

Reading Nepal Through Gadi Wolfsfeld: The Power Nexus Between Politics and Media

Sunil Paudel¹, Nilima Chandani Khan² 

¹Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Madan Bhandari Memorial College

²MPhil PhD Scholar, CDJMC, Tribhuvan University

Abstract

This review article explores Gadi Wolfsfeld's five principles of political communication in light of the power dynamics of politics and the media in Nepal. It examines the various aspects of editorial autonomy, press freedom and public discourse that are influenced by political power, media visibility, ownership and media advertising policies of the state, legal uncertainty, journalistic routines and digital platforms. The study uses qualitative, descriptive design, analysis, integration, secondary sources related to scholarly literature, policy documents, legal documents, press freedom documents, institutional documents and press documents issued by credible media as source documents. The study reveals that the media in Nepal has passed from the direct control of the State in Panchayat era to plural media in 1990 but still politically influenced. While press freedom and freedom of expression are guaranteed under the constitution, the vagueness of the laws, the regulatory instability, economic dependence and political patronage still have an impact on the status of media independence. It is also found that ownership, State advertising, elite source dependence influence the political communication in Nepal, conflict-centred reporting and Kathmandu-centric news routines. While these digital platforms have facilitated the empowerment of political actors beyond merely offering new modes of communication, they have also created new problems, including that of misinformation, online harassment, algorithmic control, and state regulation. The article concludes that Nepal's media-politics relationship is not wholly free nor it is wholly at the control of the media. Instead, it works in an arena of negotiated political, economic, legal, professional and technical power.

Article History

Revised: April 28, 2026

Accepted: June 02, 2026

Email

sunilpaudel.np@gmail.com

Cite

Paudel, S., & Khan, N. C. (2026). Reading Nepal through Gadi Wolfsfeld: The power nexus between politics and media. *Madhesh Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (MJIR)*, 1(1), 25–44.



Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): Published by Madhesh University, Nepal. Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Keywords: political communication, media power, press freedom, Nepal, digital platforms, editorial autonomy

Introduction

Political communication is a relationship between politics and media. One of the fundamental questions in political communication is to define the nature of this relationship. In democratic ideologies, the

media are expected to educate citizens, provide a forum for public discussion, and function as a watchdog over authority (McQuail, 2010). In fact, however, media institutions have power. They are influenced by legislative frameworks, organisational structures, advertising marketplaces, the routines of professionals, connections between parties and the state, and the expectations of audiences (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Political actors have to become visible in the media to define problems in the public, make decisions legitimate, develop reputations and mobilise support. Media organisations also need access to government information, legal security, advertising facilities, audience attention, and symbolic legitimacy. It is not, therefore, a simple dichotomy of free media versus political control. An organised and dynamic area of negotiation in which political power is continually shaping media power and vice versa (Wolfsfeld, 2011).

Gadi Wolfsfeld's conceptualisation of political communication is useful in the understanding of this relationship since it starts with power rather than an idealised image of media independence. The five principles of Wolfsfeld state that political power can – almost always – be translated into power over the news; that when political actors lose control of the political environment, they lose control of the news; that journalism cannot be completely objective because it is created through selection, sourcing, emphasis and framing; that media organisations are deeply orientated to tell a good story; and that many important effects of the media are unintentional and unnoticed (Wolfsfeld, 2011; 2022). These principles are particularly pertinent in nations in transition where the formal democratic rules are in place but institutional autonomy, professional norms and public trust are not yet firm.

The case study of Nepal is useful as the political and media landscape has seen considerable transformation in a relatively short span of history. Political parties were kept out of the Panchayat system, and public communication was closely controlled. The 1990 people's revolution brought about multiparty democracy and space for the private press, commercial radio and television stations and more plural public discourse. Journalists have faced pressure from official and non-state sources in the Maoist insurgency, 1996-2006. With the passage of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006, the dissolution of the monarchy, the procedure of the Constituent Assembly and the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the organisation of the state was modified. The new political order was based on the values of republicanism, federalism, secularism and inclusivity. The rise of online portals, mobile connectivity and social media revolutionised the production, circulation and contestation of political information.

Such reforms have enlarged the media field but not ensured autonomy. In Nepal nowadays, there is a wide range of media, including state-owned media, private commercial media, community media, party-affiliated media, local media, internet media portals and individual digital content makers. Community radio has served as a catalyst for communication and pluralism within the community. The Internet portals have lowered the barriers and speeded up political reportage. Through social media, citizens, activists, political leaders and diaspora organisations have been able to bypass traditional gatekeepers. But the same media system continues to suffer from challenges such as political parallelism, unprofessionalism, advertiser pressure, opacity of ownership, state advertising dependence, online abuse and disinformation, and legal uncertainty.

Recent international exams have, likewise, shown this mixed picture. The national media landscape is very large, and journalists have very little restriction in their reporting in Nepal, which was ranked 87th out of 180 nations (Reporters Without Borders, 2026) in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index. The media institutions also continue to have a role for governmental control and political influence. In 2026, Nepal was rated Partly Free (59 out of 100), with competitive politics and civic space being affected by and/or accompanied by governance challenges and limits (Freedom House, 2026). In 2024/25, Media Action Nepal recorded cases of threats, arrests, information blocks, and violence against journalists, which are violations of press freedom and freedom of expression (Media Action Nepal, 2025). These investigations claim that the media landscape in Nepal is neither purely autocratic nor entirely institutionally independent.

The issue has become more complicated with digital regulation. In early 2025, the Social Media Bill 2081 was tabled for public discussion on problems of registration of platforms, harm online, misinformation, content moderation, state authority and freedom of expression. The measure was examined by UNESCO, which stressed the importance of freedom of expression, access to information and digital rights (UNESCO, 2025). The Centre for Law and Democracy (2025) and the International Federation of Journalists (2025) also pointed out that ambiguous regulatory powers, which are not precise, necessary, proportionate and independently supervised, could impede freedom of expression and press freedom. In September 2025, major social media platforms were blocked and protests erupted, demonstrating how digital platforms have become an integral component of Nepal's political landscape, far from being just tools

for entertainment or personal communication (Sharma, 2025).

