



MEDIA COVERAGE AND FRAMING OF I/NGOS: **ANALYSING NARRATIVES AND TRENDS**

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December, 2024

“This research report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this research report are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government, USAID, or The Asia Foundation.”

Executive Summary

This report analyses news coverage related to I/NGOs in Nepal by The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar. A total of 101 news items were reviewed between the years 2014 and 2024. Of these, The Kathmandu Post published 57 items, and onlinekhabar published 44. The highest coverage occurred in 2018 (25 per cent) and 2016 (18 per cent), largely due to the 2015 earthquake and the government's efforts to regulate relief distribution by I/NGOs. News coverage also spiked in 2018 to initiate discussions around the National Integrity Policy. The content of the news varied by region, with most coverage being national (88 items); however, onlinekhabar did a better job in covering stories outside the capital. News pertaining to NGOs was covered more than those concerning INGOs, and onlinekhabar carried more NGO-related articles. A key trend in the coverage was the focus on the government's regulatory efforts and issues of transparency and accountability, particularly concerning earthquake relief.

The report also categorises news into themes such as event-based coverage, news commentaries, and articles based on public officials' remarks. Event-based news and commentaries were the most common. The Kathmandu Post focused more on detailed commentaries, whereas onlinekhabar concentrated on byte-sized news and reportage of public leaders' views.

However, in all this focus on regulation of government, transparency, and accountability, gendered reporting was missing. Most articles were written by male journalists, with only a small percentage authored by females. This could be due to the limited number of female journalists or other factors that were not fully explored in this report. Overall, the media's coverage of I/NGOs in Nepal is shaped by national events, government actions, and public perceptions, with a notable difference in approach between The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar.

Background

The relationship between media and non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs) is one predicated on mutual benefit. It is a complex and ever-changing partnership that is armed with the potential to influence public discourse. Recent trends, however, have brought to the fore possible pressures that this alliance faces, not least in South Asia,¹ where one pulse check study in March 2022 found a significant decline in perceived independence for CSOs operating in countries such as the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan.² The survey indicates that the CSO activities in Sri Lanka and Nepal are being brought within strict government purview under the pretext of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing legislation. In line with this, Freedom House has also rated Nepal as being 'partly free' in its 2023 annual study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide.³ Nepal has gone from 'electoral autocracy' in 2012 to 'electoral democracy' by 2022.⁴ This progress can mainly be attributed to changes in the electoral process.⁵ Nonetheless, CSOs lack the collective capacity to form broad, issue-based alliances to hold the government accountable.⁶

Prior to the digital revolution, civil society organisations relied heavily on traditional media to amplify their work and rally public support; in return, the media received access to useful—and often proprietary—information that would have been difficult to uncover independently.⁷ If the media is state-owned, however, the nature of the coverage and the level of scrutiny extended to the CSOs could differ significantly from privately owned outlets, and hence such entities would squarely fall under strict government control and oversight.⁸

1 IPI Media, "South Asia Publications Join Hands to Cover Press Freedom Violations in the Region - Ipi.media," May 3, 2021, <https://ipi.media/south-asia-publications-join-hands-to-cover-press-freedom-violations-in-the-region/>.

2 IPI Media, "South Asia Publications Join Hands to Cover Press Freedom Violations in the Region - Ipi.media," May 3, 2021, <https://ipi.media/south-asia-publications-join-hands-to-cover-press-freedom-violations-in-the-region/>.

3 "Nepal," Freedom House, accessed on December 1, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/nepal>.

4 *DEMOCRACY REPORT 2023 Defiance in the Face of Autocratization (V-Dem)*, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf.

5 *Nepal Gains Ground in Civic Space Efforts* (TAF: Asia Blog and Podcast, 2023), <https://asiafoundation.org/nepal-gains-ground-in-civic-space-efforts/>.

6 Dignity Initiatives, https://dignityinitiatives.org/areas_work/civic-space/.

7 "Civil Society Organizations and Traditional Media: Synergy Instead of Confrontation," NGO Tips, October 2011, <https://bitly.cx/767c>.

8 Scott Gehlbach and Konstantin Sonin, "Government Control of the Media," *Journal of Pconomics* 118, (June 27, 2014): 163–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2014.06.004>.

However, the emergence of digital platforms has altered this dynamic. For example, I/NGOs have increasingly been in a position to mobilise digital technology to distribute their content directly through online platforms.⁹ This has also resulted in what some refer to as ‘networked journalism’—an age wherein media organisations and I/NGOs now work closely together in an attempt to generate information and stories that benefit both parties.¹⁰ While it has the potential to increase news coverage, challenge government tyranny, and bring various stories to fore, critics have come forth to question the motivations of such journalistic integrity. They claim that I/NGOs are inadvertently taking attention away from vital issues affecting society and objective analysis.¹¹

This is exacerbated by the fast pace of modern news cycles that are entirely focused on grabbing viewer eyeballs. In response, I/NGOs increasingly package their narratives in more attention-grabbing and digestible forms.¹² While this approach can magnify short-term advocacy efforts, it also runs the risk of sensationalising issues that are of some social and political significance. The transition ushered in a liberalisation era that initially opened up pathways for newspapers, radio stations, and television networks to mushroom. This new freedom, however, was carved out largely in negative frames for government efforts at containing the freedom of expression and association.¹³ Nevertheless, NGOs became key players in the 1970s and found mainstream acceptance in the 1990s, advocating causes such as human rights, social justice, and sustainable development. However, even up to this date, a large number of NGOs in Nepal appear to be working according to the interests of the political parties.¹⁴ This is detrimental to the overall image that is being projected to the masses at large.

A historic watershed moment occurred in 2006, when the monarchy collapsed and a new democratic period dawned. Multi-party democracy expanded the freedom-of-expression space, opening new avenues to enjoy free speech and tending the landscape of a more liberal media and civil society.¹⁵ Since then, I/NGOs have increasingly employed media to amplify their advocacy initiatives, recognising the influence of these partnerships on public discourse. While their portrayal is layered, media outlets routinely highlight both their contributions to civil society and their shortcomings.

Although allegations of corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency continue to plague their work, it is widely acknowledged that I/NGOs continue to play a crucial role in advocating for human rights and democracy—in large part due to the way the media frames their efforts.

While the nature of media and I/NGOs in Nepal has mirrored the shifts in technology, politics, and society, several similarities exist between the pre- and post-2006 periods: I/NGOs still depend on the media to give visibility to their work. Such dependence will persist so far as neither party holds a greater bargaining position against the other. And while issues of representation and media integrity continue.

Political Economy of Civil Society

The political economy of the CSOs, broadly explores their structure, resources, personnel and ways of operating and additionally the attitude of government and donors towards the CSO sector.¹⁶ Following the political shift of the 1990s, a significant number of new organisations emerged,¹⁷ and this necessitated the establishment of

9 <https://seads.adb.org/solutions/asia-pacific-ngo-digital-transformation-project-building-tech-enabled-future-ngos>.

10 Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell, “Crossing Boundaries: New Media and Networked Journalism,” *Communication Culture and Critique* 1, no. 1 (February 29, 2008): 92–104.

11 Charlie Beckett, *The Value of Networked Journalism* (London School of Economics, 2010), accessed October 21, 2024, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/31050/1/Beckett_Value_networked_journalism_2010.pdf.

