Introduction

In early 1990, as the king-led Panchayat System gasped for its final breath, the most powerful media in Nepal were all state-owned. The Gorkhapatra Sansthan, a 'corporation' under government control, produced the two most important daily newspapers, *Gorkhapatra* (in Nepali) and *The Rising Nepal* (in English). Similarly, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television (NTV), both also owned by the state, had complete monopoly over the electronic media. The non-state media was confined to weekly newspapers owned by private individuals, most of whom were affiliated to one or another banned political party. Then came the People's Movement in the spring of 1990, which put an end to absolute monarchy and the Panchayat system.

The media boom since 1990

Due to a confluence of several factors, the demise of the Panchayat, of course, being the most significant, media was the one sector which recorded massive growth during the decade of the 1990s. This growth was seen not only quantitatively but also

qualitatively in terms of copy production. By late 2006, the media scenario was unrecognisable to those who only knew Nepal from the earlier era. And the most dramatic changes came in print and radio.

While the two government newspapers continue to be published, their influence has vastly diminished in the face of stiff competition from seven other broadsheet dailies—five in Nepali and two in English—all from the private sector. In 1993, a new era in print journalism began with the launch of two private-sector broadsheet dailies, *Kantipur* (in Nepali) and *The Kathmandu Post* (in English). The success of these newspapers, in particular the financial record of *Kantipur*, has not yet been replicated by others who came in their wake. These include *Himalaya Times, Nepal Samacharpatra, Rajdhani, The Himalayan Times, Annapurna Post* and several others which have ceased publication. Nevertheless, these papers have made the daily news market fairly competitive.

The weekly Nepali-language tabloids (known as *saptahiks*) continue to exert substantive influence in political circles and, if only for that reason, have to be considered part of the mainstream media in Nepal. They are mostly run by publishers and editors close to political parties and their factions, and the general prediction of their demise with the advent of corporate print media in the mid-1990s has proved to be clearly off the mark. For these tabloids continue to provide grist for the political mill, with even occasional investigative pieces that the larger dailies tend to shy away from, and demonstrate a daring that the larger dailies do not. The investment required for weeklies is extremely modest, as are the printing costs, using as they do subsidised newsprint and black-and-white printing. Since reader taste for this format of print media is still robust, it is expected that weekly newspapers will still be around for the next few years even when they will not

be able to recover their full operating costs from the market. The most popular weeklies found in the market today include the following: *Deshantar, Chalphal, Prakash, Sanghu, Tarun, Jana Ekata, Janadesh, Dristi, Punarjagaran, Jana Astha, Budhabar, Ghatana ra Bichar, Hank, Saptahik Bimarsha* and *Nepali Times*. These weeklies have an estimated circulation of 10,000 to 25,000 each. But it is unlikely that these circulation figures will increase because this genre of print journalism no longer attracts the best talent.

Since the year 1999, within the various print media forms, it is magazines that have seen the most spectacular growth. Influential magazines include both those published by commercial publishers and those that have a particular political brand image. The investment in this genre has come from both big investors who have spent a lot of money in creating a market for their general newsmagazines (e.g., *Himal Khabarpatrika, Nepal, Samaya*) and others with specific profiles. In the latter category, for instance, *Mulyankan* is a Nepali monthly that is very popular with left activists and workers and its sister publication, *Nava Yuba* caters to members of the youth who are searching for serious and non-glamorous information and analyses. *Sadhana* is a monthly family health digest and *Bimochan* and *Wave* can be described as monthly youth magazines. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also publish quite a few periodicals but the ones that made a national mark some years ago —*Himal* bimonthly, *Asmita,* and *Bikas* (all in Nepali)—are no longer being published while none others have clear visibility in the national print radar. The circulation of the most successful magazines varies from about 10,000 to above 50,000.

Along with a growth in magazines and broadsheet dailies, news photography too is showing signs of maturing into a potent genre by itself. Offset printing had been available for the state

print media in the pre-1990 period but it was only when that technology began to become more accessible to private commercial media in the following years that newsphotography took off. Private print media houses started hiring full-time photojournalists in 1993 and that practice has now been followed by almost all the leading newspapers and magazines. Photo-stories have now become a common feature in print publications.