The paper analyses the power nexus of politics and media in Nepal in the light of Wolfsfeld's five principles. The power nexus in question is the mutually reinforcing nature of the interaction between political control, media visibility, legal control, economic dependence, and professional practice and public discourse. This does not mean that media in general are inevitably under the sway of political actors. Rather, it is a complex relationship between political players who seek to obtain media advantage; the media, who seek access and sustainability; and citizens, who experience politics in media-mediated forms that are dominated by uneven power. The article argues that the lens of Wolfsfeld's framework is a strong one for understanding Nepal, but the Nepal case needs to be developed theoretically further, as it is influenced by factional party politics, post-conflict memory, state advertising, centre-periphery inequality, fragile media economy and global digital platforms for political communication.

The main problem addressed in this review is the need for a clearer and more systematic understanding of the relationship between politics and media in Nepal. Since 1990, Nepal's media sector has grown rapidly in number, form and reach. However, this growth has not always guaranteed editorial independence, strong investigative journalism or democratic accountability. Many media institutions still work under the influence of political access, ownership interests, state advertising, unclear laws, financial pressure and digital platform control. Existing studies have discussed issues such as press freedom, media law, ownership, political parallelism and digital regulation,

but these issues are often studied separately. Therefore, this review seeks to bring these dimensions together and explain how political, economic, legal, professional and technological forces shape the media-politics nexus in Nepal.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this review article are to examine the power nexus between politics and media in Nepal through Gadi Wolfsfeld's five principles and to analyse how political change, media ownership, state advertising, legal ambiguity, journalistic routines and digital platforms shape editorial autonomy, press freedom and public discourse in Nepal

Literature Review

Gadi Wolfsfeld: Five Principles of Political Communication

Political Power Can Generally be Converted Into Media Power

This doesn't mean all stories are manipulated by powerful actors. It means that actors with institutional authority, organisational resources, public legitimacy and regular access to official events tend to have a greater ability to define what becomes news. Governments communicate with the press through press conferences, statements, policies, public ceremonies, and regular information. Political parties can hold rallies, issue press releases and employ spokespersons. Weaker actors, such as marginalised communities, local protest groups, or informal social movements, often need crisis, disruption, symbolic action, or dramatic conflict to achieve such visibility (Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022)..

This rule is particularly applicable to Nepal. Political news is usually filled with national political leaders, ministers, party chairs, parliamentary actors and the largest

party factions. The words of the institutionally powerful are news. Routine sources are essential for journalists. This pattern is compounded by the Kathmandu-based structure of national media. Problems from Karnali, Madhesh, Sudurpaschim or far-flung hill districts seldom become national headlines unless they are tied to disaster, conflict, corruption, election controversy or central policy debate. Thus, political power is translated into media power not simply by office but also by geography, language, caste, class, party networks and market concentration.

Political Actors Lose Control Over the News When They Lose Control Over the Political Environment

When events are predictable and institutions are stable, political communication is easier to control. Protest, crisis, scandal, war, judicial conflict, or sudden public anger can disrupt normal routines, making it more challenging. There are many examples from the political history of Nepal. The 1990 people's movement, the 2006 people's movement, the crisis of royal legitimacy, the Constituent Assembly debates, the parliamentary dissolution crisis of 2020-2021 and the 2025 social media protests all show how official narratives can be challenged when political events are beyond authorities' control. During these moments, citizens, courts, opposition actors, civil society, journalists, and digital networks generate competing interpretations.

Every Political Story in the Media is Biased

Wolfsfeld is not hostile to truth, accuracy or professional discipline. Instead, he argues that journalism is inherently influenced by selection, sourcing, timing, emphasis, language and framing (Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022). This view is directly related to framing theory. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection of some aspects

of a perceived reality and the enhancement of their salience in naming and phrasing issues such that one interpretation of all the information is promoted, to define problems, delineate causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies. Different media outlets often portray political events in Nepal in various ways. Federalism can be seen as inclusion, decentralisation, fragmentation, or an administrative burden. Regulation of social media can be framed as protecting users, accountability of platforms, censorship or government overreach. Transitional justice can be seen as victim rights, political compromise, peace process management, or international pressure. These differences are not incidental but are the result of editorial orientation, source relations, ideological positions, business interests, and professional routines.

Media Organisations are Highly Committed to Telling Excellent Stories

News values are for drama, conflict, novelty, emotion, personality and moral tension. This principle explains the extensive coverage of coalition disputes, party splits, allegations of corruption, leadership rivalry and confrontations with protesters. Storytelling can make politics accessible, but it can also constrain political understanding when structural issues are reduced to personal conflict. In Nepal, where leadership wrangles are more dramatic than the more complex issues of federal implementation, public service delivery, budget allocation, migration, education, health, climate vulnerability and local accountability, the latter might be less in focus.

Many Important Media Effects are Unintended and Unnoticed

Media effects are not always the result of direct persuasion. They can work slowly, by shaping what citizens make important, legitimate, normal or possible. This relates to agenda-setting

theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which argues that media influence the salience of issues in the public. The repeated coverage of elite bargaining may normalise instability. Repeated underrepresentation of marginalised groups can shrink the national public's imagination. Framing digital criticism as a disorder may be a way to normalise acceptance of restrictive regulations. Thus, media effects may be most powerful precisely because they are routine and unnoticed.