12 Simon Cottle and David Nolan, “How the Media’s Codes and Rules Influence the Ways NGOs Work,” Nieman Lab, November 16, 2009, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/simon-cottle-and-david-nolan-how-the-media-codes-and-rules-influence-the-ways-ngos-work/>.

13 Asian Development Bank, “Overview of Civil Society: Nepal,” January 5, 2018, <https://www.adb.org/publications/overview-civil-society-nepal>; Nepal Press Freedom, “Nepal Media,” accessed on October 2, 2024, <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/cms/2>.

14 UNESCO, “Assessment of Media Development in Nepal”, 2013, <https://unmin.un.org.np/resource/assessment-media-development-nepal>.

15 Dharna N. Adhikari, “Media and Democracy in Nepal: A Case for Public-Oriented Journalism,” *Global Media Journal*, n.d.

16 Harrison, Tom. *Political Economy Analysis of the Relationship between Civil Society Organisations and Local Government in Tanzania*. (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)): London, 2018); <https://www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Report-on-PEA-of-CSOs-in-Tanzania-THarrison.pdf>

17 Up to the early 1960s, almost 15 NGOs were registered for the social services in Nepal. In 1977, some 37 NGOs came into existence and were affiliated with the Social Service National Coordination Council (SSNCC), a government bureau for coordinating and facilitating the NGOs. The number of affiliation has increased to 220 NGOs including 52 INGOs up from 1990 (see Singh 2013).

the Social Service National Coordination Council (SSNCC) (1977),¹⁸ the Ministry of Social Welfare (1981), and the Ministry of Women Development and Social Welfare (1995).¹⁹ The Social Welfare Council established by the Social Welfare Act of 1992 in Nepal is currently the focal institution overseeing NGOs, including promoting coordination, monitoring, and policy development overall. It provides training, small grants, and support, while fostering partnerships between local and international NGOs to implement coordinated programmes effectively. Whereas the project wise approval and international funding is concerned, the individual NGO has to get the approval from the Social Welfare Council.²⁰ The key laws/regulations governing CSOs/NGOs in Nepal are listed below (Table).

Table: Key laws and regulations governing civil society organisations in Nepal

Year	Act	Specific implications for civil society organisations
Existing		
1961	National Directive Act	The government can issue orders and instructions to organisations registered under the Act with regard to their activities as deemed appropriate. Any orders or instructions issued by the government are final and cannot be questioned in any court of law.
1977	Association Registration Act	The Act details requirements for registration and (annual) renewal, and of approval from the government. All of these provisions can be used for delaying the CSO registration process even though the Act provides no specific ground to reject an application for registration.
1992	Social Welfare Act	CSOs receiving foreign funding have to be affiliated with the Social Welfare Council under this Act. In addition, CSOs must also receive case-by-case project approval in order to receive such funds from foreign sources. INGOs are also required to affiliate with the SWC.
2006	Companies Act	The Act has some safeguards against arbitrary denial of registration of any company even though it has some operational requirements for non-profit companies which do not apply to for-profit groups.
2012	Local Government Resource Mobility and Management Directive	CSOs need to provide details of activities to local authorities for the renewal process. In planning development projects, CSOs are required to prioritise projects currently under operation in local areas.
2017	Local Government Operation Act	Encourages CSOs, including NGOs, user committees, cooperative institutions, and other social and community organisations, to work in coordination with local governments. Several types of work require coordination and prior approval from local governments.
2019	International Development Cooperation Policy	International aid mobilised through Nepali groups has to be in line with government priorities, which is identified mostly as infrastructure development.
Proposed		
2014	Social Welfare and Development Act	Requirement of permission from Foreign Ministry; dissolution of NGO possible on orders of local authorities; SWC has the power to suspend or dissolve the Executive Committee of NGOs if engaged in activities that contravene their memorandum of understanding, or prevailing laws.
2018	National Integrity and Ethics Policy	Requires groups to seek government permission to receive foreign grants. INGOs banned from advocating on policy issues and from making 'inappropriate allegations', 'spreading ill will', or doing anything to 'jeopardise the Nepali civilisation, culture, social relationships and harmony'.
2019	Bill to Amend and Consolidate Laws Relating to Establishment, Registration and Operation of Social Organisations	Meant to replace the Association Registration Act 1977, the National Directive Act 1961, and the Social Welfare Act 1992, CSOs are directed to choose only one area of work among 13 functional categories.

Source: Ritika Singh, Shambhawi Paudel, Sudeshna Thapa, Jeevan Baniya, "Civic Space in Nepal" in South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020 (New Delhi: The South Asia Collective, 2020), 126–163.

18 SSNCC was dissolved, and it was given a new name, Social Welfare Council (SWC), with the enactment of the Social Welfare Act 1992. The Social Welfare Council Act entrusted SWC as an autonomous body responsible for promotion, facilitation, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of the activities of the non-governmental social organisations in Nepal.

19 Singh, Sharada. Historical Development of Non-Governmental Organisations in Nepal; Bhatta, C.D. (2016). The Interface between the State and Civil Society in Nepal. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 10: 63–91.

20 The Social Welfare Act, Section 12 and 16.

In Nepal, NGOs are categorised based on how they operate. These include: ‘politically influenced groups’ linked to trade unions and professional organisations tied to political ideologies; ‘development-focused NGOs’ that provide services and rely heavily on donor funding; ‘neutral civil society organisations’ that focus on advocacy and traditional community work without political bias; and ‘pretender groups’, which claim to represent citizens but are actually connected to the state or specific sectors.²¹ Furthermore, the relationship between the state and non-state actors is fraught with ambiguities, leaving unclear where the role of the state ends and that of non-state actors begins.²²

The relationship between Nepali NGOs and the government is often contested.²³ The increasing preference of donor countries to route funds through NGOs, combined with structural adjustment policies, has resulted in the downsizing or elimination of numerous government services and programs, while NGO activities have expanded in their place.²⁴ The relationship is further, often characterised by suspicion on both sides, which is common across countries like Nepal. In fact, political economy analysis of the relationship between civil society organisations and local governments in Tanzania highlights similar characteristics. It reveals that, the state has focused on the need to know, and approve, the activities of CSOs, ‘the level of overlap between how government and CSOs view the strengths and weaknesses of the CSO sector presents an opportunity for promoting a greater degree of trust. However, there are also real and deep differences of opinion over how far CSOs should account to the government, as opposed to being regulated by the government’.²⁵

While media and CSOs have contributed a significant amount to progress in Nepal, there is a growing sense of fear that the legal environment for civil society and media is becoming restrictive.²⁶ The federal restructuring of the state has impacted CSO operations in several ways. On one hand, it has created opportunities for CSOs operating at the sub-national level, particularly those focused on women, youth, Dalit and marginalised communities, to particularly connect with the government at the local level, for government funding opportunities.²⁷ On the other hand, it has introduced numerous registration and operational requirements, ranging from the ward level to the federal level. In Nepal, several laws and draft bills have been introduced to expand government oversight, significantly hindering the registration and functioning of CSOs.²⁸ New regulations have increased surveillance of civil society and tightened media restrictions, curbing freedom of expression.²⁹ As a result, Nepal’s civic space continues to be rated as ‘obstructed’.³⁰ In the absence of clear laws at the provincial and local levels, they have been criticised for imposing taxes or VAT and for actions that limit civic spaces.³¹

21 Chandra D Bhatta, “Unveiling Nepal’s civil society,” *Journal of Civil Society* 8, no. 2 (2012): 185–199, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17448689.2012.732429>.

