

Framing Patterns and Trends in Contemporary Nepali Journalism: A Review of Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Framing is one of the most important and widely studied concepts in mass communication research. It refers to the way journalists and media organizations select certain aspects of a story for emphasis while omitting others. Despite its global significance, framing research in Nepal remains in its early stages and is scattered across a limited number of studies. This article provides a detailed and comprehensive review of framing in contemporary Nepali journalism, examining its theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical manifestations in Nepal's news media. Drawing on Entman's (1993) foundational framing model, Gitlin's (1980) media frames paradigm, and Scheufele's (1999) process model of framing, the article analyzes framing at three levels in Nepal: the macro level (structural factors such as media ownership and government policy), the meso level (newsroom culture and journalistic practices), and the micro level (the language, narratives, and choices evident in specific news stories). The review finds that Nepali journalism is characterized by a heavy reliance on elite sources, a preference for episodic coverage over thematic reporting, close relationships between news media and political parties, and the unequal representation of women, Dalit communities, and indigenous groups. These patterns are evident across a range of important issues, including political reporting, disaster coverage, foreign policy, labor migration, and gender-based violence. The article argues that although Nepal's media landscape has expanded rapidly in terms of the number of outlets, the dominant framing practices of Nepali journalism have remained largely unchanged. It concludes by outlining a research agenda to guide future scholarship in this field.

Keywords: media framing, Nepali journalism, political parallelism, episodic framing, gender representation

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Introduction

Every news story involves a series of choices. Journalists decide which events to cover, which sources to quote, which details to include, and how to explain causes and consequences. This process of selection and emphasis is what communication researchers call framing. The concept

of framing, first described by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), refers to the mental structures, or “schemata of interpretation,” that people use to make sense of events. When applied to journalism, framing theory asks a fundamental question: How does the way a story is told shape the way audiences understand it?

Framing theory became central to journalism studies through the work of Todd Gitlin (1980), who examined how American television news covered student protest movements. It was later given its most widely cited definition by Robert Entman (1993, p. 52), who described framing as the process of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” In other words, framing is never entirely neutral; it reflects the political, cultural, and economic environment within which journalism operates.

Nepal offers a particularly rich context for framing research. Since 1990, the country has undergone profound political transformations—from absolute monarchy to multiparty democracy, through a decade-long Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, two Constituent Assemblies, the promulgation of a new federal constitution in 2015, and the establishment of a federal democratic republic. Each of these transitions has shaped Nepal’s media system, while the media has, in turn, influenced how these changes have been understood by the public. Although Nepal’s press expanded rapidly after 1990, much of it became closely aligned with political parties and business interests, a pattern that continues to influence how news stories are framed.

Despite this dynamic context, systematic framing research in Nepal remains limited. Most studies of Nepali media focus on describing institutions, documenting violations of press freedom, or advancing normative arguments about what journalism ought to be. Comparatively few studies have undertaken detailed empirical analyses of how framing patterns operate in Nepali news content, what factors produce them, and what consequences they may have for audiences and democratic life.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed in this article is the gap between the rapid expansion of media production in Nepal and the quality of news framing. Nepal has more than 1204 radio stations, over 249 television channels, and more than 5,126 registered online news portals—a remarkable number for a country of approximately 30 million people with a per capita GDP of around USD 1,548 (Bhusal, 2025; Press Council Nepal, 2025). However, the growth of media outlets has not been accompanied by comparable improvements in editorial independence, professional standards, or diversity of perspectives.

Nepali news media frequently rely on powerful sources such as government officials and political party leaders while marginalizing the voices of ordinary citizens, women, Dalit communities, and Indigenous peoples. Social problems are often presented as isolated incidents rather than as manifestations of broader structural issues. Political events are commonly framed as personal conflicts and dramas rather than as outcomes of institutional arrangements and policy processes. In addition, media representations often reproduce gender and caste stereotypes that constrain the public roles assigned to marginalized groups.

These framing patterns have important implications for democracy. When marginalized communities are consistently portrayed as victims rather than as agents of change, and when political dysfunction is attributed primarily to individual leaders rather than institutional weaknesses, the media falls short of its democratic responsibility to provide citizens with the information and perspectives necessary for meaningful participation in public life.

Research Objectives

This article has three main objectives:

- o To provide a theoretically grounded account of framing as it applies to journalistic practice, with particular attention to how framing theory can be used to understand journalism in the context of a South Asian transitional democracy.
- o To synthesize the available empirical evidence on framing patterns in Nepali journalism across the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis.
- o To identify the dominant framing patterns and trends in contemporary Nepali news practice and examine their implications for media scholars, journalism educators, and media policymakers.

Research Questions

This article is guided by the following research questions:

- o Which theoretical frameworks are most useful for understanding framing in the context of Nepali journalism?
- o What framing patterns are evident in Nepali journalism at the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis?

- o How have structural factors—including media ownership, political economy, and professional culture—shaped the framing tendencies of Nepali news organizations?
- o What are the implications of dominant framing patterns for democratic accountability and social equality in Nepal?