Comparative Media Systems and Political Parallelism

The concept of political parallelism is important in comparative media studies. Hallin and Mancini (2004) use the term to refer to the extent to which media systems mirror political cleavages, ideologies, party systems, and organised social interests. High political parallelism: Media outlets often have visible links to parties or social groups. Journalism tends to be more commentary-orientated or advocacy-based. In systems with lower political parallelism, media institutions claim more professional autonomy and seek audiences across political divides. The Hallin and Mancini framework was largely derived from Western Europe and North America but is still useful as it provides vocabulary for analysing the relationship between political structures and media structures. Later comparative work also demonstrates that media-system models need to be adapted for non-Western contexts (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

Nepal shows many of the characteristics associated with high political parallelism. Historically, newspapers, local media, student publications, radio stations and journalists' professional associations have been subject to political parties. K.C. (2019) applies the model

of Hallin and Mancini directly to Nepal, arguing that the Nepalese press shows characteristics of the polarised pluralist model, including political parallelism and weak professionalisation. That doesn't mean that every journalist is partisan, or every outlet is controlled by a party. This suggests that the overall media system is more representative of political divisions than a fully professionalised and institutionally autonomous model would be.

But Nepal doesn't quite fit the classic European model. Political parallelism in Nepal is not merely party-based. It is also factional, leader-centred, business-connected, localised, and identity-related. Internal factions, fluid alliances, and personalised leadership structures characterise major political parties. Media alignment may follow specific leaders, business patrons, temporary coalitions, or local power networks rather than stable ideological programs. This pattern suggests the need for a revised understanding of political parallelism in Nepal. In Nepal, the problem is not just parties versus press; it is the broader incorporation of media into a political economy of access, influence, factional bargaining, and public legitimacy.

Political parallelism is also related to social inequality. Elite and Kathmandu-centric perspectives have often dominated Nepali-language national media. Mainstream discourse does not equally represent Madheshi, Janajati, Tharu, Dalit, Muslim, women, and rural and remote provincial voices. Federalism has generated new provincial communication spaces, but it has not completely redressed the center-periphery imbalance. Hence, the media-politics nexus in Nepal should be studied not only in terms of party alignment, but also in terms of unequal access to communicative power.

Field Theory, Autonomy of the Media and Capital Conversion

Bourdieu's field theory provides yet another useful lens. A field is a structured social space with its own rules, hierarchies and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1991, 1993). The political field values votes, public office, party organisation, legal authority and legitimacy of leadership. Values in the media industry include newsworthiness, credibility, audience attention, professional reputation and advertising revenue. These fields are relatively autonomous, but not entirely independent. Actors can transfer capital from one field to another. Media visibility can be used by a political leader to increase electoral capital. A media owner may employ editorial influence to serve business interests or to obtain political access. A journalist can use his professional visibility to get a job in the advisory, diplomatic, party or public relations fields.

In Nepal, this interaction is compounded by the small and overlapping nature of elite networks. Political leaders, editors, media owners, senior bureaucrats, advertisers, public intellectuals, civil society actors and consultants often circulate in the same Kathmandu-based circles. This closeness can increase access to information, but it can also reduce critical scrutiny. The appointment of journalists as press advisers to administrative and political bodies can threaten the independence of journalism, Reporters Without Borders (2026) writes. This is not only a question of personal ethics. It shows a structural overlap between the political and the media fields.

Field theory also explains media capture in the absence of formal censorship. A media organization relying on a business group that has government contracts might not want to publish stories that upset that group's political ties. Local

radio stations that depend on the government for notices may be hesitant to investigate local authorities. A sensational, traffic-driven online portal may amplify polarising content instead of investing in verification. Bhattarai (2026) analyses media capture in Nepal using political economics and shows how commercialism, partisanship, and less visible exchanges can shape content. This suggests that media autonomy is something more than constitutional freedom. It also needs diversified revenues, transparent ownership, labour protection, editorial safeguards, and strong professional norms.

Law and Regulation: Freedom of the Press in Nepal

Legal frameworks are pivotal to the media-politics nexus. Existing research on media policy in Nepal reveals that the media's evolution since 1990 has been strongly linked to regulation, reform, and the incomplete institutionalisation of democratic governance (Rijal, 2014). The Constitution of Nepal provides for the right to communicate and prohibits prior censorship of publication, broadcasting, dissemination and electronic communication (Government of Nepal, 2015). It also bars the closure or cancellation of media registration solely on the basis of published or broadcast content but permits regulation by law. These guarantees are a significant democratic achievement when compared to the Panchayat period and the period of direct royal rule. They provide a constitutional basis for freedom of the press, free expression and the right to information.

But the practical meaning of constitutional protection is decided by ordinary laws, institutions, courts, police practice and administrative culture. Even if rarely used, broad or vague legal provisions can lead to self-censorship. Journalists might avoid sensitive topics for fear

of arrest, legal costs, source harassment, or administrative retaliation. Though some laws to tackle cybercrime, defamation, public order, misinformation or national security may be needed in some contexts, they can also be abused when the language is vague and enforcement is selective. Martin Chautari (2021) has observed that the issue of digital freedom of expression in Nepal requires careful policy attention as online regulation could affect journalism, civic speech and political criticism.

The Social Media Bill 2081 exacerbated these concerns. There is a need for regulation concerning fraud, harassment, children's safety, coordinated disinformation, hate speech, and data protection on digital platforms. Regulation is not the issue. The question is whether regulation is accurate, necessary, proportional, independent, and rights-respecting. The UNESCO review of the bill underscored its compliance with international human rights standards and the importance of protecting freedom of expression, access to information and digital rights (UNESCO, 2025). The Center for Law and Democracy (2025) criticises the bill for sweeping regulatory powers and restrictions on content. The International Federation of Journalists (2025) warned that the bill could threaten freedom of expression, the right to information and press freedom. Such debates show how digital governance has become part of the same nexus of power that once operated mainly through print, broadcast, and state regulation.

