

# Role of professional organizations of journalists in defending press freedom

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## Abstract:

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees press freedom in Nepal, and the history of Nepali media spans over 100 years. Similarly, the Right to Information Act (2007) is also an important legal instrument to protect press freedom. The Article 17(2) (a) of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, Article 19 ensures the right to communication, and Article 27 guarantees the right to information. Clause (3) of the Right to Information Act (2007) further ensures every citizen's right to information and provides for its enforcement. While the number of media outlets in Nepal has grown rapidly, the quality of journalism has often been questioned. Along with the increase in media outlets and journalists, the number of professional organizations has also expanded. However, these organizations remain divided along political, ethnic, and news beat lines, and have not been able to play effective roles in defending press freedom or ensuring the professional security of journalists.

As a result, journalists in Nepal continue to face issues like personal and professional insecurity, limited opportunities for skill

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development, frequent violations of press freedom, and concerns over labor rights. A few organizations, such as NEFEJ and SEJON, have been more effective because of their focused mandates and financial independence.

This study, based on secondary sources, key informant interviews, and an online survey, highlights the need to consolidate organizations with similar mandates in order to increase their effectiveness in promoting ethical journalistic practices, restoring public trust, and safeguarding press freedom. The existence of multiple organizations with overlapping roles weakens the collective bargaining power of media professionals and limits their ability to achieve economic independence, as they compete for scarce resources.

**Keywords:** *Press freedom, professional security, legal instruments, ethical practices, public trust, media outlets and media growth.*

## **Introduction**

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees press freedom in Nepal, and the history of Nepali media spans over 100 years. Similarly, the Right to Information Act (2007) is also an important legal instrument to protect press freedom. Article 17(2)(a) of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, Article 19 ensures the right to communication, and Article 27 guarantees the right to information. Clause (3) of the Right to Information Act (2007) further ensures every citizen's right to information and provides for its enforcement. However, media outlets and journalists have not been able to fully exercise these rights, as violations of media freedom continue unabated. Although Nepali media has a history of over 100 years and its growth is notable among South Asian countries, sustainability and professionalism remain in doubt. A majority of media outlets are either controlled by interest groups, including politicians, or operated to serve vested interests. Due to a lack of a professional environment and fading public trust, many professionals have been leaving the field.

With the increase in media outlets and journalists, the number of professional organizations representing journalists from different castes, beats, and political affiliations has also grown. Ideally, these organizations should play a significant role in strengthening media institutions and building the capacity of journalists. Instead, they are often limited to pursuing narrow interests rather than contributing meaningfully to the sector. Moreover, they have not been effective in ensuring the professional and personal security of journalists, largely due to financial constraints and weak management.

**Research objective:** The objective of this research is to assess the effectiveness of professional journalist organizations in upholding press freedom and promoting the professional development of journalists.

### **Study methodology:**

The study adopts both qualitative and quantitative research designs. In qualitative research design, Key Informant Interviews (KII) method has been followed, while in quantitative online survey method has been followed. KIIs were conducted with selected journalists as well as current and former leaders of professional journalist associations and academicians to gather their perspectives. A brief online survey was also carried out to capture journalists' views on the issue.

### **History of Nepali media**

The history of Nepali journalism can be traced back to the publication of the state-owned Gorkhapatra in 1901, while professional journalism began after the people's movement of 1990. Mission journalism, which emerged during the Panchayat era—when some media promoted democratic ideologies despite government restrictions while others promoted the interests of the regime—continued in both the democratic and republican eras. Journalism in Nepal evolved with different political contexts: the Panchayat

era, multiparty democracy, the Maoist insurgency, the direct rule of King Gyanendra, and the republican set-up (Dahal, 2019).

Despite a huge increase in media outlets, the government remains the largest media owner. It operates the only news agency, the Gorkhapatra Corporation, which publishes two broadsheet dailies and three magazines, and manages public service broadcasting through the merged Radio Nepal and Nepal Television. These state-run media mostly focus on covering government activities and promoting the ruling party's interests. During the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), state media used to dub Maoist activities as “terrorist acts” following their designation as a terrorist organization (Dahal, 2018), while some private outlets displayed sympathy toward the Maoists.

Since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Nepal has made significant progress in media growth in terms of numbers and nationwide coverage (Onta, 2001), though quality remains questionable. The launch of private-sector broadsheet newspapers with large-scale investment introduced independent, corporate, and professional journalism (Onta, 2001). Similarly, local radio stations expanded rapidly after 1997, and private television channels emerged four years later.

