hold the responsible person more accountable. The materials need to be capable to sensitise the concerning authorities on obligations of the state. Even the media logics allow the news outlets to cover children related issues with the help of campaigns or similar kinds of pressure towards gatekeepers of media.

The experts and child-rights activists argue that the coverage would be enhanced with the institutions working for child rights collaborating closely with media persons. The collaboration would be primarily with reporters and also with an editor or the desk editors to socialise them and enhance their capacity to cover the children's issues properly. Efforts such as training, exposure trip and production of reference materials and media-kit would be instrumental to uplift child-sensitive journalism. Appropriate socialisation would be effective to develop a common understanding of child-friendly reporting and the importance of wider coverage of children including conceptual clarity on child rights among the communicators. The training comprised of practical exercise on evaluation and presentation of news and other materials that would encourage them to abide

by ethical standards. Media organisations and journalists need to undergo socialisation process with to develop a better understating that covering children issues require more sensitivity, knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it might be helpful in identifying and dealing with some of the hurdles/barriers in reporting child related issues.

3.2 Placement of child related news on newspaper

Out of the total news stories on children published during the period of study, as many as 21 per cent were published in the front pages. The majority 78 per cent of news stories are published on inside pages and 1 per cent on back (Figure 3). Most of the news stories on children are not above the satisfactory level.

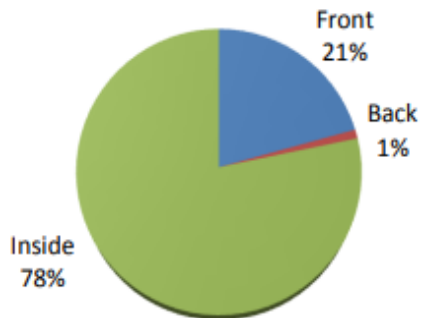


Figure 3: Placement of children related news on the newspaper

Source: Aryal and Dhital, 2020.

Analysis of the contents published in five national dailies during the two months period and three prominent online news portals shows that the media in many instances have not played a role in surveillance in the cases related to children, though at many instances, the issues used to be escalated because of the mounting public pressure.

Case Study

A case study, in this regard, substantiates the findings. A news story of the rape of a minor and subsequently killing was published with low priority, on the fifth page. The general public continued the protest and after three days, the news appeared on the front page. The first news was silent about the offender, while the third explicitly exposed the rapist accused.

On September 25, 2020, *Nagarik* daily published a short news on the fifth page with the Bajhang dateline. The news story was about an incident where a minor girl was found dead inside a temple. The 12-year-old girl was killed following a rape. Though the news story has mentioned about the accused, the tone is soft as it quotes police stating that the case is being investigated. The news reported that the accused boy is a 16-year-old. After two days of follow-up, news on the incident was published. The crux of the news was that the body of the slain girl was not cremated as the locals had been demanding proper investigation of the case. The news reported that the police had arrested the accused boy. But it was also published on the fifth page. As the protest spread over to other places of the country, the follow-up news stories received space in media.

After four days, on September 28, follow up news on the incident got coverage on the front page with a dateline from Dhangadhi bureau and Bajhang. The news story has a highlight that reads: Police states that shreds of evidence concerning the facts on the incident of killing after the rape of 12-year-old girl has been collected. The news story has also revealed that a local youth, who is under police custody was being investigated, was also involved in the rape case in the past. It has been mentioned that he was 18 years old. The news appeared across three columns with prime importance.

A couple of news stories that appeared in the newspapers indicates an attempt to highlight the issue regarding children such as child marriage. On September 15, the main news published in *the Annapurna Post* was on child marriage. It was published with a catchy photograph of young mothers carrying infants. The news is based on extensive reporting. Most of the news stories, around 80 per cent, concerning children appear around the inside pages. As the afore-mentioned case, in most of the instances, the news stories on children get front-page coverage due to the activism of the pressure group.