Although the state-owned Radio Nepal continues to be the most powerful media in Nepal with a communication infrastructure unmatched by any other institution, there has been a phenomenal growth in independent FM radio. By October 2006, licences had been issued to over 100 independent radio operators, out of which about 50 had gone on air with regular programing. Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 (owned by the NGO, Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists), which received its licence in May 1997, was the trailblazer in the movement for independent FM radio in Nepal. While most of the initial growth in the radio sector was limited to the Kathmandu Valley and cities like Hetaunda, Pokhara, and Butwal, much of the growth in the recent past has happened in semi-urban or rural areas of Nepal.

In terms of radio station ownership, NGOs, cooperatives, locally elected bodies and private commercial companies own and manage FM radio stations with their own transmission sets and towers. This variety in ownership is an important indication of the pluralism achieved in radio in Nepal. Radio is the most democratic medium, because it is cheap and can be localised. Countries with longer experiences of democracy in South Asia, namely India and Sri Lanka, have for long talked about such plural possibilities for radio in their respective mediascapes without much to show in terms of achievement. India is mostly doing very expensive, tender-based private radio in the metros with some licences given to educational or community broadcasters.

Nepal has gone in the other direction, and this is ideal for a country with so many different identities and region-specific issues. The opening that has been made possible in Nepal should never be closed up by narrow-focused governmental action on the one hand, or irresponsible programming by the radio stations which could lead government bureaucrats to react negatively.

Comparatively little happened in the television sector until about 2002. Until then, the government-owned Nepal Television (NTV) produced its own programs and sold program slots to commercial and NGO operators. Once the government finally decided to open the television sector to other players, independent commercial television stations entered the scene. Current non-state TV stations that broadcast news and entertainment programs include Channel Nepal, Image Channel, and Kantipur Television. Some more television stations will go on air shortly.

Good satellite television in the Nepali language has a potentially large audience outside of Nepal. When this becomes available, a new kind of transnational Nepali public sphere can be expected to emerge. This would not only provide new markets to media from Nepal but also bring in challenges regarding production of print copy or audio-visual software that is responsive to both national and international Nepali sensitivities. At the moment, however, Nepalis are in the thrall of non-Nepali satellite television, mostly uplinked from India.

The internet has also begun to make inroads in the lives of a small but influential group of Nepalis. The private sector has led the effort to provide internet-related services in Nepal since the mid-1990s and email is especially popular with the youth and members of the professional classes. There are a few online news portals operated by some of the main media houses – for instance, the portals run by Kantipur Prakashan and Himalmedia – but

clearly they lack investment and are run as poor side-shows to the main print business of the concerned media organizations. The leading online news portal, *nepalnews.com* is run by Mercantile Communications but it too is run with a small staff (fewer than five reporters and editors). It perhaps derives more prestige value to the owners of Mercantile than function as a full-fledged news show.

Nevertheless, the cumulatively growth in all forms of media has contributed to opening up Nepali society to new ideas and newer ways of looking at 'old' issues. It has enlarged the space of what can be called the Nepali public sphere and facilitated the search for democratic foundations for the state and the entire society at large. Learning through everyday practice with very little mentoring—as the older generation of journalists are remnants of the closed-in Panchayat era—a younger generation of Nepali journalists are interrogating their society in ways that have never been done before: from democratic rights to food supplies, from greed to generosity, from political restructuring of the state to the functioning of intermediate organizations, from Maoist atrocities to police brutality, from hunger strikes to fashion shows, the Nepali media is learning to report about all these subjects and more. It is slowly reflecting the desire for greater representation of those sections of Nepali society as yet considered outside of the political and development mainstream. More importantly, it has made just about every literate Nepali a media critic who can readily present a list of complaints against the media's current level of performance. This massive growth in the volume and variety of media in Nepal and the significant improvement in its quality are gifts of the 1990 People's Movement to the Nepali society at large. They are also reasons to reflect on the media in Nepal, its strengths and weaknesses, and hence this book.

Writing about media

After I submitted my doctoral dissertation in mid-1996, I began to talk to several of my friends about media in Nepal as a way to get to know the increasingly more important field. I was interested in writing and if I began to do semi-systematic research on media, it was done primarily from the point of view of finding out which publications would be suitable for publishing some of my own work. For the case of writing in Nepali, I favored the bimonthly analytic magazine *Himal* and in mid-1996 I joined its editorial team led by Basanta Thapa. For the case of English, I turned to *The Kathmandu Post* where many of the essays contained in this book were first published.