Media Economy, State Advertising and Ownership

The political economy of media is a major part of the power nexus. Media organisations require a sufficiently stable financial base to pay reporters, maintain newsrooms, verify facts, investigate, and resist pressure. As revenues fall,

the dependence grows. In Nepal, many outlets still rely financially on state advertisements, government notices, local-level announcements, and public information campaigns. When disseminated in a transparent manner, public advertising can support media pluralism and public interest journalism. If dispensed politically, it becomes a tool of reward and punishment.

Ownership transparency is also a key. Citizens should know who owns media outlets, what other business interests they have, whether they are linked to political parties or leaders, and whether they receive state contracts. Without such transparency, it is not straightforward for audiences to see conflicts of interest. The media market in Nepal is made up of state-owned media, private commercial conglomerates, community broadcasters, local media, and party-affiliated publications and online platforms. According to Reporters Without Borders (2026), the government of Nepal remains one of the largest media owners and directly influences media houses, including Gorkhapatra and The Rising Nepal. The 2024 Public Service Broadcasting Act merged Radio Nepal and Nepal Television into Public Service Broadcasting Nepal, raising important questions about whether public service broadcasting will be truly independent or remain susceptible to government influence (Public Service Broadcasting Nepal, 2025; Reporters Without Borders, 2026).

Commercial ownership also shapes editorial practice. Media owners may have stakes in banking, real estate, hydro power, education, aviation, construction, advertising or other sectors. These interests can conflict when investigative stories involve business partners, regulators or political patrons. Advertiser pressure can influence not only whether a story runs, but

also its position on paper, how it is framed and how long it lives. Herman's and Chomsky's (1988) political economy approach serves as a reminder that market pressures discipline media, even in formally free systems. Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences model similarly illustrates the impact of individual, routine, organisational, institutional, and social-system levels on content.

Digital media have not done away with economic vulnerability. The online portals are easier to set up than print or broadcast outlets but difficult to sustain professionally. Many rely on sponsored content, owner subsidies, political patronage or traffic-driven advertising. Such practices can lead to sensational headlines, clickbait, partisan amplification and weak verification. Global platforms are capturing audience attention and advertising revenue, while Nepali newsrooms are struggling to monetise digital journalism. Consequently, the digital public sphere may appear crowded but remains institutionally fragile.

The New Political Communication Environment and Digital Platforms

Digital platforms have changed the actors and mechanisms of political communication in Nepal. Political leaders can speak directly on Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube and live streaming. Parties can mobilise support, spread slogans, attack opponents, and set the political agenda without relying wholly on traditional media. Citizens can expose abuse; organise protests; share visual evidence; and challenge official narratives. Journalists can publish quickly and reach audiences beyond the limits of print and broadcast. Diaspora communities can participate in the national debate.

These developments have in some ways democratised communication, but they have also

created new asymmetries. Comparative research on social media and political change further warns that technology does not replace political context; politics often leads first in determining whether social media leads to mobilisation, polarisation, or limited change (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Algorithms determine what citizens see, but their logic is opaque. Global platform companies are beyond the full control of any national government, but their decisions impact local political debate. Governments have the ability to impose platform registration, local representation, and content takedown; however, they can also wield these measures as instruments of censorship, bypassing due process and independent oversight. Politicians may employ coordinated campaigns, fake accounts, paid influencers and targeted disinformation. Harassment may discourage participation among women journalists, minority voices, and critical commentators. Therefore, digital media diminishes some of the older gatekeepers but creates new forms of political, commercial, and algorithmic power.

The social media shutdowns and protests of September 2025 exemplify this shift. Reuters reported that Nepal announced plans to block several social media platforms that had not registered with the government, while critics called the move an attack on free expression (Sharma & Chitrakar, 2025). The Associated Press later reported that protests against the ban became more intense, and the deaths of 19 protesters led to the resignation of the prime minister. The incident shows that social media platforms in Nepal are not on the sidelines. Social media platforms in Nepal play a significant role in journalism, education, business, migration, youth identity, civic mobilisation, and political accountability. This further supports Wolfsfeld's

second principle—when authorities lose control of the political environment, they lose control of the news stories.

Public Sphere, Inclusion and Representation

Habermas's concept of the public sphere is a sphere where citizens debate issues of common interest (Habermas, 1989). However, critics such as Fraser (1990) contend that exclusion and inequality construct real, existing public spheres. The media-politics nexus in Nepal needs to be evaluated not only in terms of the number of media outlets or the lack of prior censorship but also in terms of whose voices are seen, heard and politically intelligible.

In Nepal, communication power is determined by caste, ethnicity, gender, geography, language, class, disability and digital access. The national media in Kathmandu tend to frame national issues in terms of elite politics. Financial, technical, and professional constraints limit the ability of provincial and local media to improve their representation. Community radio has been a significant contributor to local language programming, civic participation, and communication development. UNESCO's media development assessment recognises the role of the media system in Nepal in democratic transition and pluralism, including the role of broadcast and community media (UNESCO, 2013). But the community media can also be under pressure from local governments, party actors, donors, and advertisers. Digital spaces can add new voices, but online harassment and unequal access still restrict participation.

The representational dimension is fundamental to democracy. A media system can be formally open but socially narrow. It may extensively cover national politics while under-representing Dalit, Madheshi, Janajati, Muslim, Tharu, women, and rural, disabled, and migrant

perspectives. It may pay attention to marginalised groups in protests, disasters, or crises but ignore them in everyday policy debates. The power nexus determines not only what politicians can say but also which citizens are recognised as political subjects.

The reviewed literature shows that the relationship between politics and media in Nepal has been studied from several important perspectives, including political communication, press freedom, media regulation, ownership, political parallelism, digital platforms, and public discourse. Existing studies explain that media in democratic societies are expected to inform citizens, provide a forum for public debate, and monitor political power (McQuail, 2010). However, the literature also shows that media institutions are shaped by political access, legal structures, ownership patterns, advertising markets, professional routines, and audience pressures (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022). In the case of Nepal, previous studies have discussed press freedom, media policy, legal uncertainty, political influence, and digital regulation, but these issues are often examined separately rather than as an interconnected power structure.