3.3 Issues covered on the news

Among the child-related news stories, 29 per cent were directly related to education, 18 per cent to the pandemic, 14 per cent to disaster/accident, 12 per cent to abuse and exploitation, 9 per cent to health and 17 per cent on others. Out of the total news stories on abuse and exploitation cases, 72 per cent were about sex abuse, 8 per cent on child marriage and 20 per cent on others. The comparatively higher percentage of news related to sex abuse shows the relationship between the role of the pressure group and the media coverage. The pressure groups use to be relatively more concerned about the cases of abuse. As much as 9 per cent of the news stories on children are well explained, whereas 8 per cent are poorly explained and 83 per cent are satisfactory.

Likewise, out of the total news stories presented through online news portals, as much as 44 per cent were found to be on child protection. As many as 23, 19 and 3 per cent of news stories were found to be concerned with the themes of survival, development and participation respectively (Figure 4). Most of the news, about 21 per cent, were found to be about sex abuse. Likewise, about 6 per cent of news stories highlighted child marriage. As much as 57 per cent of news stories found online were on event/ incident reporting. Likewise, 29 per cent of news stories were on situation reporting. About 14 per cent were found to be based on press releases or reports. Out of the total news stories presented through online news portals, as much as 21 per cent are found to be written on the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, as much as 17, 14,13 and 11 per cent of news stories are found to be concerned with the current contexts such as education, disaster/accident, abuse as well as exploitation and health.

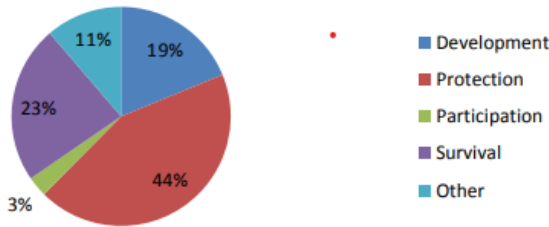


Figure 4: News-stories on four thematic areas of child rights.

Source: Aryal and Dhital, 2020.

Out of the total news stories presented through the selected three online news portals as much as 59 per cent are found to be useful for general awareness. Likewise, as much as 15 and 5 per cent of news stories are found to be useful for the exposition of wrongdoing and for making the offices accountable respectively.

4. Conclusion

Findings reveal that influences on gatekeeping processes would have the potential to achieve wider coverage and prominence placement. Although children's issues are not in priority in the process of gatekeeping in the Nepali newspapers and online news portals, it would be encouraging to have involvement of the pressure groups. Hence, newspapers or the Nepali media in general have not been playing a proactive role in surveillance in cases related to children. At times, the issues would be escalated because of the mounting public pressure.

There is a dominant perception that children related news are usually considered as soft news and thus most of the news stories appear on the inside pages. Hardly 20 per cent of news, mostly about the agitation and child abuses, gets covered on the front page. Most of the news stories are found to be based on a formal source. It indicates that the news stories on children are not in-depth in nature. The process of gatekeeping in the Nepali media shows that it is the way to fix

the information in a hierarchy. The contents of the Nepali mass media, especially the print and digital news, signals the nature of gatekeeping, their process of determining newsworthiness.

Most of the news stories on children are not fully focused on children's issues. Some of them are included just because of the mention of a single word or sentence on children. The situation of low coverage and the coverage without substance would change with the greater efforts from child rights activists, as well as academia to provide well-articulated opinions as well.

Comparatively low coverage of the child-related issue is not only the consequence of traditional values of news hierarchy or newsworthiness but also the result of trained human resources. Newspapers lack especial beat for child reporting and trained human resources for child-sensitive and child-friendly reporting. Because, the contents demonstrate that 53 were not prepared as per the standard, treated and presented properly in absence of skilled human resources for covering the news on children or the issues of child rights.

Since advocacy and campaign activities are major forces that influence media gatekeeping, the relationship between intensity, frequency and effectiveness of action works and the selection process of the contents in media are visible. Analysis of the contents of prominent dailies and online news portals of Nepal demonstrates that the coverage on children would be the consequence of the editorial process of selection which used to be shaped by the news factors.

The conclusion drawn from the examination of coverage from select print and online news media generally applies to the entire Nepali media outlets. It is visible that the media coverage increases as the

pressure concerning any issue or event in different forms escalates. Infrequent and low substantial media coverage has resulted in low public awareness and debate on the matter of social issues including those concerning children. Hence, media personals need to be socialised, capacitated and sensitised so as to ensure substantial and effective coverage concerning child rights as well as promote public debates on the concerns of social protection.

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