22 Chandra D Bhatta, “Civil Society in Nepal: In Search of Reality,” *Contribution to Nepalese Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 45–57, https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_34_01_04.pdf.

23 Chandra D Bhatta, “The Interface between the State and Civil Society in Nepal,” *Dhaulagiri: Journal of Sociology & Anthropology* 10, (2016), <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/DSAJ/article/view/15881>.

24 ADB, Overview of Civil Society: Nepal. (ADB: 2005), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28970/csb-nep.pdf>.

25 Tom Harrison, *Political Economy Analysis of the Relationship between Civil Society Organisations and Local Government in Tanzania* (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)): London, 2018).

26 FHI 360, *Assessment of the Legal Environment for Civil Society and Media in Nepal* (FHI 360: Washington, 2017); *Legal Landscape Report on Civil Society Organisations of Nepal* (GoGo Goundation: Kathmandu, 2017); *Analysis of the Relationship between Civil Society Organisations and Local Government in Tanzania* (Swiss NGO Federation, 2019); *National Civil Society Conference 2021* (NGO Federation: Kathmandu, 2022), <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/355>; Dignity Initiatives, https://dignityinitiatives.org/areas_work/civic-space/; Lekhanath Pandey, *Shrinking of Civil Space: Drafting of CSOs policies in Nepal* (Centre for Media Research-Nepal, Policy Paper 18, 2021), <https://nepalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Discussion-Paper-Shrinking-of-Civic-Space-Federal.pdf>.

27 *Assessment of the Legal Environment for Civil Society and Media in Nepal* (FHI 360: Washington, 2017), https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/our-work_Nepal-Assessment_Final_June26.pdf.

28 Ritika Singh, Shambhawi Paudel, Sudeshna Thapa, & Jeevan Baniya. ‘Civic Space in Nepal’. *The South Asia Collective*, pp. 126–163, 2020, <https://thesouthasiacollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SASM2020-Nepal.pdf>.

29 Dignity Initiatives, https://dignityinitiatives.org/areas_work/civic-space/.

30 “Monitor,” CIVICUS, accessed on December 1, 2024, <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/nepal/>

31 *National Civil Society Conference 2021* (NGO Federation: Kathmandu, 2022), <https://www.ngofederation.org/content/355>.

Objectives

The objectives outlined below seek to offer a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media and I/NGOs in Nepal.

1. **Analyse the nature of media coverage:** investigate how I/NGOs are portrayed in the Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar outlets, particularly in their narratives and framing techniques used in news stories and opinion pieces. This objective seeks to unveil trends in coverage as they relate to successes and challenges, alongside the influence of external factors such as political climate and public sentiment.
2. **Analyse the nature of the relationship:** examine whether the relationship is collaborative, adversarial, or a combination of both.
3. **Analyse patterns of coverage:** explore the types of news covered, the volume of coverage, and trends over time to identify patterns in media attention towards I/NGOs. It will also pinpoint the geographical areas that receive the most media focus.

Methodology

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of two newspapers: The Kathmandu Post, an English-language publication, and onlinekhabar, a prominent Nepali news outlet. The temporal scope of the study covers a ten-year period, from 2014 to 2024. The year 2014 was chosen as a pivotal starting point, primarily due to its significance in Nepal's political history, serving as a precursor to the promulgation of the new constitution. To systematically capture relevant information, data from both op-eds, news reports, and commentaries was entered into an Excel Spreadsheet. The data was retrieved using the Advanced Google search engine with keywords such as 'I/NGOs', 'The Kathmandu Post', and 'Nepali text', along with searches on onlinekhabar, within a certain time frame. However, by relying on the Google search engine for finding articles, researchers were limited to using only those that appeared in the search results.

The retrieved data were further refined to accurately meet the objectives of the study. This methodical process allowed information on media coverage to be organised more comprehensively for analysis, hence providing a deeper insight into the interaction between the media and I/NGOs within the stipulated period. Additionally, to validate findings, five key informant interviews were also conducted—two with experts who have a background in journalism and three with individuals from civil society. The researchers also acknowledge that all of the interviewees are men, which is a limitation.

Qualitative Analysis

The narratives presented by The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar reflect a complicated view of the I/NGOs' role in Nepal—one that is painted by ongoing scrutiny, regulatory initiatives, and concerns over operational efficacy. While both outlets have highlighted the need for accountability, they frame their discussions through different lenses—regulatory compliance versus operational independence.

Opinion Pieces in Media

Since 2014, a total of 101 news reports, including opinion pieces and interviews, have been published in the nationally circulated Kathmandu Post and the Nepali language online platform—onlinekhabar. Without proper research into how media and I/NGOs interact, it is difficult to gauge if this level of coverage should be considered adequate. A study from India provides an interesting comparison: between January 2005 and January 2006, two national newspapers there published 442 articles on similar topics.³² This sharp contrast to Nepal spotlights how

³² Rebecca de Souza, "NGOs in India's elite newspapers: a framing analysis," *Asian Journal of Communication* 20, no. 4 (2010): 477–493.

little attention I/NGO issues receive in the country.

Opinion pieces are even more rare. Between 2014 and 2018, The Kathmandu Post published only nine. With so few examples, it is difficult to ascertain how these pieces shape public perceptions around I/NGO activities. Nonetheless, the fact that they were published at all highlights the importance of discussing these issues and the role media plays in shaping views. Notably, many of these writings surfaced around the same time period, which might have been in large part due to significant events like the introduction of federalisation and the new Constitution.

Out of the nine opinion pieces, several highlight the negative impacts of weak government oversight. They suggest that relying on ‘off-budget aid’ can lead to corruption and misuse of resources. Two of the articles take an especially critical view of the transparency and accountability of I/NGOs in Nepal. These critiques add to growing concerns that many organisations involved in development and humanitarian work often rely on questionable funding practices.³³

It is also no secret that many NGOs are contributing to corruption, either directly or indirectly. Given the levels of corruption prevalent in Nepali society, NGOs cannot work without indulging in some form of corruption, however small. There are various methods of indulging powerbrokers, such as providing them with fellowships, straight financial incentives, or employing them as resource persons in communication and transportation.

- ‘*The poor and poorer*’, **The Kathmandu Post**, 2015

Following this line of thought, many opinion pieces adopt a broader ‘meta-framing’ that, while recognising that corruption does exist within NGOs, implies it is less likely to fester within INGOs. They often argue that the stricter lending practices of INGOs help prevent unethical practices. This distinction between NGOs and multilateral donor agencies provides a more nuanced understanding of the complicated environment in which civil society operates.

A large portion of NGO corruption can be conveniently ascribed to donor policies and more importantly, their discrete and irrational practices. The single reason why NGOs are so vulnerable to corruption is their funding practices. Donors have a ‘one-way traffic’-like funding programme. That is, their funding mechanisms are basically designed to disburse funds, not collect them when the funds remain unspent. This makes NGOs susceptible to corruption.

- ‘*Faults in foreigners*’, **The Kathmandu Post**, 2015

Despite courting such hefty criticism, some opinion pieces call for a more nuanced approach to examining NGOs. They argue that broad generalisations about their ineffectiveness can detract from the valuable contributions of many organisations.