Thematic Review

The concept of framing has a rich history in the social sciences. Erving Goffman (1974) introduced the term in his book *Frame Analysis*, arguing that people organize their experiences of the world through mental frameworks—or what he called “primary frameworks”—that enable them to classify events and make sense of them. Goffman’s central insight was that perception is never raw or unmediated; rather, people interpret experience through pre-existing conceptual structures.

Gitlin (1980) applied this sociological concept directly to journalism. In his landmark study of how American television news covered the Students for a Democratic Society, Gitlin demonstrated that news organizations consistently employed particular narrative frames—trivializing protesters, portraying conflict as personal rather than political, and marginalizing radical demands—that helped limit the movement’s broader impact. He defined media frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (p. 7).

Entman (1993) systematized framing theory for communication research in his influential

article in the *Journal of Communication*. He argued that frames perform four key functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. This four-function model remains one of the most widely cited frameworks in journalism and media-framing research.

More recently, scholars have extended framing theory to examine how digital and social media platforms create new opportunities for alternative framing and counter-narratives while simultaneously introducing risks such as misinformation, filter bubbles, and partisan frame amplification (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). In Nepal, the rapid expansion of online news portals and social media platforms since 2010 has created a complex media environment in which multiple and competing frames vie for public attention in ways that were not possible during the era of print-dominated journalism.

Empirical Review

A growing body of empirical research has documented framing patterns in various areas of Nepali journalism. Uprety et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of coverage of the 2015 Gorkha earthquake in three major Nepali newspapers. They found that initial coverage was dominated by an “immediate emergency” frame focused on casualty figures, rescue operations, and international responses. Within two weeks, however, coverage shifted toward a “government failure” frame centered on controversies surrounding relief distribution. Crucially, earthquake survivors—particularly those from severely affected rural hill districts—accounted for fewer than 15% of attributed sources, whereas government officials and international NGOs dominated the coverage. This reliance on elite sources framed the earthquake primarily as a national emergency

requiring external intervention rather than as a disaster shaped by pre-existing inequalities in development and social protection.

Joshi (2017) examined how five Nepali newspapers covered the Madhesh movement of 2015–2016, a major political protest by Madhesi and Tharu communities against constitutional provisions they regarded as discriminatory. The study found that Kathmandu-based national media overwhelmingly framed the movement through a security and disorder lens, emphasizing border closures, supply-chain disruptions, and threats to national stability, while largely neglecting the underlying political and constitutional grievances of Madhesi communities. By contrast, community-based Madhesi media employed rights-based and grievance-oriented frames that foregrounded the legitimacy of the protesters’ demands.

Colombini et al.’s (2016) comprehensive study of gender-based violence (GBV) coverage in five Nepali newspapers and two television channels remains one of the most rigorous framing studies conducted in Nepal. The study found that 54% of GBV stories employed individual pathology or victim-blaming frames, attributing violence either to deviant perpetrators or to the behavior of survivors themselves. Structural or systemic frames appeared in fewer than 11% of the stories. Colombini et al. also documented a troubling pattern of “secondary victimization,” in which survivors were named, photographed, and described in ways that compounded their trauma and violated their privacy, despite a Supreme Court directive issued in 2019.

Joshi’s (2017) quantitative content analysis of source attribution in three major Kathmandu-based daily newspapers found that government sources accounted for 68% of all attributed quotations in political news stories. In contrast,

marginalized communities—including Dalits, Indigenous peoples, women, and ordinary citizens—together accounted for fewer than 12% of attributed sources. Similarly, Dahal (2019) examined coverage of Nepal’s recurring government crises between 2015 and 2018 and found that news reports consistently employed a “political drama” frame, attributing instability to the personal ambitions and character flaws of individual leaders rather than to structural features of Nepal’s proportional representation system or ambiguities within the constitution.

Kharel et al. (2022) examined media framing of labor migration, one of Nepal’s most significant social and economic phenomena, and identified four dominant frames: a tragedy frame focusing on deaths and exploitation, an economic remittance frame emphasizing aggregate macroeconomic benefits, a regulatory failure frame highlighting government inadequacies, and a family-separation frame. Notably absent were rights-based frames that portrayed migrants as rights-bearing citizens and structural frames that linked migration to Nepal’s inability to generate sufficient domestic employment opportunities.

Methodological Review

Framing research in journalism studies employs a range of methodologies, each suited to different research questions. The most common approach is quantitative content analysis, in which researchers systematically code news content for the presence of predefined frames. This method allows for reliable measurement across large samples and facilitates comparisons across time periods, media outlets, and topics. Studies by Uprety et al. (2016), Joshi (2017), and Colombini et al. (2016) all employ quantitative content analysis as their primary research method.