Other things happened around the same time. In 1996, I became the convener of the public discussion forum Martin Chautari. As part of what was known as the *Mangalbare* (Tuesday) bi-monthly discussions series, several aspects of media in Nepal were discussed at Chautari. In late 1996, with journalist Raghu Mainali, I began to organize an informal monthly media discussion series at the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ). This series lasted for only about a year, but it provided me ample opportunities to learn more about the world of Nepali media. Around the same time I also began to attend media-related seminars in Kathmandu and was later asked by several organizations to either write a paper for their seminars or comment upon the presentations made by other analysts. In 1996 I also began to collect newspapers, magazines and other printed media for reading and research purposes. When Ashutosh Tiwari started the *Kathmandu Post Review of Books* in April 1996, I became one of its coordinators and that responsibility was fruitful in thinking about the connections between the world of books and mass media. My association with the Nepali language *Himal* gave me

the opportunity to think about how to produce social scientific writings in a form more palatable to non-academic readers.

In April 1997, I began to write a fortnightly column, *The Politics of Knowledge*, for *The Kathmandu Post*. As a columnist writing in English I was forced to pay close attention to the contents of other papers, both in Nepali and English. During the same year, I befriended the group of journalists who were getting ready to start Radio Sagarmatha. That gave me the opportunity to watch from a close distance the beginnings of non-state sector radio in Nepal. After Radio Sagarmatha started doing regular programs in the spring of 1998, Raghu Mainali invited me to produce a program for it. I became one of Radio Sagarmatha's voluntary producers by hosting the discussion program, *Dabali*. Between May 1998 and December 1999, I produced close to 170 editions of *Dabali*. That experience was valuable in producing insights into many aspects of independent radio in Nepal, and also into the lives of media producing individuals and institutions. Radio Sagarmatha was also an important site from where one could think about the relationship between media content and the society at large. If all these activities and affiliations deepened my interest in Nepali media, the increasing prospects of sharing a life together with journalist Rama Parajuli added an extra reason to care about this field from 1997.

After it was decided that the publication of Nepali *Himal* as an NGO-produced magazine was no longer possible, I quit its editorial team in late 1998. Around the same time, with research help from Bhaskar Gautam, I wrote my first long analysis of the state of Nepali media. In 1999, I worked with two feminists, Shova Gautam and Amrita Banskota, to produce *Chapama Mahila*, a book (often called a 'reader') for journalists on issues raised by the women's movement in Nepal in recent years. At the end of 1999, I quit being a program producer for Radio

Sagarmatha and in early 2000 I left for India to begin a research project on academic institutions dealing with area studies.

While I had already been toiling with the idea before leaving, it was in India that I decided that a return to the field of media, this time in the capacity of a full-time researcher would be interesting. As a result of that decision, I began to convene a group of researchers at Martin Chautari to work on various aspects of Nepali media and think about its institutional location vis-à-vis different social movements and sectors in Nepal. Since mid-2000, members of this team and other outside researchers and media practitioners have been involved in several research projects that I have coordinated. As a result of this group work, we have been able to publish ten books on various aspects of the print and electronic media scene in Nepal, including three volumes on the histories of the radio. We have also provided serious help to three writers to complete their book length manuscripts on print media in different parts of Nepal. Results of these collaborative research projects and lessons learnt from co-editing or editing these media books also found their way into my writing. In addition, since mid-2001 Martin Chautari has organized a weekly media discussion series that has provided me further opportunities to learn about Nepali media.

The original versions of most of the essays contained in this book were first published in my column in *The Kathmandu Post*, a few in the newsmagazine *Nation Weekly* and some elsewhere. In fact the column in the *Post* first provided me the space to organize in writing what I was learning about the Nepali media from my own work of media production, my research and that of others, and from discussions and seminars. Hence every so often I devoted the column space to discuss one or other aspect of media in Nepal. As can be expected from a columnist of a broadsheet daily, I wrote these essays for a general audience

and did not burden them with an academic language or format. However, I do hope that I brought my academic training to bear upon the analysis, especially in the methods I used to reach the conclusions of the arguments offered.