Current NGO bashing in Nepal has completely failed to understand this basic idea. In making sweeping calls for enhanced regulation of NGOs, advocates overlook the existing diversity among civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs regarding their work. They also fail to appreciate the value of this diversity within the loktantrik polity established constitutionally.

- ‘*CSOs in a loktantrik Nepal*’, **The Kathmandu Post**, 2017

What is striking is the noticeable lack of discussion around multilateral donors in Nepal. Nearly all opinion pieces—except for one that calls for more on-budget transfers—focus entirely on NGOs. These pieces highlight the challenges faced by NGOs in Nepal and offer insights into how the wider civil society landscape shapes their actions. The relatively limited attention lent to INGOs might be explained away by policies in Nepal that do not allow INGOs to operate on their own without partnering with local organisations. As a result, NGOs in Nepal tend

³³ Mark Sidel and Iftekhhar Zaman, “Philanthropy and Law in South Asia: Key Themes and Key Choices,” October 26, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3719436.

to be much more visible than INGOs.

Despite retaining some elements, opinion pieces admittedly are subjective in nature, deviating from ‘impartial’ and ‘factual’ reporting. Research indicates that readers have a particular problem distinguishing between news and opinion pieces in digital media, where the latter is sure to be clubbed together with the former. This blurring of lines can lead not only to the readers perceiving news items as biased or partial but can skew public perception and discussion altogether.³⁴

Reporting on I/NGO Transparency and Government Oversight

In the present context, news reports of the two leading dailies share a common thread with opinion pieces featured: both critically address the mismanagement of funds within I/NGOs and the efficiency of operations—with news reports extending their coverage to also cover implications of government regulatory frameworks.

A comparison between onlinekhabar and The Kathmandu Post shows some striking similarities in their way of portraying the regulatory push of the Nepali government towards I/NGOs. Whereas both The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar hint at the need for reform of the NGO sector, they vacillate between highlighting regulatory control over NGOs and operational challenges and broader implications. Though mostly neutral in tone, The Kathmandu Post sometimes leans towards depicting government control as a bulwark against ‘overreach’ on the part of civil society. This can be gathered from articles such as ‘Social Welfare Council to introduce anti-money laundering directive for non-profit organisations’, ‘Integrity policy gathers dust at PM’s Office’, and ‘New policy aims to bar foreign NGOs from financing religious and political institutions’. Another report on the Election Commission’s directives to NGOs to desist from activities that may influence voters reflects the broader set of anxieties related to the social and cultural footprint I/NGOs might be leaving behind.³⁵

A recent annual report of the Office of the Auditor General also blamed the council for poor monitoring despite reports finding that some of the NGOs—both domestic and foreign—were involved in some religious activities.

- ‘New policy aims to bar foreign NGOs from financing religious and political institutions’, **The Kathmandu Post**, 2019

The Kathmandu Post does not shy away from scrutinising I/NGOs, especially when they are considered to be exercising unchecked power. Coverage like ‘More than half of Nepal’s total NGOs are in Province 3—and most of them are in the Capital’, brings into focus the flip side, raising concern about the heavy concentration of NGOs in Kathmandu and questioning their effectiveness in addressing the needs of remote regions. Similarly, onlinekhabar in its reportage has given more currency to government discourses on the urgency of regulation to protect national sovereignty, economic transparency, and responsible use of foreign funds through provocative pieces like ‘गैरसरकारी संस्थाको धन्दा: काम नसकिँदै प्रगति विवरण सार्वजनिक’ and ‘आइएनजीओ भ्रष्टाचारको सबैभन्दा ठूलो अखडा: पूरख्य सचिव पौडेल’ and ‘एनजीओ र पाँचतारे होटललाई सिफारिसको तेल, सर्वसाधारणलाई सास्ती’, which never fail to scrutinise the ineptness, corruption, and partiality of NGOs.

In this regard, onlinekhabar, and to a lesser degree, The Kathmandu Post, follows a long tradition of media outlets that, while not dismissive of concerns brought forward by civil society, present a more state-focused narrative. They frame government actions as necessary to prevent the misuse of funds. For civil society, this type of story raises

34 “Separate News and Opinion, Says the Public — and Clearly Label Them, Say Journalists — News Literacy Project,” News Literacy Project, February 4, 2022, <https://newslit.org/tips-tools/did-you-know-news-opinion/>; Amy Mitchell and Amy Mitchell, “Distinguishing Between Factual and Opinion Statements in the News,” Pew Research Center, May 3, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>; Kevin Loker, “Confusion About What’s News and What’s Opinion Is a Big Problem, but Journalists Can Help Solve It,” American Press Institute, December 1, 2023, <https://bitly.cx/qDRQB>.

35 “I/NGOs told to follow election code,” *The Kathmandu Post*, April 5, 2017, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2017/04/05/ingos-told-to-follow-election-code>.

concern, as shared by a key informant from a reputed I/NGO in Nepal.³⁶ According to them, often, restrictions are imposed by the government under the pretext of maintaining national security or curbing misinformation. In effect, such actions only suppress civil society reporting and disrupt the free flow of information.

This is not to suggest that the two dailies do not provide ample space for concerns facing I/NGOs. As watchdogs against governmental overreach, articles such as ‘असुरक्षा बढेको भन्दै एनजिओकर्मीले गाउँ छाडे’ highlight the operational threats and safety issues encountered by NGO workers in their day-to-day undertaking. However, the media ultimately retains the right to choose what topics to cover, and it is found kneeling to content that can grab eyeballs rather than ground-reporting.³⁷ Key informants—including representatives from both the media and civil society—reported that the media looks upon NGOs as ‘dollar harvesters’ while CSOs view the media as ‘an agency with an agenda’.³⁸

Between the two, however, The Kathmandu Post is found taking a comparatively more advocacy-oriented approach—particularly in its coverage of government policies related to I/NGOs. This is evident in how their articles have addressed the National Integrity Policy (NIP) since the time when it was first proposed. The Post’s coverage of the NIP—which sought to impose tight oversight on I/NGOs, such as requiring prior approval for yearly programming and budgets—characterises the policy as unduly restrictive, with their editorials using phrases like ‘distinctly sinister tenor’, to describe its potential impact. Civil society, in principle, plays a crucial role in both democratic and non-democratic governance, independently holding governments accountable while uniting people to pursue common goals and interests.³⁹

Furthermore, during this period, The Kathmandu Post proactively provided a platform for various I/NGOs to voice their alarm and, by extension, potentially helped shape public support, seen in coverages such as ‘Whose integrity is it anyway?’, ‘Non-government organisations concerned over a new law to regulate them’, and, ‘Curtailling civil liberties in Nepal, one legislation at a time’. Respondents highlighted that the negative portrayal of NGOs largely arises from the state’s failure to effectively monitor and govern the sector. They suggested that if the state were capable of addressing these shortcomings, such debates and portrayals of NGOs would not have arisen.⁴⁰ Instead, key informants felt that this reflects a culture of blaming NGOs rather than tackling malpractice directly. They pointed out that NGOs routinely submit all required documents and evidence to the Social Welfare Council.⁴¹ They also mentioned the decline of FM radio stations, many of which were run by NGOs and cooperatives.⁴² They also said while CSO malpractices are talked about, the state is not doing anything. For example, they spoke to the decline of FM radio stations, many of which were run by NGOs and cooperatives previously.