Therefore, the major research gap lies in the absence of a systematic and integrated analysis of Nepal's media-politics nexus through a clear theoretical framework. Although Wolfsfeld's five principles of political communication provide a useful lens for understanding how political power influences media visibility, framing, storytelling, and public opinion, limited research has applied this framework directly to Nepal's transitional democratic context. Similarly, existing literature on political parallelism, media ownership, state advertising, legal ambiguity, digital platforms, and marginalized representation has not been

sufficiently synthesized to explain how these forces collectively shape editorial autonomy, press freedom, and democratic discourse in Nepal.

The literature further indicates a contextual gap. Many media theories were developed in Western democratic settings, while Nepal's media environment is shaped by post-conflict politics, weak institutionalization, factional party networks, centre-periphery inequality, fragile media economy, community media, and rapid digital transformation. These Nepal-specific conditions require deeper theoretical adaptation. In addition, there is an empirical gap because limited studies have used systematic content analysis, ownership mapping, newsroom interviews, audience studies, or digital platform analysis to examine how political and economic pressures operate in everyday journalistic practice.

Thus, this review identifies the need for a more comprehensive study that connects political power, media ownership, state advertising, legal regulation, journalistic routines, digital platform governance, and inclusive representation within one analytical framework. Addressing this gap can contribute to a clearer understanding of how media freedom, editorial independence, and democratic communication function in Nepal's changing political environment.

Methodology

The study is based on the design of Qualitative review, descriptive, analytical and integrative review with the following objective that is to examine the relationship between politics and media in Nepal by referring to Gadi Wolfsfeld's five principles of political communication. The design of the review is suitable as the study is not used to draw out numerical data or statistical information. It, on the contrary, aims

to systematically gather, analyze, compare and integrate scholarly and documentary evidence available regarding political communication, media power, legal regulations, ownership, State advertising, journalistic practices in Nepal, digital media and the state of press freedom in the country. Literature review as a research method is helpful when knowledge about a topic is seen as disorganized in various sources, and must be organized into an analytical structure (Snyder, 2019). A systematic review process also allows for a more transparent selection, analysis and interpretation of sources and increases academic acceptance of the results (Tranfield et al., 2003).

It is guided by overall objective of the study: To analyze the politics between the media and their role in producing and consuming Nepalese public discourse within the framework of the five principles mentioned by Wolfsfeld, and how the changes in political atmosphere, media ownership, media legislation, public awareness of state advertisements, and journalistic routines and digital platforms affect editorial autonomy, press freedom and public discourse in Nepal. The report article drafts surface the relationship of media with the politics as complex as a result of political access and ownership, indistinguishable law on media, financial pressure, and control of digital platforms in Nepal. Hence, this study adopts interpretive method of review to link these diverse issues together in order to explain analytically the media-politics nexus in Nepal.

Research Design

This study is designed with qualitative integrative literature review. In the case of the literature review, it would be appropriate to use an integrative review method as the researcher would be able to use theoretical literature, empirical studies, policy documents, legal materials, media and institutional reports in

one analytical discussion (Torraco, 2005). This design is particularly important for political communication research, as an understanding of politics and media can only be gained from a single form of evidence. It involves looking at theory, institutions, laws, ownership, journalistic practice and political events in the context of each other. Wolfsfeld's five principles act as the main analytical framework in this study for structuring and analyzing the materials. The relevance of Wolfsfeld's framework lies in its elucidation of the impact of political power on news production, the possibility of the changes in political control during crisis or instability, the journalistic process of selection and framing, the media's ability to embrace dramatic narratives and the indirect and unintended effects of media.

Nature and Sources of Data

The main academic literature deals with issues of political communication, media systems, media power, journalistic professionalism, political parallelism and the process of democratic transition. Using reports from organisations like Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, Media Action Nepal, UNESCO, the International Federation of Journalists and the Centre for Law and Democracy (2025), one can gain an understanding of the current situation of press freedom, digital regulation and media rights in Nepal. Legality and policy documents will be analysed to reveal the impact of state regulation, media law on freedom of expression and editorial autonomy, and digital governance.

Search Strategy

The terms were used alone or in combination. Academic databases, Google Scholar, official organisational websites, policy repositories and reliable media archives were the sources for the search. The aim of the search was not just to gather literature, but to highlight any

similarities, inconsistencies and missing areas of the literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The sources that were included in the review were those directly related to political communication, media power, press freedom, journalism, media law, ownership, state advertising, digital platforms and democracy in Nepal. Particular emphasis was laid on the sources since 1990, as Nepal has experienced the transition towards multiparty democracy, resulting in a new political and media environment. This was to explain the background of the Panchayat system and the control of communication by the state, but earlier historical sources were also introduced when they contributed to this. Those sources were selected when they were academically relevant, institutionally credible, conceptually useful or directly related to the relationship between media and politics in Nepal. The sources were included when they were, academically relevant, institutionally credible, conceptually useful or directly related to the Nepalese media-politics relationship.

Sources which are not related to Nepal, politics, media, journalism, digital regulation, and press freedom were excluded from the review. Unsupported opinion pieces, politically biased commentaries with no evidence, duplicate materials and materials that do not have clear authorship or institutional credibility were not used as sources of core evidence. Only if the general studies on media or politics were important for clarifying the theoretical framework were they included.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis is used as the main way of analyzing the data in this study.

Wolfsfeld's study methodological framework adopted to this study is that of five principles. The first principle is examined to investigate the links between the political power and the media influence over visibility, access and agenda-setting of the news. The second principle is applied to examine the disempowerment of political actors of the media narrative when experiencing a crisis, protest, conflict or fast digital mobilization. The third principle looks at the scope and boundaries of the journalistic objectivity, by examining the concept of sourcing, framing, selection and editorial routines. Applications of the fourth principle to analyse and explain how the political events are turned into dramatic, conflictual, personalised and captivating stories for audience. The fifth principle is used to showcase the unexpected and hidden effects of media on public opinion, legitimate power, polarization and democratic debate.