Nepal has 8,010 registered newspapers, 1,193 radio stations, 246 television channels, and 4,948 online news portals (DOIB, 2025), but their sustainability remains uncertain. The exponential growth of media outlets amid a limited advertising market – now increasingly diverted to social media – has driven Nepali media to cross ethical boundaries. Press Council Nepal recorded 413 incidents of code-of-conduct violations in 2023/24. Due to a lack of sustainable financial resources, many media outlets – particularly those operating at the local and regional levels – are affiliated with political leaders or operate to serve their direct interests. Many local and regional radio stations are directly invested in, controlled by, or managed by politicians (Kharel, 2010; Pandey, 2019).

The closure of popular media outlets like Space Time, Space Time Today dailies, and nepalnews.com, the first online portal run by Mercantile Communications, highlights the financial hardships and obstacles from journalists, faced by media institutions. While news portals continue to grow annually, most lack sustainable business models (Bista, 2015). Only a few media institutions are considered economically viable. Due to the limited advertising market, media owners diversify into other industries while maintaining media outlets merely for influence. For example, the owner of Kantipur Media Group, the largest media group of the country, has invested in insurance, fintech, and education sectors, while Annapurna Media Network's owner has invested in aviation, hospitals, and other businesses. This trend raises conflict-of-interest concerns, but such issues remain largely undiscussed due to weak accountability mechanisms.

## **Media freedom**

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees full press freedom, but Nepali journalists are still unable to fully exercise it (Constitution of Nepal, 2015; Reporters Without Borders, 2024). The media has played an important role during the country's major political transitions. However, the same political parties that once relied on the media during difficult times are now attempting to curtail press freedom. Attempts to curtail press freedom have also been made by various sectors. The proposed Media Council Bill, and Social Media Bill introduced by the government raised concerns because they include provisions that could restrict press freedom. The provisions of Social Media Bill related to mandated registration and increased barriers to operations, as well as ordering a ban on companies that fail to comply severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. Similarly, the vague terms of the bill to make 'digital, online and print journalism more decent, accountable and credible', gives rise to worries that independent media could be curtailed and journalists put at risk of being targeted (CPJ, 2025).

Pandey (2022) argues that Nepal's state-owned media often act as government publicity tools rather than fulfilling the watchdog role of the "fourth estate." Similar concerns are raised by RSF (2024), which highlights how financial interests compromise editorial independence and foster self-censorship. Reports also show that political patronage and personal gain undermine impartiality in Nepali media (Republica, 2017). McQuail (2005) emphasizes the pivotal role of the news media in serving as a "voice of the voiceless" and safeguarding public interests, yet Nepali media face challenges in fulfilling this responsibility. Media content is often guided by corporate ownership and personal agendas. Dahal (2002) highlights how ownership patterns shape information flow, arguing that private media tend to prioritize their business interests—sometimes even spreading misinformation—over fulfilling the public's right to information. Kharel (2017) directly links the media–corporate sector nexus, characterizing it as "money as the message".

Despite constitutional guarantees, press freedom has frequently been curtailed. Cases against online outlets and journalists are often prosecuted under the Electronic Transaction Act (2008), which restricts freedom of expression protected under the Constitution (Acharya, 2016a). For instance, on June 10, the Kathmandu District Court ordered the removal of news articles published on [www.bizmandu.com](http://www.bizmandu.com), a popular economic news portal, and [www.nepalekhabar.com](http://www.nepalekhabar.com), a leading news portal concerning Securities Board of Nepal (SEBON) chair Santosh Narayan Shrestha. Similarly, an arrest warrant was issued against journalist Dil Bhusan Pathak over YouTube content linked to the son of a former Prime Minister.

In recent years, journalists have faced direct attacks instead of proper legal procedures to address disputed reporting. This growing trend of intimidation and arbitrary action undermines both press freedom and journalistic integrity.

Media related organizations and their impact

Although there are more than 100 professional organizations representing over 9,000 journalists in Nepal, their roots can be traced back to the establishment of the Nepal Journalists’ Association on 29 March 1956 – today known as the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ). The association was formed to promote professional growth, defend press freedom, and increase cooperation with government mechanisms (FNJ, 2013).