As well as its wide-ranging recommendations for political parties, the diplomatic community, constitutional bodies, professors, teachers and the private sector were also matters of concern. While prima facie, the policy’s aim was touted to be an effort to ensure good governance, critics were of the view that the country already had laws and institutions for ensuring good governance, accountability and transparency.

- ‘Non-government organisations concerned over a new law to regulate them’, **The Kathmandu Post**, 2019

Such media portrayals underpin an increasing cynicism towards what some would call ‘nefarious’ state intentions and a recognition of the critical role that I/NGOs play in pushing for social justice and human rights. This is part of a trend across South Asia where democratic backsliding is experienced through increasing state encroachment on I/NGO freedoms.⁴³ This may result in a media landscape that overlooks the contributions of I/NGOs, portraying them as dissenters.⁴⁴

36 KII_CS_17112024.

37 KII_CS_14112024; KII_CS_17112024.

38 KII_J_9112024; KII_CS_10112024; KII_CS_14112024; KII_CS_10112024.

39 Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Civil Society Organization Source Book: A Staff Guide to Cooperation with Civil Society Organization* (ADB: Philippines, 2008), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32629/files/cso-staff-guide.pdf>.

40 KII_J_9112024; KII_CS_10112024; KII_J_12112024.

41 KII_J_9112024; KII_CS_10112024.

42 KII_CS_14112024.

43 Rebecca L. Root, “Civil society and NGOs ‘under assault’ in Asia,” *Devex*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.devex.com/news/civil-society-and-ngos-under-assault-in-asia-107041>.

44 Sumit Bisaraya and Madeleine Rogers, “Designing Resistance: Democratic Institutions and the Threat of Backsliding” (International IDEA, 2003), accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2023-10/designing-resistance-democratic-institutions-threat-of-backsliding.pdf>; Conny Roggerband and Andrea Krizsan, “Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash Against Women’s Rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics” (UN Women, June 2020), accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www>.

In its discussion of the NIP, The Kathmandu Post similarly covers regulatory measures as in other South Asian countries. For example, India's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) also limits the ability of NGOs to receive foreign funding, often citing national security as the driving reason. This reflects a regional trend where NGOs are scapegoated and made 'soft targets' by governments.⁴⁵

Another critical area of news coverage also revolves around the financial structure of I/NGOs in Nepal. The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar have run stories questioning the adequate utilisation of funds in development work. Both outlets point to issues stemming from excessive administrative costs and high operational expenses, including high rents. Further, the lack of comprehensive monitoring mechanisms inside Nepal's Social Welfare Council, as reported by onlinekhabar, highlights the need for enhanced regulatory frameworks to hold I/NGOs responsible for their financial malpractices. Literature on I/NGO accountability supports such media discourses about how transparency and responsible financial management can create a base for public trust. According to research evidence, those organisations with stronger accountability mechanisms, including regular financial reporting, third-party audits, and community involvement, are more likely to attract funding.⁴⁶ Complimentary, some key informant respondents highlighted how NGOs used to have a clear approach to civil rights until sometime back, but now are paralysed and similar to academia, plagued by politically divided.⁴⁷

While both NGOs and CSOs are meant to be custodians of civic space, they often fail to do so in practice.

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Humanitarian Aid Reporting

While the media acknowledges I/NGOs' role during operations and aid after a disaster, they also highlight the challenges I/NGOs face from the government. Articles like 'Gorkha quake survivors upset with INGOs' wasteful spending of aid money' and 'Tardy INGOs get flak from quake survivors' bring to the fore survivor accounts that criticise civil society spending habits and lack of response to immediate needs. However, media reports in Nepal highlight that I/NGOs were slow to respond in earthquake-affected areas, and their efforts were often poorly coordinated with government initiatives.

The role of the media in reporting on I/NGOs during disasters is often overlooked, despite its capacity to shape public opinions and influence the potency of humanitarian interventions. Research shows local media outlets, which are often the trusted information sources within the communities they serve, play a big role in providing timely information.⁴⁸ Moreover, media can become conduits between affected populations and relief organisations. Further, studies have shown that media coverage following disasters may significantly increase international donations by spotlighting the needs of afflicted communities.⁴⁹ This shows the media's power not only to inform but also to hold I/NGOs accountable, so that the funds are used effectively to benefit the affected. Additionally, fostering collaboration between journalists and I/NGOs can enhance the quality of coverage. This will allow for

unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Discussion-paper-Democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights-en.pdf.

45 Deepak Raj Sapkota, "NGOs and INGOs Are Soft Targets to Blame for All the Failure," *SpotlightNepal*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.spotlightnepal.com/2018/07/01/ngos-and-ingos-are-soft-targets-to-blame-for-all-the-failure-deepak-raj-shapkota-sapkota/>.

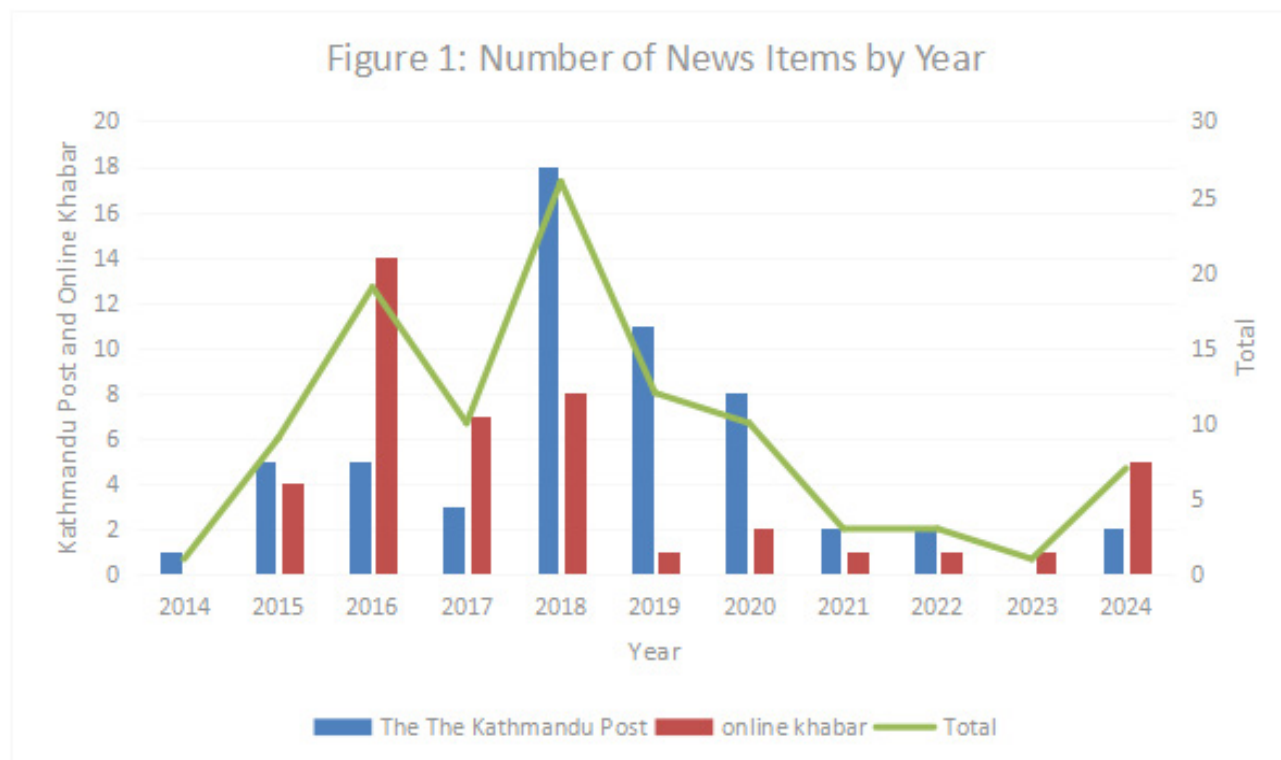
46 Mahalia Sinclair-Parker, "Accountability mechanisms in NGOs : how ChildFund New Zealand maintains accountability with its funders and communities", Diss., (University of New Zealand, 2022), <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/d2acbca9-7d6a-4f61-aa99-548f83a079b3/content> ; Tugyetwena Michael, "A Literature Review of the Relationship Between Governance, Funding Strategy and Sustainability of Non-government Organizations," *International NGO Journal* 18, no. 2 (July 31, 2023): 10–19, <https://doi.org/10.5897/ingoj2023.0365>.