The dimensions are suitable for the context of media within Nepal where they exist in an intricate political landscape of influence, financial sustainability issues, legal uncertainty and a level of professional vulnerabilities..

Trustworthiness and Validity

In order a high level of academic trustworthiness, source triangulation and theoretical triangulation were applied. In order to achieve the trustworthiness in an academic sense source triangulation and theoretical triangulation were used. Using academic research, legal documents and institutional reports and credible news articles, source triangulation is implemented. To explore the theoretical triangulation used two frameworks, first, Wolfsfeld's political communication, and second, the broader literature of the media system. This is kept transparent by articulating

the process of finding samples, inclusion and exclusion criteria, thematic analysis coding process and analytical framework. This enhances the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the review.

Results and Discussion

This study's objectives of examining the influence relationship between the political and the media in Nepal based on the principles of Wolfsfeld and studying how the process of political change, political entity's media ownership, state advertising, legal uncertainties, journalistic routines, and digital media influence editorial autonomy, press freedom and the discourse of the public are strived for in this review. The study is qualitative and integrative review in nature, so as a result, statistical results are not generated but rather secondary sources, documents and reports of the institutions involved in the subject and the scholarly writings are analyzed and synthesized in thematic interpretations to gain an understanding of the study problem. It is viable because of the interweaving nature of the relationship between media and politics in Nepal, particularly in light of the digitalization process, regulatory unpredictability, and weak media-market structures, all of which have impacted on the country's media landscape in recent years, as well as its political transitions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Snyder, 2019; Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022). This dialogue is thus grounded in the observation of patterns that emerge in relation to political communication and in broader theories of political communication and media systems, including that of parallelism in politics, ownership pressure, dependence on state advertising, elite sourcing, framing of politics around conflict, and regulation of the digital platforms. It suggests a media environment which is not completely under control of the government or completely

independent from it, but functioning within a sphere of negotiations where the various interest groups (political, economic, legal, professional and technological) can have their voice heard when developing democratic communication..

From Direct State Control to Competitive Political Parallelism

The first major discovery is the change in the relationship between media and politics in Nepal from direct control of the media by the state to competitive parallelism between both. Political parties were curbed and there was stringent censorship of public communication during the Panchayat period. The media lacked freedom of expression due to censorship, state ownership and the lack of political competition. This pattern is in line with the first rule that political power tends to be manifested as power over the news, especially in cases where political institutions dominate communication channels (Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022).

The political change in Nepal in 1990 led to a pluralization of the media. Public debate was extended by private newspapers, FM radio, commercial television, community media and, more recently, the Internet portals. But the opening of the media did not lead to editorial independence. The influence of political parties, ideology networks, business groups, advertisers and state institutions on news production remained. Thus, in case of Nepal, it is more of a shift from controls to competition of political influence than from controls to freedom.

This observation goes well with first objective of the study i.e. to examine the power nexus between politics and the media in the light of five principles of Wolfsfeld in Nepal. Political power in Nepal is manifested through access, ownership, party networks, state resources and visibility, the analysis suggests.

The political sources, legal security, advertising, and attention of the media are also vital to media institutions. As such, politics and media are not considered independent institutions but rather interdependent fields (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2011).

Constitutional Guarantees and Regulatory Uncertainty

Security situation is another finding as Nepal has robust provisions clearly laid forth in its constitution on freedom of media but implementation of these provisions is not clear. The Constitution of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015) acknowledges the right to communication and forbids any form of prior censorship of publications, broadcasting and electronic communications. People held constitutional guarantees that sought to establish a democratic basis of freedom of press and expression. The review also reveals that constitutional rights will be harmed where the basis of ordinary laws or regulatory practices are vague, too broad or not evenly applied. Fears related to laws pertaining to cybercrimes, defamation, public order, national security, and digital platforms may intensify among journalists and citizens. But even in the absence of legal censorship authors can be subjected to self-censorship through legal uncertainty. It's an indirect control since journalists can be deterred from critical reporting because of the potential of legal, political or economic liabilities.

The Social Media Bill 2081 is another illustration of this tension. In 2025, UNESCO initially discussed this bill, and stressed the significance of good free speech and digital rights in regulating platforms. The Centre for Law and Democracy (2025) has also pointed out that the bill vests too great of a regulatory authority in government actors and lacked broad

content restrictions. The second objective of the study attempts to understand the impact of legal ambiguity and digital regulation on the editorial autonomy, press freedom and public discourse in Nepal, the results of which support the present observation.

Ownership, State Advertising, and Editorial Autonomy

The third finding concerns the political economy of media. Nepal has a large media landscape, but numerical growth alone does not guarantee independence. Reporters Without Borders ranked Nepal 87th out of 180 countries in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index, with a score of 54.80. The same profile also shows that Nepal's media environment faces political, economic, legal, social, and security-related pressures.

The review indicates that ownership patterns, commercial interests, and state advertising influence editorial autonomy. State advertising is useful when it informs citizens about public services, health, elections, laws, and development programs. However, when its distribution lacks transparency, it can become a political instrument. Friendly outlets may receive benefits, while critical media may be economically weakened. In this way, economic dependency can function as indirect editorial control.

This finding supports Hallin and Mancini's (2004) argument that media systems are shaped by political parallelism, media-market structure, journalistic professionalism, and state intervention. It also supports Wolfsfeld's view that power over news is not always exercised through open censorship. In Nepal, influence may operate through advertising allocation, ownership links, political patronage, and financial vulnerability.

Source Dependence, Elite Networks, and News Visibility

The fourth finding shows that informal relationships between journalists, political actors, media owners, and advertisers shape political news. Journalists require access to political information, while political actors require media visibility. This mutual dependence is normal in democratic communication. However, when access becomes too closely tied to personal relations, professional distance may weaken.