Membership Area	Numbers of Members	Male	Female
Koshi Province	1227	968	259
Madesh	784	684	100
Bagmati	950	730	220
Gandaki	689	550	139
Lumbini	1129	903	226
Karnali Province	691	577	114
Sudurpaschim Province	746	634	112
Valley (Province 8)	1519	1242	277
Corporate Branches (Province 9)	953	754	199
Associate Organizations (Province 10)	652	556	96
Total	9340	7598	1742

Source: Federation of Nepali Journalists

Over 100 journalist-related organizations represent 9,340 journalists affiliated with the FNJ, the umbrella organization for working journalists and some others (Media Directory 2018). However, their contribution to professional development and press freedom

remains debatable. Many organizations are formed based on gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, news beat, and geographic lines. Instead of strengthening press freedom, these organizations are struggling to survive and maintain their existence. For example, the mandates of the Society of Economic Journalists-Nepal (SEJON), the Nepal Association of Financial Journalists (NAFIJ), and the Female Economic Journalists' Association (FEJA) appear to be similar (Comparative Study, 2025). This is just one instance, as there are many such organizations with overlapping mandates. While the Constitution of Nepal provides freedom to form organizations and carry out their activities, having multiple organizations with similar objectives may confuse relevant stakeholders and weaken collective bargaining. Several journalists interviewed during the research reported that they are affiliated with three to five different associations, yet they still felt insecure and doubted whether these organizations would support them in times of need. Leaders of Nepal Press Union, Press Chautari, and Press Centre claimed memberships of around 8,000, 7,526, and 4,000 journalists respectively – numbers that exceed FNJ's reported membership (Personal Interviews, 2025). A participant of the KII shared that she did not renew her membership in any professional organization because they failed to provide necessary support to working journalists. She further stated that the leadership of such organizations has been using them and their members to serve their own interests.

In many countries, press councils function as independent bodies working to uphold press freedom and promote ethical journalism. In Nepal, however, despite having one of the highest numbers of media-related organizations in the region, journalists continue to face serious challenges to both professional and personal security. Institutions formed by the government—such as Press Council Nepal, the National Information Commission (NIC), the Minimum Wage Fixation Committee, and the Advertisement Board—have yet to prove effective due to politicized appointment processes and weak institutional frameworks.



Dr. Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, a researcher and Professor of Journalism, Communication, and Media Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada, posits that the establishment of organizations in Canada and other developed nations presents significant challenges, primarily due to the heightened levels of accountability and responsibility required—elements that are often deficient within Nepali media-related organizations. According to international practice, a federation may be constituted when a minimum of three like-minded independent organizations reach a consensus to collaborate. In Canada, the law does not stipulate a specific numerical requirement, whereas in India, the Societies Registration Act mandates that federations typically comprise at least seven member organizations. In Nepal, the formation of a federation necessitates the participation of nine like-minded organizations.

Acharya further adds: Notably, in 2025, some journalists of Nepali origin established an International Journalists' Federation, which bears a resemblance to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), based in Brussels, Belgium. Additionally, a group of working journalists in Nepal is endeavoring to create a Federation of Working Journalists, although the specifics of their contributions remain ambiguous. In numerous countries, the absence of a federation dedicated to media and journalists does not preclude the enjoyment of greater freedom and professional security for journalists. Conversely, the lack of effective accountability mechanisms in Nepal has led media-related organizations to function not as effective institutions, but rather as vehicles for leadership to consolidate power—exemplifying a clear case of impunity (KII, 2025 August 19).

The partisan affiliation of journalists has further undermined independent reporting. Since majority of Nepali media outlets are politically linked, they are sometimes used as vehicles for propaganda and misinformation. For example, candidates for FNJ leadership are routinely recommended by political parties. During the convention of Press Chautari Nepal, the head of CPN-UML's

Publicity Department urged Press Chautari Nepal representatives to elect leadership through “consensus” (Khabarhub.com, 2025), a move criticized as party interference in professional associations.

Because many organizations struggle financially, lacking sustainable income, they often lack the resources to invest in training or capacity building. Government support for journalists often favors those with political connections. Bimala Tumkhewa, a former chairperson of Sancharika Samuha (a women journalists’ network with over 1,200 members), admitted that although associations should have clear plans for capacity development, her tenure failed to deliver such programs due to resource constraints, even though they did well in expanding networks in the district and provincial levels (KII, 2025 August 20).

Internal conflicts and weak institutional development remain the main bottlenecks. Tumkhewa observed that while new organizations provide more leadership positions, they have not ensured professional or personal security for journalists. She stressed the need for journalists to rise above partisan interests and work toward collective institutional development. Since journalists demand accountability and transparency from other institutions, they too must ensure integrity and uphold professional ethics.