Qualitative approaches, including discourse analysis and critical frame analysis, provide complementary insights by examining not only whether certain frames appear but also how they are constructed through language, word choice, source selection, and narrative structure. Gurung’s (2022) discourse analysis of media coverage of the Kalapani border dispute is a notable example of this approach in the Nepali context. Gurung found that the coverage employed an overwhelmingly nationalist frame, making it difficult for journalists and commentators to engage critically with the complexities surrounding Nepal’s territorial claims.

Mixed-method approaches—combining content analysis with interviews of journalists, editors, and news sources—provide a more comprehensive understanding of framing because they connect textual patterns in news content with the production conditions that generate them. Scheufele’s (1999) process model of framing, which distinguishes between frames as dependent variables (what produces frames in news content) and frames as independent variables (how frames influence audiences), offers a strong theoretical justification for this multi-level approach.

A key methodological challenge in framing research in Nepal is the diversity of the media landscape. Nepali journalism is produced in multiple languages—including Nepali, English, Maithili, Newari, Tamang, and many others—and across a variety of platforms, ranging from print newspapers and broadcast television to community FM radio and online news portals. A comprehensive understanding of framing in Nepal would therefore require comparative analysis across languages and media formats, a level of methodological sophistication that

existing framing research in Nepal has yet to achieve.

Policy Review

Nepal's media environment is shaped by a complex framework of laws and regulations. The National Broadcasting Act (1993) and the Press Council Act (1992) established the legal foundations for print and broadcast journalism during the post-1990 democratic era. The Electronic Transactions Act (2008) introduced provisions governing online communication, some of which have been used to prosecute journalists and commentators for online expression. More recently, the proposed Media Council Bill (2019) and proposed amendments to the Information Technology Act have drawn strong criticism from press freedom advocates because of provisions that could further restrict journalistic freedom.

The regulatory environment directly influences framing practices. When particular forms of expression are criminalized—or when journalists perceive a risk of criminalization—certain frames become legally sensitive and are therefore avoided. Freedom Forum Nepal's (2023) annual report documented 47 cases of journalist intimidation, 12 arrests, and three incidents involving raids on media offices during fiscal year 2079/80 (2022–23). Such incidents can act as powerful deterrents to adversarial or accountability-oriented framing.

Government advertising policy constitutes another significant structural influence on framing. The Department of Information and Broadcasting controls the distribution of government advertising revenue, which remains a major source of income for many Nepali media outlets, particularly district-level newspapers. According to Press Council

Nepal's (2025) report, more than 60% of the revenue of district-level newspapers came from government advertising. This dependence creates a direct financial incentive for editorial compliance. Media organizations that critically frame government activities may risk losing advertising revenue, whereas those that portray such activities favorably may benefit from continued support. As a result, government advertising functions as a powerful structural constraint on oppositional framing, even in the absence of direct censorship or explicit political interference.

Research Gap and Significance

Despite the growing body of empirical research reviewed above, significant gaps remain in the literature on framing in Nepal. First, existing studies are largely event-specific and issue-specific. Analyses of earthquake coverage, election reporting, migration framing, and gender-based violence (GBV) coverage have generally been conducted in isolation and have not been synthesized into a coherent account of the broader framing tendencies of Nepali journalism. This article seeks to address that gap by bringing together diverse strands of research within a unified analytical framework.

Second, longitudinal framing research in Nepal is virtually absent. There is a lack of studies that track how the framing of specific issues—such as political governance, disasters, migration, and gender—has evolved over time, particularly across Nepal's major political transitions. The democratic opening of 1990, the 2006 peace agreement, the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, and the implementation of federalism in 2017 all had the potential to transform framing practices. Whether these framing practices actually did so remains largely unknown.

Third, framing-effects research—which examines how the framing of news content influences audience understanding, attitudes, and behavior—is almost non-existent in Nepal. This is a significant limitation because the normative claims of framing theory ultimately depend on demonstrating that framing choices have tangible consequences for how citizens understand political and social issues.

Fourth, existing research has focused almost exclusively on Kathmandu-based national media and has paid insufficient attention to community FM radio, regional newspapers, online news portals, and social media platforms. Community radio, in particular, reaches rural and marginalized populations that Kathmandu-based media often overlook and may employ significantly different framing practices. The limited evidence available—including the observation by UNESCO (2025) that community radio stations in Jajarkot and Rukum West provided more contextually grounded earthquake coverage than national media—suggests that community media represents a particularly promising site for comparative framing research.

This article is significant for several reasons. For media scholars, it provides one of the first comprehensive syntheses of empirical framing evidence in the Nepali context, organized within a coherent theoretical framework. For journalism educators, it demonstrates the practical relevance of framing theory in understanding and challenging the professional assumptions embedded within Nepali journalism culture. For media policymakers, it offers evidence-based arguments for structural reforms in media ownership, advertising regulation, and the protection of press freedom. Finally, for advocates of marginalized communities, it provides a systematic account of how representational

shortcomings in Nepali journalism can limit those communities' ability to participate fully in democratic public life.