47 KII_J_12112024.

48 Wayan Vota, "How Do Humanitarian Organizations and Local Media Communicate During Disasters?," November 29, 2013, <https://www.ictworks.org/how-do-humanitarian-organizations-and-local-media-communicate-during-disasters/>.

49 Neelam Kapoor, "Role of Media in Disaster Management," *Journal of Advance Research in Social Science and Humanities (ISSN 2208-2387)* 1, no. 1 (January 31, 2015): 05–08, <https://doi.org/10.53555/nssh.v1i1.228>.; Renu Bali, "Disaster Management Cycle," *Asian Journal of Geographical Research* 7, no. 1 (February 3, 2024): 85–93, <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajgr/2024/v7i1217>.

more informed discussions to flow.⁵⁰



Quantitative Analysis

This section presents qualitative data examining patterns in news coverage, including the subject matter, the space allocated, and the gender of the authors. The analysis is based on a collection of media content published over a decade by The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar.

A total of 101 news items were published between 2014 and 2024. The Kathmandu Post published 57 of these items and onlinekhabar published 44. Figure 1 illustrates the year-by-year distribution of news content from both outlets. The greatest coverage occurred in 2018, accounting for 25 per cent of the total, followed by 2016 with 18 per cent. Due to the limited research on media coverage of these organisations, an objective assessment of whether this number is high or low is not possible. However, there are several noteworthy factors regarding the increased media coverage in 2016 and 2018.

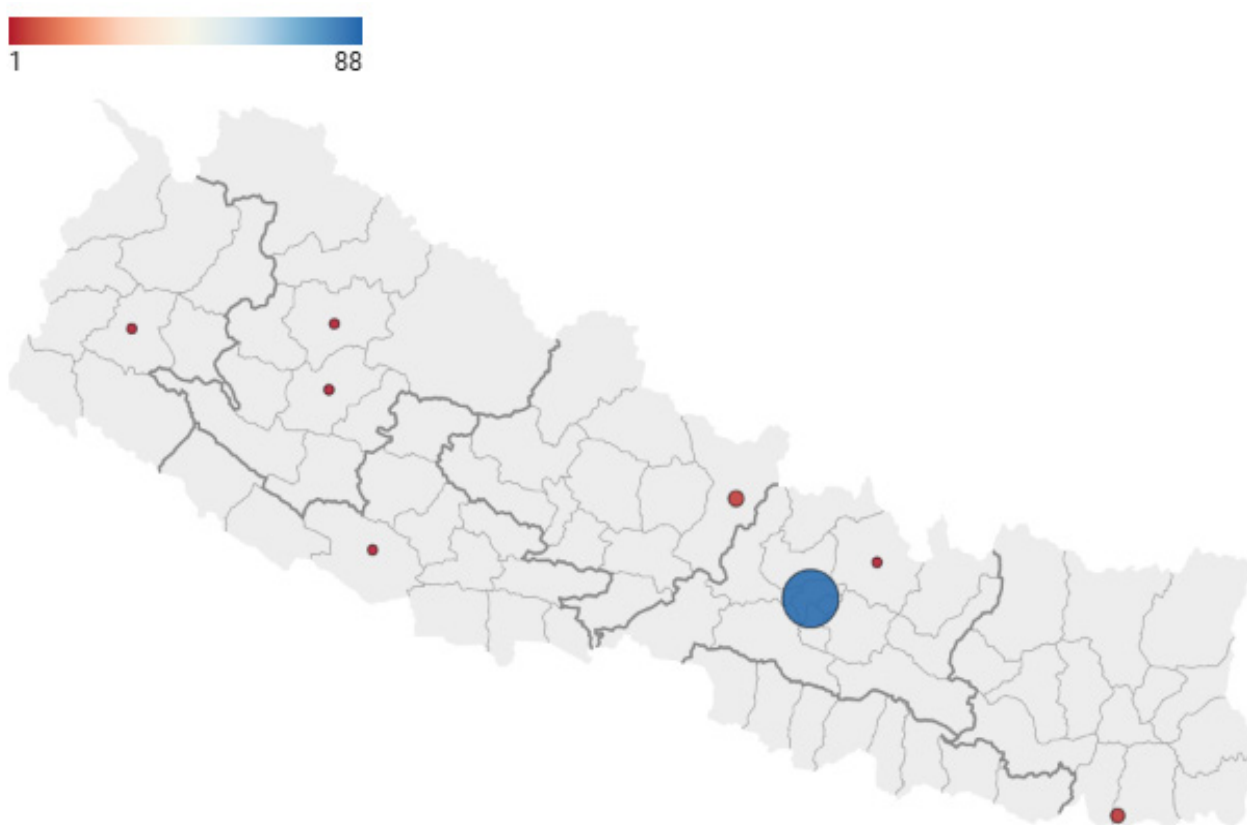
In 2015, Nepal was hit by a major earthquake and saw the government mobilise all available resources. Some key measures included implementing a one-door policy for the distribution of relief by I/NGOs and increased scrutiny of I/NGOs over the distribution of relief materials. News articles from this period highlight these developments and provide insights into public perceptions regarding relief distribution by I/NGOs. Of the 14 news items published by onlinekhabar, six focused on earthquake-related relief measures initiated by I/NGOs, particularly addressing transparency issues surrounding these efforts. Similarly, of the five news items published by The Kathmandu Post that year, four were against the backdrop of the earthquake. This coverage examines transparency concerns in relief distribution, government decisions, and the perceptions of recipients receiving aid from I/NGOs. In 2018, news coverage predominantly covered the proposed NIP. Out of 18 news items published by The Kathmandu Post, 13 were related to this policy. In contrast, onlinekhabar did not cover the NIP directly but reported on the government's intentions to control and regulate I/NGOs; of the eight news items published, five reported on the developments.

⁵⁰ "Tardy I/NGOs draw flak from quake survivors," *The Kathmandu Post*, August 21, 2016, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2016/08/21/tardy-ingos-draw-flak-from-quake-survivors>.