In this reflective exercise, I cannot help but note two related contexts, one personal and the other societal, in which these writings on Nepali media have had a life. First comes the personal context. Writing about the media has been a part of my overall effort to generate new styles of self-reflection and new channels of communication in Nepal. This effort is guided by the idea that given our social history, new subjects, modes and styles of thinking and communication are necessary so that our young democracy begins to assume a social reality in our otherwise hierarchical, authoritarian and anti-critical society. This guiding philosophy explains the work I have done with the Nepali language *Himal* (1996-99), *Review of Books* (1996-2002), Radio Sagarmatha (1997-99), the column in *The Kathmandu Post* (1997-2002), the journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (since 1996) and Martin Chautari (since 1996). I have often taken ideas from one of these forums to another in what can be described as a multi-media (narrow and mass, print and electronic) mutually reinforcing process of communication. Only time and others can tell how successful I have been in my efforts.

With respect to the social context, the years during which many of the essays presented here were written have seen tremendous growth in the Nepali public sphere. In this context, my effort is just a small and modest part of the much larger initiative to create a distinctly new public domain of discourses through the media and on the media in Nepal. Media growth in Nepal has happened in tandem with broader developments in Nepali society. A fruitful conflation of movements highlighting issues of social justice along various fronts (gender, caste, ethnicity,

language, religion, class and region) with growth in private and public (not state) sector media has meant that we are in the midst of an unprecedented social introspection in Nepali society. This step towards a state of self-critical awareness is an achievement that has been sometimes missed in analyses of post-1990 Nepal. Of course there is no dearth of people who will say that communication alone does not fill hungry Nepali stomachs. That is true of course but they also need to be reminded where Panchayat's *bikas* agenda minus the self-critical public discourse took us by the end of that authoritarian system in 1990: Nepal as one of the poorest countries in the world, a legacy that we will have to struggle for decades to overcome. This then has been the story behind my writing of the essays contained in this book.

This book

The essays contained in this volume touch upon many aspects of post-1990 Nepali media. Several factors are responsible for the growth of media during this period. This book examines those factors and describes the changes witnessed in the media scene in Nepal in the last fifteen years. It also analyzes the many micro-facets of media under the assumption that such attention is crucial to making mainstream media a real force for democracy in Nepali society. Apart from this introduction, this book contains 48 essays. For ease of organization, I have ordered them in several thematic sections, namely, overview, print, radio, visual/Internet, media and freedom, women and media, and media performance, institutions and society.

Most of the essays were written between 1997 and 2002 but one was written as early as 1993 and one as recent as mid-2006. All of the essays are reprints. Some have been slightly edited to delete some repetitions (others remain) to facilitate their reading in this collection. I have made no effort to update the

contents of each essay to the fullest possible state. As would be the case for any such collection of essays some of the themes discussed herein would have received a different treatment if they were to be written afresh today due to the availability of additional data or changes in my own perception and knowledge of the subject. In some ways, to revise these essays substantially would have meant writing new essays altogether. I decided against doing so because I want these essays to not only reflect the history of my own thinking about the Nepali media but also function as small catalysts for further writing and research, some of which I hope to do myself in a more academic format.

For each essay, I have provided the original date of publication in a footnote to indicate to the readers the time when each essay was first written and if the title has been changed, I have also provided the original title. In the case of some older essays, it is my belief that while some of the data might be a little old, the analysis provided is still relevant for further thinking on the concerned topic. Hence readers should approach this book as a collection of texts that are good to think with (so I hope) regarding the media in post-1990 Nepal rather than a late 2006 portrait of this important sector of Nepali society. They should also consult the many sources listed under 'Further Readings' for other perspectives on the media in Nepal.

There are many subjects that do not receive attention here, especially with respect to television, a medium that is still largely alien to me. I hope a younger generation of self-reflective journalists will explore those themes and provide us with deeper analyses of the field. I also expect academic writings on the Nepali media to grow in number and sophistication in the years to come, especially since media studies are now being introduced in several disciplines taught at Nepali universities and colleges. Several Nepali scholars are in the process of completing or have just

completed masters or doctoral level studies in media or communication studies in universities in different parts of the world. They and their Nepali and foreign colleagues and collaboraters will undoubtedly enhance the volume and quality of Nepal-related media studies in the years ahead. If these essays help in the way of producing more analytic work on the Nepali media by practitioners and academics alike and provide some insights to the general reader for whom they were originally written, then collecting them in this book would have certainly been worth the effort.