Similarly, the chairperson of the Tamang Journalists’ Association, Netra Tamang, emphasized the need for leadership development training for board members, fellowships to improve writing skills, and training in new technologies to strengthen associations. He argued that many organizations fail to play an effective role because they lack clear agendas, while leaders often focus on politics or financial irregularities rather than genuine professional development. As a result, retaining skilled journalists in the profession has become increasingly difficult due to weak professional and personal security (KII, 2025 August 20).

However, there are some good examples as well. For instance, the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) has been instrumental in raising awareness and building capacity in the areas of environment and climate change, while the Society of Economic Journalists Nepal (SEJON) has contributed valuable insights to policy development. These two examples highlight the importance of economic independence and focused programs.

### **Professional organizations' role in personal and professional security of journalists**

Despite having the highest number of professional organizations, the professional and personal security of journalists is at stake due to the apathy of media houses in providing basic safety and security facilities. Being a glamorous profession, journalism attracts many people; however, this has led media houses to engage in gross violations of labor rights while neglecting the professional security of journalists. Journalists who work to ensure accountability and expose wrongdoing in society are often subjected to discrimination in their workplaces, yet very few are able to raise these concerns or seek justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn dealt a severe blow to the Nepali media sector. A study by Madhu Acharya and Bhumi Chapagain on the impact of COVID-19 in the journalism sector revealed that 10 percent of journalists lost their jobs, while 14 percent of media houses were unable to pay salaries during the pandemic and lockdown (Khabarhub.com, 2020). Following the pandemic and recession, most media houses have been operating with limited human resources, creating stressful work environments, and failing to provide remuneration commensurate with journalists' efforts. Among 20 surveyed journalists, 10 reported not receiving regular pay and facing increased work pressure, with many colleagues having their contracts terminated (Online Survey, 2025 August).

Incidents of Press Freedom Violations					
	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Incidents	Affected Journal-ists	Affected Journal-ists	Affected Journal-ists	Affected Journal-ists	Affected Journal-ists
Murder	1				
Threat	19	19	13	15	36
Obstruction / Vandalism	17	6	56	20	58
Misbehaviour	7	9	18	20	22
Court Case	3			1	
Attack / Man-handle	28	23	28	20	36
Arrest Detention	7	2	5	7	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>167</b>

*Source: Annual Press Freedom Reports of Freedom Forum*

Representation and retention of women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups remain low in Nepali media due to weak professional security and poor pay. Of the 9,340 journalists affiliated with FNJ (FNJ, 2024), only 1,742 are women, despite women holding both the Chair and Vice-Chair positions at FNJ. Very few women occupy editorial positions. In 2023–24, Sancharika Samuha received 23 complaints from women journalists regarding online violence, job dismissals, and delayed salaries.

State-owned media are frequently accused of siding with those in power, often amplifying government narratives while sidelining critical voices. For example, during debates over the Social Media and IT Bills, state outlets either ignored expert criticism or echoed government positions, failing to provide balanced coverage, while the private media and international media rights organizations condemned the bill. Unfortunately, such issues are often overlooked

by professional organizations of journalists and raising issues on biased coverage of state-owned media (Review of coverage on state-owned and private media regarding Social Media and IT Bills, 2025).

At least 36 journalists lost their lives, and four more disappeared between 1996 and 2017 (FNJ, 2018). The FNJ reported 73 cases of media rights violations in a single year (May 4, 2024, to April 30, 2025) (FNJ, 2025), including two journalist deaths—the highest toll since the civil war. Violations rose from 62 in the same period the previous year. On March 28, 2025, Avenues Television photojournalist Suresh Rajak was killed while covering a pro-monarch demonstration. Similarly, on November 10, 2024, journalist Suresh Bhul died following a brutal attack after a minor dispute. During this period, two journalists were arrested, nine faced obstruction in carrying out their duties, 24 experienced mistreatment, 20 were attacked, and 16 reported professional insecurity.

Financial instability has deepened these challenges. As advertisers shift toward digital and social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), traditional outlets are struggling to manage their revenue. Meanwhile, shrinking revenues from YouTube and other new media have forced outlets to downsize staff, often unfairly. Journalists allege that layoffs violate labor laws, with inadequate compensation or arbitrary dismissals (Personal Interviews, August 2025). In 2021, FNJ reported that over 10 percent of journalists nationwide faced layoffs, underpayment, or delayed wages during the first months of the pandemic. In October 2023, FNJ organized a protest at Kantipur Media Group after 82 workers were dismissed. The dispute dragged on for months, with some dismissed staff rejecting the FNJ-KMG agreement, saying it failed to address their concerns.