Except for the years 2016, 2017, and 2024, The Kathmandu Post published more news items than the onlinekhabar. One particular reason for this is likely that, given the online medium of onlinekhabar, it depends on bite-sized news pieces to increase user views. In the three years that onlinekhabar has reported more than The Kathmandu Post, it covers remarks from public officials or events that can be sensationalised through bite-sized pieces. As stated earlier, news items in 2016 and 2017 were written against the backdrop of the earthquake. I/NGOs received attention because of their role in relief measures; this attention also led to news items scrutinising their activities. The big incident of 2024 was the presence of an I/NGO in a parliamentary committee meeting. This event, although reported by both media houses, received more attention from the onlinekhabar. While The Kathmandu Post produced two news items, the onlinekhabar produced more than double the item—five. To a certain extent, these figures highlight the approach taken by both media houses. While The Kathmandu Post positions itself as a detailed news commentary outlet, onlinekhabar focuses more on reporting events as they occur, without detailed commentary.

There is no notable variation in the geographical coverage of news items. Of the total, 88 are national news stories, primarily focused on actions taken by the federal government of Nepal. Four news items report from Gorkha,

Figure 2: Geographical Coverage of News

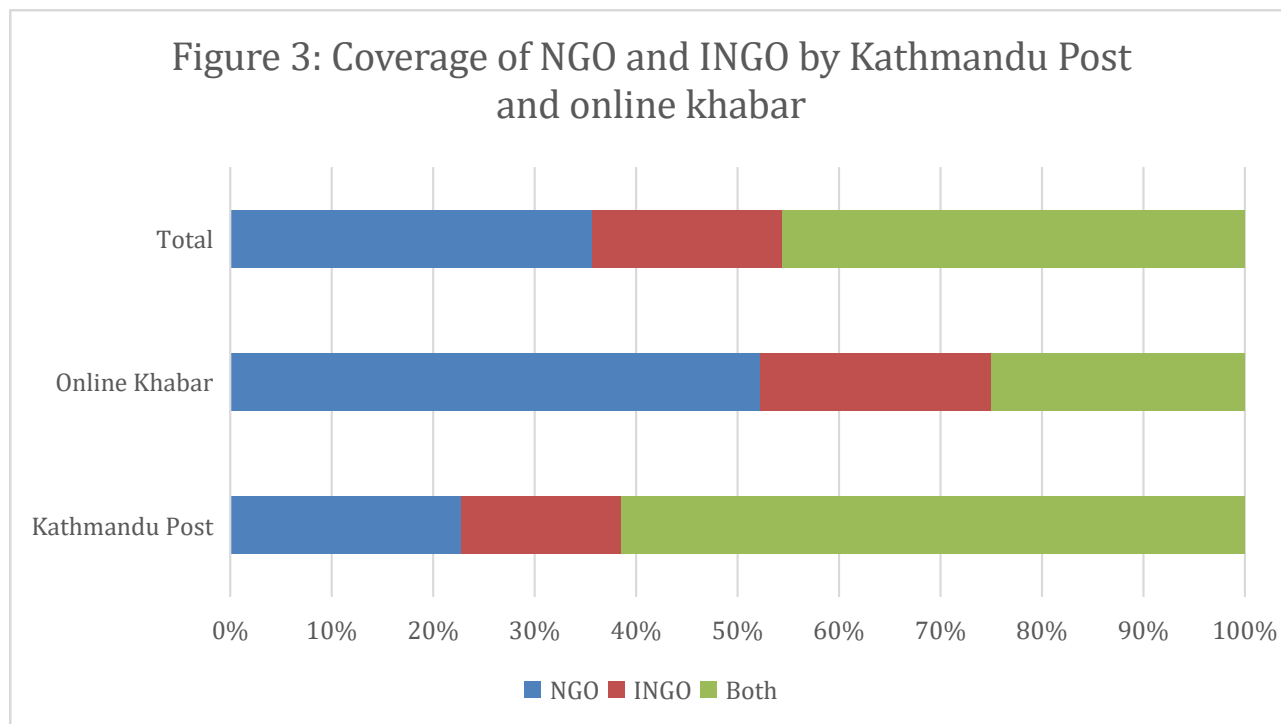


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followed by three from Biratnagar and one each from Jajarkot, Jumla, Dang, Doti, and Sindhupalchowk. Coverage from areas other than Biratnagar majorly focuses on incidents related to natural disasters and the relief measures distributed by I/NGOs. The regional coverage, from the perspective of relief distribution, projects I/NGOs in Nepal as ‘benevolent’ organisations that provide aid to those in need.

While a focus on national news is expected given that both media outlets are based in the capital city, the outlined disproportionate focus reflects an undercurrent characterised by dismissiveness toward issues outside Kathmandu. However, onlinekhabar demonstrates a slightly greater capacity for reporting from other parts of

the country. Of the 12 news items covering specific districts outside the capital, onlinekhabar published nine. Its online format allows for broader coverage of issues nationwide, while the page constraints and limited space of The Kathmandu Post likely restrict its reporting to only what it deems significant. This imbalance in coverage was also a concern for interviewed civil society members and journalists alike. Most respondents noted the impact of centralisation of leadership and resources to Kathmandu on the ability of the media to cover activities at the sub-national level.⁵¹ CSO priorities also reinforce this uneven focus by showing a general reticence, though not always, to engage in activities beyond the capital because their leadership is similarly capital-based.



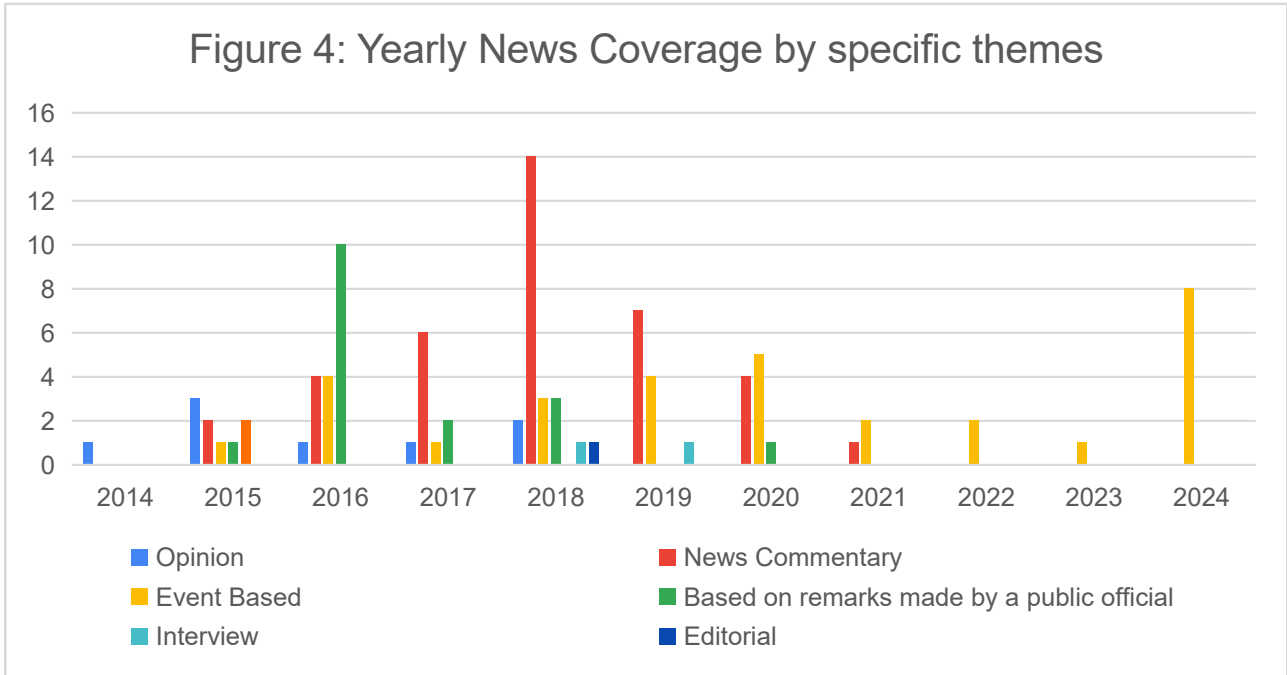
NGO-related news is reported twice as often as I/NGO-related news. Between 2014 and 2024, 35.6 per cent of all news items focused on issues related to non-governmental organisations, compared to 18.8 per cent for INGO-related news. Notably, the highest share of news items—45.6 per cent—covers both NGOs and INGOs.