In Nepal, political reporting often depends on leaders, party spokespersons, ministers, senior officials, and other elite sources. This creates a risk of access journalism, where journalists may avoid strong criticism in order to maintain information channels. Such patterns also affect public discourse because elite voices become more visible than local, provincial, minority, or marginalized voices.

This finding is connected with Wolfsfeld's third principle: journalism cannot be completely objective because it is shaped by selection, sourcing, framing, and emphasis (Wolfsfeld, 2011, 2022). The observation also supports the methodology's use of thematic analysis, because the same pattern appears across several themes: political access, framing, professional routines, and unequal visibility.

Framing, Storytelling, and Political Conflict

The fifth finding is that Nepali political news frequently follows a conflict-oriented and leader-centred narrative. Political coverage often focuses on coalition changes, party disputes, parliamentary conflict, appointments, scandals, and statements by senior leaders. These issues are important, but excessive focus on elite conflict may reduce attention to policy outcomes, public service delivery, local governance, social justice, and institutional accountability.

This finding reflects Wolfsfeld's fourth principle that media organizations are strongly oriented toward telling "good stories." Political conflict provides drama, characters, crisis, and resolution. Therefore, it attracts both journalists and audiences. However, when politics is mainly framed as a game of leaders and parties, citizens may receive limited explanation of deeper structural issues.

Framing theory is also relevant here. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting some aspects of reality and making them more salient. McCombs and Shaw (1972) similarly show that media influence public priorities by highlighting some issues over others. In Nepal, the repeated framing of politics through crisis, conflict, and personality may shape how citizens understand democracy, federalism, corruption, secularism, transitional justice, and social media regulation.

Digital Platforms and the Reconfiguration of Political Communication

The sixth finding is that digital platforms have reconfigured the media-politics nexus. Social media has enabled citizens, activists, youth groups, political leaders, and diaspora communities to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. It has expanded political expression and accelerated public debate. At the same time, it has also created new risks, including misinformation, harassment, algorithmic amplification, political propaganda, and regulatory overreach.

The 2025 social media blocking episode illustrates this transformation. Associated Press reported that Nepal blocked about two dozen major platforms, including Facebook, X, and YouTube, for failing to comply with registration requirements. Later protests against the policy turned deadly, with Reuters reporting that 19

people were killed before the ban was lifted. This event shows that digital platforms are no longer only communication tools. They have become part of Nepal's political environment itself.

This finding extends Wolfsfeld's framework. Political power, media power, and platform power now interact together. Governments may regulate platforms, platforms control visibility, political actors use digital networks for mobilization, and citizens use social media for resistance and public accountability. Therefore, the Nepal case suggests that contemporary political communication theory must include platform governance as a central dimension.

Inequality in Public Discourse and Marginalized Voices

The seventh finding concerns unequal visibility in the public sphere. Nepal's formal media freedom has expanded, but public discourse remains uneven. National media coverage often gives priority to Kathmandu-based politics, senior leaders, ministries, parliamentary debates,

and national-level conflicts. Local and provincial issues often receive attention only during crises, disasters, protests, or scandals.

This creates a democratic gap. Dalit, Madheshi, Janajati, Tharu, Muslim, women, migrant, rural, disabled, and minority-language communities may be visible in moments of conflict but less visible in everyday policy discussion. Therefore, media pluralism must be understood not only as the number of outlets but also as the diversity of voices, languages, regions, and social experiences represented in public debate.

This observation supports the study's second objective by showing how journalistic routines, media structure, and digital access shape public discourse. It also adds a Nepal-specific theme to Wolfsfeld's framework: communicative decentralization. In a federal democratic system, political decentralization must be supported by media decentralization.

Table 1
Observation-Based Analytical Summary

Observation From the Review	Analysis	Interpretation
Nepal moved from Panchayat-era control to a plural media system after 1990.	Political control became less direct but more competitive and network-based.	Media freedom expanded, but political influence remained.
Constitutional guarantees exist, especially Article 19.	Legal ambiguity and broad regulatory powers can still create fear.	Formal rights require clear laws and independent institutions.
Nepal has many media outlets.	Ownership, state advertising, and financial pressure affect editorial autonomy.	Media plurality does not automatically mean media independence.
Journalists depend on political sources.	Access-based reporting can privilege elite voices.	Public discourse may become leader-centred and Kathmandu-centred.

Observation From the Review	Analysis	Interpretation
Political news often focuses on conflict and personalities.	Media storytelling favours drama, crisis, and recognizable actors.	Structural policy issues may receive weaker attention.
Digital platforms expanded political participation.	They also introduced misinformation, harassment, and regulatory conflict.	Platform governance is now central to political communication.
Marginalized voices remain unevenly represented.	Federalism has not fully produced communicative inclusion.	Democratic media reform must include local, provincial, and minority voices.

The findings show that Nepal's media–politics relationship is best understood as a negotiated field of power. It is neither a fully independent democratic media system nor a completely controlled authoritarian system. Instead, Nepal represents a mixed and transitional media environment where constitutional guarantees, political competition, ownership structures, state advertising, professional routines, and digital platforms interact.

The study. First, Wolfsfeld's five principles help explain how political power influences media visibility, how political crisis disrupts official control, how journalism is shaped by framing and sourcing, how media prefer conflict-driven stories, and how media effects are often indirect. Second, the Nepal case shows that political change, media ownership, legal ambiguity, journalistic routines, state advertising, and digital platforms shape editorial autonomy, press freedom, and public discourse in complex ways.

Methodologically, the findings are consistent with a qualitative integrative review. The study does not claim to generate statistical results or causal proof. Instead, it synthesizes secondary sources through thematic analysis,

using Wolfsfeld's framework deductively and Nepal-specific themes inductively. This approach is suitable because Nepal's media–politics nexus is spread across legal texts, press freedom reports, academic literature, policy debates, media monitoring documents, and contemporary news events.