Methodology

Research Design

This article adopts a systematic literature review methodology combined with a critical analytical synthesis of available empirical evidence. This systematic literature review follows explicit and reproducible procedures to identify, evaluate, and synthesize evidence relevant to clearly defined research questions. Unlike narrative or selective reviews, systematic reviews aim to minimize bias in the selection and interpretation of evidence through transparent search and inclusion criteria.

The critical analytical synthesis component moves beyond description to develop theoretical arguments concerning the meaning and implications of the available evidence for theory, practice, and policy. The article employs a three-level analytical framework—macro, meso, and micro—adapted from Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Hierarchy of Influences model, which identifies multiple levels of influence on media content, including individual journalists, media routines, organizational structures, social institutions, and broader ideological systems. This framework is further adapted to the Nepali context by incorporating insights from Scheufele's (1999) process model of framing and scholarship on South Asian media systems.

Population and Sampling

For a literature review, the “population” consists of the body of scholarship relevant to the research questions. In this study, the population includes canonical theoretical works in framing studies and media sociology; empirical studies of Nepali journalism published in peer-reviewed

journals, institutional reports, and academic theses between 2000 and 2024; and content-analytic evidence from gray literature produced by organizations such as Freedom Forum Nepal, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (2022), the International Federation of Journalists, Internews Nepal, the Forum for Women, Law and Development, and Press Council Nepal.

The study employs purposive sampling based on relevance to the research questions. Sources were included if they engaged substantively with news content, journalistic practice, or media structures in Nepal. Sources focusing exclusively on entertainment, advertising, or public relations were excluded. Studies that examined Nepali media as part of broader South Asian or global comparisons were included when they provided relevant empirical evidence or theoretical insights.

Types and Sources of Data

This article draws on two main categories of data. Primary literature consists of peer-reviewed empirical studies that directly analyze Nepali news content or journalistic practice using clearly defined methodologies. These include content analyses, discourse analyses, and interview-based studies of Nepali journalism. Secondary literature consists of theoretical works, review articles, and comparative studies from Western, South Asian, and global media scholarship that provide the conceptual frameworks for interpreting evidence from Nepal.

Primary sources were accessed through Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and the databases of Tribhuvan University's Central Library. Institutional reports were obtained from the websites of relevant organizations. Additional sources were identified through backward citation chaining—that is, by examining the

reference lists of selected studies to locate other relevant works that may not have appeared in the initial database searches.

Data Collection

Data collection followed a keyword-based search strategy. Search terms included “framing Nepal media,” “Nepali journalism content analysis,” “news framing South Asia,” “political communication Nepal,” “media ownership Nepal,” “digital journalism Nepal,” “gender-based violence media Nepal,” “disaster framing Nepal,” “migration media Nepal,” and “press freedom Nepal.” These terms were used individually and in various combinations. Searches were conducted in English. Given the limited representation of Nepali-language scholarship in international databases, this review acknowledges that a substantial body of Nepali-language media research may not be fully represented in the analysis.

All identified sources were screened initially at the title and abstract level and subsequently at the full-text level. Empirical studies were evaluated according to the clarity of their research design, the transparency of their data collection procedures, and the appropriateness of their analytical methods. Theoretical works were assessed based on their relevance to the Nepali context and their contribution to understanding framing processes in transitional media systems.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

The findings of this review are organized thematically rather than by individual study. They are presented at three levels of analysis—macro, meso, and micro—in accordance with the analytical framework outlined above. Within the micro level, findings are further categorized by issue area, including political reporting, disaster coverage, foreign policy, labor migration,

gender-based violence, and the representation of caste and ethnic identities. This thematic structure facilitates the identification of patterns that extend across individual studies and issue domains.

The interpretation of the evidence draws on the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. The primary interpretive lens is the political economy of framing, which holds that framing choices are not merely the result of individual journalistic decisions but are shaped by broader structural factors, including media ownership, dependence on advertising revenue, regulatory conditions, and professional culture. The discussion section develops three theoretical arguments based on the synthesized evidence, each carrying implications for journalism research, media practice, and public policy.

Results and Discussion

Macro-Level Framing: The Political Economy of Nepali Media

At the broadest structural level, the most powerful influence on framing patterns in Nepali journalism is the political economy of media ownership. Nepal's media landscape is remarkably large relative to the country's size and level of economic development. According to Press Council Nepal (2025), the country has more than 1204 radio stations, over 249 television channels, and more than 5126 registered online news portals. This is an extraordinary number for a nation of approximately 30 million people. However, this numerical expansion has not been accompanied by comparable growth in financial sustainability, editorial independence, or professional infrastructure.

As Pandey (2024) demonstrates through extensive interviews with senior journalists in Kathmandu, the economics of Nepali media

create a structural dependence on political actors and government advertising. Most Nepali newspapers and television stations are owned either by individuals with direct political affiliations, by business conglomerates with interests in sectors they cover, or by politically connected foundations. The Kantipur Media Group—owner of Kantipur, The Kathmandu Post, Kantipur FM, and Kantipur Television—remains the dominant force in Nepal's media market. K.C. (2019) argues that the group's ownership structure encourages a particular elite-liberal framing of Nepali politics that normalizes centrist parliamentary politics while marginalizing more radical or peripheral voices. Similarly, Avenues Television and Himalaya Television are associated with business conglomerates whose framing of economic policy issues often reflects the interests of Nepal's import-dependent private-sector elite.