Press Council Nepal has been proactive in monitoring violations of the code of conduct, in addition to receiving complaints from

victims. The data below presents complaints received by Press Council Nepal through self-monitoring, individual filings, and public complaints.

Data of Code of Conduct Violation recorded by Press Council Nepal				
Year	Self-Mon- itoring	Complaints Filed	Public Complaints	Total
2080/81 (2024/25)	141	339	13	493
2079/80 (2023/24)	259	221	3	483
2078/79 (2022/23)	324	203	8	535
2077/78 (2021/22)	192	479	7	678
2076/77 (2020/21)	729	194	12	935

Source: Annual Reports of Press Council Nepal

At a time when journalists already struggle with low pay – barely above manual workers’ basic wages—benefits and job security remain a distant dream. Professional associations failed to raise the issue or advocate for compensation, reflecting a lack of courage and effectiveness among media organizations.

Discussions about minimum standards and qualifications for journalists have continued for years but have never been implemented, leaving the profession vulnerable and insecure.

The role of professional organizations should be to train journalists on basic safety and security while covering events, enhance professional capacity, and provide support when needed. However, most of these organizations limit themselves to issuing press releases rather than providing tangible assistance. The proliferation

of journalist-related organizations without clear roles, combined with divisions based on political and personal interests, has further weakened collective advocacy efforts.

## Discussion

Various studies indicate that the rapid expansion of media outlets and the number of journalists in Nepal is disproportionate to the country's economic capacity and the size of its advertising market. Parallel to this growth, there has also been a proliferation of journalist-related professional organizations. However, their contribution to strengthening professionalism within Nepali journalism has remained minimal, as many operate primarily as activist entities rather than institutions fostering professional standards.

Interviews with journalists, researchers, and both current and former officials of media-related organizations reveal that most of these organizations lack sustainable business models. Consequently, they have been unable to develop strategic frameworks for advancing professional development, raising awareness, or conducting advocacy on critical media issues. Heavy dependence on government or donor funding further exposes them to political influence, while leadership practices often reflect self-promotion and personal gain rather than collective advancement of the journalism sector.

The findings also suggest that these organizations compete largely on the basis of membership numbers rather than service quality. As a result, many journalists maintain multiple affiliations, reflecting insecurity but simultaneously straining their time and resources. This fragmentation underscores the urgent need for consolidation. Stronger, unified organizations with sustainable business plans and diversified income streams—such as through paid training, research initiatives, and publications—could better support media professionalism and independence, reducing reliance on state or donor resources.

## Conclusion and recommendation

Nepali media still has a long way to go in becoming the true voice of the voiceless, as it remains unable to consistently focus on public concerns. In a context marked by political instability and corruption, the public expects media to play an effective watchdog role, but the sector has largely fallen short. The uncontrolled mushrooming of media outlets—out of proportion to the national economy and advertising market—has fostered unhealthy competition, unethical practices, and reliance on unclear funding sources. Weak regulatory mechanisms, lacking both resources and willpower, have further allowed such practices to persist.

Similarly, while journalist-related organizations have grown in number, most are ineffective and serve the narrow interests of their leadership rather than supporting professional development. Political influence, weak governance, and poor financial sustainability have limited their credibility. In some cases, even district chapters of the FNJ have resorted to unethical practices to sustain operations. This trend undermines trust in journalism and diverts attention from capacity building. Incidents of press freedom violations and breaches of the code of conduct reflect the failure of these institutions to effectively defend press freedom and uphold ethical journalism.

What Nepal needs is fewer but stronger institutions that are resourceful, accountable, and genuinely committed to ethical journalism. Consolidation of organizations with overlapping objectives would help eliminate duplication and enhance effectiveness. Professional bodies should emulate the proactive role of Press Council Nepal in self-regulation and enforcement of ethical standards. Sustainable revenue sources—through training, capacity development, and organizational expertise—are critical to reducing financial dependency and safeguarding independence.

The Federation of Nepali Journalists, as the umbrella organization, must lead this transformation by prioritizing ethical practices,



promoting transparency, and ensuring the professional security of journalists. Distinguishing press freedom from vested interests, while enforcing accountability among journalists and media organizations, is key to restoring public trust. Ultimately, building a few strong, independent, and well-resourced organizations is far more valuable than maintaining numerous ineffective ones. Only through such reforms can Nepali media strengthen its credibility, safeguard professional integrity, and sustain its crucial role in democracy.

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