The main theoretical contribution is that Nepal both confirms and extends Wolfsfeld's framework. It confirms the link between political power and media power. However, it also shows that power is dispersed across parties, factions, business groups, state institutions, advertisers, local governments, and digital platforms. Therefore, future analysis of Nepal's political communication should combine Wolfsfeld's framework with political economy, media system theory, public sphere theory, and digital platform governance.

The practical implication is clear. Nepal needs stronger editorial independence, transparent state advertising, ownership disclosure, journalist safety mechanisms, rights-based digital regulation, and stronger support for local and community media. Media reform should not focus only on preventing censorship. It should also address economic vulnerability,

political patronage, digital rights, professional standards, and inclusive representation. Further research under society 5.0 is essential (Mishra, 2023; Ananda et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This review, therefore, finds political and media relations in Nepal as a power nexus that is complex, negotiated, dynamic and constantly changing. The study demonstrates the shift of political power to media visibility in Nepal following five principles of political communication developed by Gadi Wolfsfeld. The study reveals how political power is translated into political media visibility through institutional power, elite access, ownership configuration, party bases, government banners, legal fuzziness and digital legislation. Meanwhile, media also have an influence on politics, in the ways of agenda setting, shaping on public issues, construction of political storyline, legitimizing actors, and creating and public pressure.

The results suggest that the media landscape in Nepal has shifted from a one-party state control in the Panchayat era to more pluralistic but yet politically polarized media environment, post-1990. This growth has led to growing awareness and participation in communication by the citizens and access to information. But the media diversity has not been the guarantee of editorial autonomy, independence of professional practice or inclusive democratic debate. Production and circulation of political news is still affected by political parallelism, economic dependency, opacity of ownership, state advertising, reliance of sources by the elite and a limited focus on Kathmandu.

The study also concludes that Nepal's political communication landscape has undergone a transformation due to use of digital platform. Where they have built some

alternatives, they have built spaces for activists, accountability, and for citizen expression, at the same time they also have brought new problems, such as misinformation, online abuse, algorithmic influence, surveillance, and what has become known as regulatory overreach. Media freedom in Nepal is not reckonable by the lack of direct censorship; it is more important to assess by all other factors that makes media free. It has to also be evaluated via editorial independence, financial stability, legal clarity, journalist safety, representativeness, rights over digital content, and transparency of ownership.

Nepal's media system, overall, could be said to be plural with a weak institutional structure. In a vibrant and democratic communication there should be transparency of ownership, equal allocation of state advertising, democratic, independent and rights-based media regulation, and more protection of journalists, more support for local and community media and more weight given to marginalised voices. Empirical tools like content analysis, ownership mapping, newsroom research, audience studies and news platform analysis can help to gain further insights into the media-politics relationship in Nepal in future research.

References

- Ananda, N., Kobayashi, S., Mishra, A. K., & Aithal, P. S. (2023). Mandala in operation of Web 3.0. *International Journal of Case Studies in Business, IT, and Education*, 7(1), 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7727160>
- Bhattarai, B. (2026). Unveiling media capture in Nepal: Insights from disclosures of journalists and media workers [Doctoral disseratation, CDJMC, TU]. TUCL. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849251414748>

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature* (R. Johnson, Ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Centre for Law and Democracy. (2025). *Nepal: Note on the social media act* (Bill), 2081.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Fraser, N. (1990). *Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy*. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Freedom House. (2026). *Nepal: Freedom in the World 2026 country report*.
- Government of Nepal. (2015). *The Constitution of Nepal*. Nepal Law Commission.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2012). *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139005098>
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- International Federation of Journalists. (2025). *Nepal: Social media law threatens free expression*.
- K.C., B. (2019). Polarized pluralistic model: Characteristics of Nepalese press. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7, 161–186. <https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v7i0.27911>
- Martin Chautari. (2021). *Freedom of expression in Nepal in the digital world: A policy review* (Research Brief No. 31). <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/43>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). SAGE.
- Media Action Nepal. (2025). *From intimidation to impunity: Rising threats against media in Nepal: Press freedom report 2025*.
- Mishra, A. K. (2023). Digital academic operation: A case of Nepal. In P. K. Paul, D. Gurrapu, & E. R. K. (Eds.), *Digital education: Foundation & emergence with challenges, cases* (pp. 219–228). New Delhi Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8066273>
- Public Service Broadcasting Nepal. (2025). *Pre-launch of PSB Nepal beginning Tuesday to formalize merger of Radio Nepal and Nepal Television*.
- Reporters Without Borders. (2026). *Nepal: In 2026 World Press Freedom Index*. RSF.
- Rijal, N. P. (2014). *Media development in Nepal since 1990: Challenges and central role of regulation and reform* [Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University]. CORE. <https://doi.org/10.25439/rmt.27351138>
- Sharma, G. (2025, September 4). Nepal to block some social media including Facebook. *Reuters*.
- Sharma, G., & Chitrakar, N. (2025, September 9). Young anti-corruption protesters oust Nepal PM Oli. *Reuters*.

- Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (2013). *Mediating the message in the 21st century: A media sociology perspective* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930434>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283>
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, 14(3), 207–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375>
- UNESCO. (2013). *Assessment of media development in Nepal: Based on UNESCO's media development indicators*. UNESCO Office in Kathmandu.
- UNESCO. (2025). *Official review of Nepal's Social Media Bill 2081: Upholding freedom of expression in the digital age*.
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2011). *Making sense of media and politics: Five principles in political communication*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203839874>
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2022). *Making sense of media and politics: Five principles in political communication* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176657>
- Wolfsfeld, G., Segev, E., & Sheaffer, T. (2013). Social media and the Arab Spring: Politics comes first. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18(2), 115–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212471716>