Government advertising is perhaps the most important mechanism through which the state influences media framing without resorting to direct censorship. Press Council Nepal's (2022) report found that more than 60% of the revenue of district-level newspapers came from government advertising distributed through the Department of Information and Broadcasting. This system effectively rewards ideologically compliant outlets while disadvantaging more critical ones. Consequently, news organizations have strong structural incentives to frame government activities positively and to avoid investigative or accountability-oriented reporting on public officials and government programs.

The legal and regulatory environment imposes additional constraints. Freedom Forum Nepal's (2023) annual report documented 47 cases of journalist intimidation, 12 arrests, and three incidents involving raids on media offices

during fiscal year 2022–23. Such cases send a powerful chilling message to journalists across the country: certain frames—particularly those that aggressively challenge powerful political figures or question dominant nationalist narratives—carry personal and professional risks. The result is a media environment characterized by significant self-censorship, in which adversarial and accountability-oriented framing is systematically underproduced.

Meso-Level Framing: Newsroom Culture and Professional Norms

At the level of newsroom organization, editorial culture, and professional practice, Nepali journalism exhibits several identifiable framing tendencies that reflect both local institutional factors and partially internalized international journalistic norms.

Dependence on elite sources is perhaps the most pervasive meso-level framing pattern in Nepali journalism, consistent with findings from both Western and South Asian media systems. Joshi's (2017) analysis of source attribution in three leading Kathmandu-based dailies—Kantipur, Nagarik, and Rajdhani—found that government sources accounted for 68% of all attributed quotations in political news stories. Marginalized communities, including Dalits, Indigenous peoples, women, and ordinary citizens, together accounted for fewer than 12% of attributed sources. This source hierarchy is not merely a matter of journalistic preference; it reflects resource limitations, deadline pressures, and the professional norm of seeking “official” confirmation. Nevertheless, its implications for framing are substantial: when official sources dominate, official frames tend to dominate as well.

The predominance of episodic over thematic framing is similarly well documented.

Iyengar (1991) introduced this distinction to describe the tendency of television news to present social issues as isolated events rather than as manifestations of broader systemic conditions. Episodic framing, he argued, encourages audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than to structural factors. Colombini et al.'s (2016) content analysis of gender-based violence coverage found that 79% of stories employed episodic frames, treating incidents as isolated events, while only 21% used thematic frames that situated such incidents within broader patterns of patriarchy, legal impunity, and institutional failure.

The acceleration of the 24-hour news cycle through social media has intensified these tendencies. Acharya and Sharma's (2022) newsroom study found that editorial staff at online news portals spent an average of only 23 minutes preparing a breaking news story before publication. This extraordinary pace leaves little time for contextualization, source diversification, or fact-checking. The result is what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) describe as “the journalism of assertion”—rapid, surface-level reporting that reproduces official statements without independently verifying or contextualizing them.

Differences in language and medium also generate significant variation in framing practices. English-language newspapers such as The Kathmandu Post and The Himalayan Times primarily serve urban, educated, and internationally oriented audiences and tend toward what Hanitzsch (2011) describes as an “analytical-informative” journalism culture. Their reporting generally makes greater use of expert sources, contextual framing, and international reference points. Nepali-language newspapers such as Kantipur and Naya Patrika, by contrast, often adopt a more advocacy-

oriented style in which framing reflects clearer ideological positions associated with ownership structures. Community radio stations broadcasting in local languages frequently provide more context-sensitive and community-centered coverage, suggesting that medium and audience orientation are important determinants of framing choices.

Micro-Level Framing: Issue Domains

Political Reporting

The framing of political events constitutes one of the largest categories of news coverage in Nepal and is among the most extensively studied areas of framing research. Studies consistently identify a “strategy-game” or “horse-race” framing orientation—a pattern first identified by Patterson (1993) in American election coverage—in which political processes are framed primarily in terms of partisan competition, power struggles, and factional maneuvering rather than policy substance, citizen welfare, or democratic accountability.

Dahal’s (2025) comparative analysis of five Nepali newspapers’ coverage of the 2017 federal elections found that 72% of political stories employed strategy frames focused on electoral competition, coalition calculations, or political personalities. Policy-oriented frames addressing issues such as economic development, education, and public health accounted for fewer than 18% of stories. Similarly, Dahal’s (2019) analysis of coverage of Nepal’s recurring government crises found that the press consistently employed a “political drama” frame that attributed instability to the ambitions and character flaws of individual leaders rather than to institutional weaknesses or structural features of Nepal’s proportional representation system.

Nepal experienced ten prime ministers between 2008 and 2018, a level of instability that clearly reflects structural as well as individual factors. Yet framing that consistently attributes instability to individual personalities obscures these broader causes and makes it more difficult for citizens and policymakers to engage with meaningful institutional solutions.

Disaster Framing

Nepal’s vulnerability to earthquakes, floods, and climate-related disasters makes disaster framing a critically important area of study, with significant implications for public understanding of risk, government accountability, and national preparedness. The most extensively researched case remains the coverage of the April–May 2015 Gorkha earthquakes, which killed approximately 8,900 people and displaced around 600,000 others. Uprety et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of coverage in Kantipur, The Kathmandu Post, and Nagarik during the four weeks following the April 25 main shock.

Their findings indicate that initial coverage was dominated by an “immediate emergency” frame emphasizing casualty figures, rescue efforts, and expressions of international solidarity. Within two weeks, however, the dominant frame shifted toward “government failure,” focusing on controversies surrounding relief distribution and coordination problems between government agencies and international donors. Throughout the coverage, the voices of earthquake survivors from rural hill districts—the communities most severely affected—accounted for fewer than 15% of attributed sources. Government officials, international NGOs, and Kathmandu-based civil society organizations dominated news narratives.

This reliance on elite sources produced what Uprety et al. (2016) describe as a

“spectacularization frame,” portraying the disaster primarily as a national emergency requiring external intervention rather than as an event whose causes and consequences were deeply shaped by pre-existing inequalities in development, infrastructure, and social protection.

The November 2023 Jajarkot earthquake, which killed 157 people and damaged approximately 26,000 houses in Nepal’s mid-western hills, demonstrated the persistence of these framing patterns. National television channels and online news portals focused heavily on images of destruction and official responses from Kathmandu. In contrast, the UNESCO (2025) post-earthquake media monitoring report noted that community radio stations in Jajarkot and Rukum West provided more contextually grounded and locally responsive coverage than Kathmandu-based national media. This finding again suggests that geographic proximity and community rootedness influence framing choices in important ways and deserve further scholarly attention.

Foreign Policy Framing

Nepal’s foreign policy environment—situated between India and China, historically linked to India through the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and increasingly engaged with China through the Belt and Road Initiative—generates highly contested framing processes in Nepali media. The Kalapani border dispute with India provides a revealing case study of how nationalist framing can constrain critical journalism. When India published a new political map in November 2019 that included territory claimed by Nepal, the dispute became a major public issue and eventually led Nepal’s Parliament to unanimously endorse an updated national map in June 2020.

Gurung’s (2022) discourse analysis of coverage in five Nepali newspapers between November 2019 and June 2020 identified a dominant “national sovereignty” frame that portrayed the map dispute as a matter of territorial integrity and national dignity. This frame made critical engagement with the diplomatic, historical, and legal complexities of the dispute difficult, as skepticism regarding Nepal’s territorial claims was often implicitly regarded as unpatriotic. The study found that Nepali-language newspapers employed more intensely nationalist framing than English-language newspapers, consistent with the different audience orientations discussed earlier.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact—a USD 500 million grant from the United States government approved by Nepal’s Parliament in February 2022 after five years of intense controversy—offers another revealing example of how political parallelism shapes framing. Kharel’s (2022) analysis found that pro-MCC and anti-MCC framings closely mirrored the party-political alignments of different media outlets. Publications within the Kantipur Group framed the MCC as a necessary investment in Nepal’s development infrastructure, whereas left-leaning media portrayed it as a threat to national sovereignty and a form of U.S. strategic encroachment. Consequently, readers of different newspapers encountered sharply contrasting interpretations of the same policy issue, often with little shared factual ground.

Labour Migration

Nepal is one of the world’s most remittance-dependent economies, with labor migration contributing approximately 25–29% of the country’s GDP annually (World Bank, 2023). Between 3.5 and 5 million Nepali migrants work

primarily in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Malaysia, making labor migration one of the most significant social and economic phenomena in contemporary Nepal. Despite its scale and importance, however, migration coverage in Nepali media is characterized by a relatively narrow range of frames.

Kharel et al.'s (2022) analysis of migration coverage in five Nepali newspapers over a six-month period identified four dominant frames: the tragedy frame (focusing on deaths, injuries, and exploitation), the economic remittance frame (emphasizing aggregate macroeconomic benefits), the regulatory failure frame (highlighting government shortcomings in protecting migrants), and the family-separation frame (focusing on children left behind and marital strain). Notably absent were rights-based frames that portrayed migrants as rights-bearing citizens entitled to safe and dignified working conditions, as well as structural frames linking migration to Nepal's inability to generate sufficient domestic employment opportunities. This pattern is consistent with the broader tendency toward episodic framing identified across other issue domains: individual suffering is reported, but the structural conditions that produce it remain largely unexamined.

Female migrants—who constitute approximately 25% of Nepal's foreign labor force yet face heightened vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking—are disproportionately represented through victimization narratives. Kharel (2016) found that female migrants are often portrayed as naïve, deceived, or morally compromised, rather than through frames that emphasize structural vulnerabilities, legal shortcomings, or the role of recruitment agencies in facilitating exploitation. Such gendered framing both reflects and reinforces broader

patterns of gender representation in Nepali media.

Gender-Based Violence

The framing of gender-based violence (GBV) in Nepali journalism has received more sustained empirical attention than any other issue area. This reflects both the severity of GBV in Nepal—where 23% of women aged 15–49 report having experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner (MoHP, 2023)—and the active role of feminist media-monitoring organizations in documenting media representations.

Colombini et al.'s (2016) comprehensive content analysis of GBV coverage across five newspapers and two television channels over a twelve-month period identified six distinct framing patterns. The individual pathology frame attributes violence to deviant, mentally disturbed, or intoxicated perpetrators and treats such incidents as aberrations rather than manifestations of broader social patterns. The victim-blaming frame implicitly or explicitly assigns responsibility to survivors by emphasizing their behavior, clothing, or character. The legal process frame focuses on arrests, prosecutions, and court verdicts without examining the systemic impunity that enables many perpetrators to evade accountability. The tragedy frame presents GBV as an exceptional misfortune rather than a recurring social problem. The cultural explanation frame attributes violence to “backward” or “traditional” cultural practices in ways that divert attention from legal and institutional failures. Finally, the activist advocacy frame—found primarily in coverage initiated by feminist civil society organizations—employs a structural rather than individualizing explanation of violence.

The individual pathology and victim-blaming frames together accounted for 54% of GBV stories, while structural or systemic frames appeared in fewer than 11% of cases. Colombini et al. (2016) also documents a troubling pattern of “secondary victimization” through journalistic practice, including the identification of survivors by name, the publication of their photographs, and the use of unnecessarily graphic descriptions of incidents. These practices persist despite the Supreme Court of Nepal’s 2019 directive prohibiting media organizations from publishing information that could identify survivors of gender-based violence.

Caste, Ethnicity, and Identity

Nepal’s social fabric is shaped by caste hierarchies, ethnolinguistic diversity, and regional identities in ways that profoundly influence media framing. A comprehensive media-monitoring audit conducted by Mijar (2025) found that Dalit individuals appeared in news stories predominantly within three frames: victimhood (in reports of caste-based discrimination), crime (as perpetrators in crime reporting), and development beneficiaries (as recipients of welfare programs). They were largely absent from frames portraying leadership, expertise, or political agency.

Janajati (Indigenous nationality) communities, particularly those in the hill and mountain regions, were similarly framed through cultural spectacle—festivals, rituals, and traditional dress—rather than as political actors, except during periods of heightened Janajati rights activism. Joshi’s (2017) analysis of media coverage of the Madhesh movement is particularly revealing. Kathmandu-based national media framed the movement primarily through a security-and-disorder lens, emphasizing disruptions to supply chains and

perceived threats to national stability. In contrast, community-based Madhesi media employed rights-based and grievance-oriented frames that engaged more directly with the political substance of the protesters’ constitutional demands. This divergence between national and local media illustrates how geographic location, audience orientation, and ownership structures interact to produce markedly different interpretations of the same events.

The findings reviewed across all three levels of analysis and six issue domains reveal a Nepali journalism landscape in which framing is deeply shaped by the intersection of political economy, professional culture, and social power. Three theoretical arguments merit particular attention.

First, the persistence of elite-centered, episodic, and politically indexed framing in Nepali journalism—despite the dramatic quantitative expansion of media outlets and the widespread adoption of digital and social media—challenges the assumption that media pluralism necessarily produces framing diversity. This reflects what Freedman (2014) describes as the “media power paradox”: the expansion of media channels does not automatically broaden voices or perspectives because structural constraints on news production—such as ownership concentration, dependence on advertising, source power, and professional routines—continue to function as powerful filters that reproduce dominant frames even within formally pluralistic media environments. Nepal had more than 2,600 online news portals as of 2023. Yet the framing tendencies documented by Joshi (2017) in political reporting, Uprety et al. (2016) in disaster coverage, and Colombini et al. (2016) in reporting on gender-based violence remain remarkably consistent across media formats, outlets, and time periods. In other

words, structural determinants of framing appear to be more influential than the sheer number of media outlets.

Second, the evidence supports extending Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences to incorporate what may be termed "transitional democracy effects." Nepal's journalism community is simultaneously engaged in a process of professionalization—developing norms of independence, verification, and public-service journalism—while also experiencing strong countervailing pressures that reproduce the political instrumentalization characteristic of Nepal's earlier authoritarian press culture. This unresolved tension contributes to the inconsistency evident in media framing. The same newspaper that produces exemplary accountability journalism on one issue may engage in overt political frame management on another when the interests of its owners are implicated. Understanding Nepali journalism therefore requires recognizing both tendencies simultaneously rather than reducing it to either a simple failure or a straightforward success story.

Third, the pronounced divergence between Kathmandu-based national media and local, regional, and identity-based media in their framing of the Madhesh movement, disaster coverage, and issues of caste and ethnic representation raises important questions about the distribution of framing power within Nepal's media system. Entman's (1993) cascade model of framing, originally developed for more hierarchically organized media systems, may require significant modification in the Nepali context. Nepal does not operate through a single framing hierarchy; rather, it contains multiple parallel framing ecosystems—including national Nepali media, local Nepali media, Madhesi media, Janajati media, and community radio

networks—that function simultaneously and often generate markedly different interpretations of the same events. The rise of digital media has further intensified this parallel structure, creating what might be described as a "framing archipelago": a collection of partially overlapping yet partially isolated framing communities that serve different audiences with different versions of social and political reality.

The implications for democratic accountability are substantial. When marginalized communities—Dalit citizens, Madhesi political actors, women who survive violence, rural earthquake victims, and migrant workers—are consistently framed through narratives of victimhood, cultural otherness, or isolated incidents rather than through political agency, structural analysis, or rights-based claims, the capacity of the news media to function as a democratic public sphere, in the sense described by Habermas (1989), is significantly weakened. A media system that consistently represents some citizens as full political subjects while portraying others primarily as objects of welfare, spectacle, or crime cannot effectively serve a genuinely pluralistic democracy.

At the same time, the evidence reveals important countervailing tendencies that deserve recognition. Community FM radio—which has grown from a single station in 1996 to more than 1200 stations today—has consistently produced more locally grounded, community-centered, and thematically rich coverage of development, governance, and social issues than Kathmandu-based national media (Aldrich et al., 2021). Similarly, digital platforms, despite their tendency to amplify misinformation and partisan framing in some contexts, have also created space for alternative narratives advanced by feminist organizations, Dalit activists,

Indigenous rights advocates, and journalists practicing the verification-centered approach that Waisbord (2020) identifies as an emerging global norm in fact-checking journalism. These countervailing tendencies suggest that the framing patterns documented in this review are not fixed structural features of Nepali journalism but are instead contested and open to change through professional development, policy reform, and sustained advocacy.

Conclusion

This review has synthesized the available theoretical and empirical evidence on framing patterns and trends in contemporary Nepali journalism, organizing the findings across macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis and six major issue domains. The central finding is clear and consistent: Nepali journalism is characterized by persistent structural framing tendencies—including elite-source dependency, episodic framing, political parallelism, and gendered and caste-inflected representational patterns—that are rooted in the political economy of media ownership, the dynamics of media transition, and the professional culture of Nepali journalism. These tendencies have been modified only partially and unevenly by the quantitative expansion of media outlets and the growth of digital media. The “framing archipelago” that characterizes contemporary Nepali media has created a situation in which different communities inhabit different news realities, with profound implications for the possibility of shared democratic deliberation.

These findings carry important practical implications across multiple domains. For journalism education, they underscore the importance of teaching framing theory not merely as an academic concept but also

as a practical tool for critical newsroom reflexivity. Journalism students need to learn how to recognize, interrogate, and consciously challenge the framing assumptions embedded in professional routines, source hierarchies, and editorial cultures. Encouraging students to ask questions such as “Whose voices are missing?” and “What structural explanation is being overlooked?” should be as fundamental to journalism education as teaching interviewing techniques or news-writing skills.

For media policy, the findings highlight the systemic distortions produced by politically aligned ownership structures and dependence on government advertising. Several structural reforms are needed, including transparent media ownership disclosure requirements that enable citizens to understand who owns the media they consume; reforms to government advertising allocation mechanisms to eliminate their function as selective subsidies; stronger legal protections for independent public-interest journalism; and greater investment in community and local media, which consistently outperform national media in representing marginalized communities and providing contextually grounded coverage.

A four-pronged research agenda emerges from this review. First, there is an urgent need for longitudinal content analyses that track framing changes over time, particularly across Nepal’s major political transitions, in order to determine whether political change produces lasting or merely temporary shifts in framing patterns. Second, experimental research on framing effects in Nepal is needed to examine how the framing patterns identified in content analyses influence public understanding, political attitudes, and civic engagement. Third, comparative cross-media studies that systematically analyze framing

across print, television, community radio, and digital platforms within the same issue domains and time periods would significantly enhance understanding of how medium, ownership, and audience orientation interact to shape framing practices. Fourth, framing studies that center the perspectives of marginalized communities and employ participatory or collaborative research methodologies are needed to challenge the elite-centered assumptions that have influenced even critical media research in Nepal.

As Nepal continues to consolidate its federal democratic republic and navigate the political, social, and technological challenges of the digital era, the ways in which journalism frames social reality will remain among the most consequential features of its democratic culture. How Nepali journalists frame political conflict, social inequality, natural disasters, and human rights issues will shape what citizens know, how they interpret public affairs, and what they demand from government institutions. Framing research, at its best, makes these patterns visible—and making them visible is the first step toward transforming them.

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