In fact, onlinekhabar has significantly outperformed The Kathmandu Post in covering NGO-related news, publishing a total of 23 news items compared to just 13 by The Post. Both newspapers rarely use the term ‘civil society organisations’ to refer to I/NGOs; in fact, only one news item employed this term, with it being an opinion piece written by someone who would typically be categorised as part of an I/NGO in Nepal. Nepali news items commonly use the terms NGOs and INGOs, along with their translated versions ‘गैर सरकारी संस्था’ and ‘अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय गैर सरकारी संस्था’, interchangeably. Onlinekhabar’s reporting also indicates that public officials have adopted the term I/NGO rather than its translated counterpart. In 2024, the first news reported by onlinekhabar stated: ‘NGO को सहयोग नलिन संसदीय समिति सभापतिलाई सभामुखको निर्देशन’ (The Speaker Directs Parliamentary Committee Chair to Not Accept NGOs’ Help). In subsequent coverage, onlinekhabar quoted parliamentarians who likewise used the term NGOs instead of its translated version. This term has been somewhat accepted in the Nepali language as is.

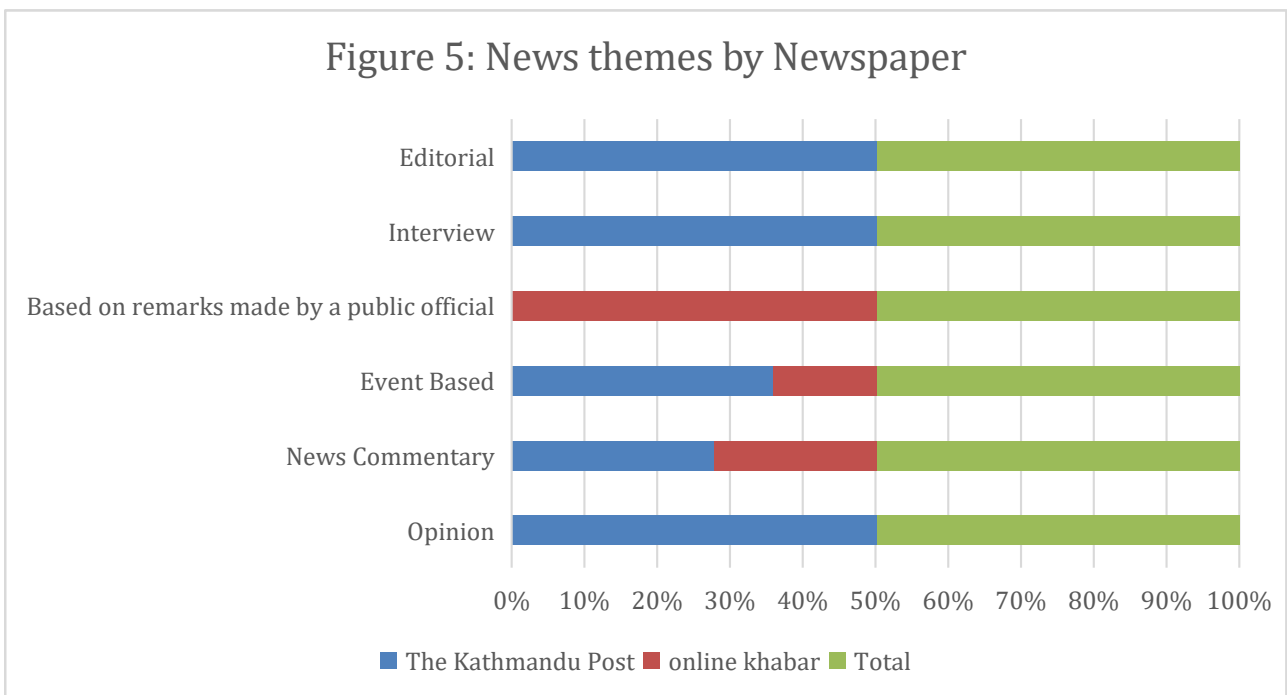
The news items are further categorised by broader themes, which include event-based coverage—news that reports on specific events as they occur; news commentaries—articles that provide detailed analysis of events, incorporating expert opinions or narratives that unpack the potential reasons behind a series of occurrences; and news pieces based on remarks made by public officials—items that report on statements from government employees, political party members, or retired officials. Additional categories include interviews, opinion pieces, and editorials.

Event-based news and news commentaries are by far the most popular categories. Over the span of 10 years, both The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar report a total of 38 news commentaries and 31 event-based news

51 KII_CS_14112024; KII_J_12112024.



items. Until 2020, the coverage seemed diverse, often featuring a mixture of opinion pieces, news commentaries, event-based coverage, non-event-based articles, interviews, editorials, and reports based on public officials’ remarks. However, after 2020, the news coverage appears to be limited primarily to event-based reporting, indicating a decline in interest in more varied content. Noteworthy is also that in 2016, the highest percentage of news was focused on public officials’ statements. This could be owing to the earthquake reconstruction and I/NGOs’ involvement in the process. As noted in the following section, public officials are generally perceived to frame I/NGOs as unaccountable foreign entities, and reportage during this period resonates with such a tone.



However, distinct patterns of coverage emerge between the two media companies. The Kathmandu Post has produced more news commentaries, whereas onlinekhabar has focused on reporting more news items based on remarks made by public officials. In fact, The Kathmandu Post has not covered a single news item based on

public officials' remarks. In contrast, onlinekhabar has produced an equal number of news commentaries and reports based on such remarks. This focus on public officials' statements can be explained away by the online medium's need for regular bite-sized news to stay competitive. Opinion pieces have been written solely for an English-speaking audience, to say the least, since onlinekhabar did not publish any opinion pieces during the given period while The Kathmandu Post came out with eight. Likewise, interviews have also been targeted at an English-speaking readership; of the two interviews published between 2014 and 2024, both appeared in The Kathmandu Post.

These figures highlight that issues related to I/NGOs cater to specific audiences, with each newspaper serving a distinct readership. Onlinekhabar's focus on event-based news and reports based on public officials' remarks indicates a different audience than The Kathmandu Post, which has prioritised news commentaries and event-based reporting and provided space for opinions and interviews.

Regardless of these broader themes, both media houses gave more space to news on GoN regulatory efforts, followed by issues of transparency and accountability. In the last decade, 30.23 per cent of all news pieces were on government efforts to regulate I/NGOs. This is not surprising given the rhetoric of the Nepali government vis-à-vis the I/NGOs in which regulation and compliance with the government plans and policies are emphasised.

Transparency-related issues accounted for 26.35 per cent of news coverage, while accountability and governance accounted for 24.03 per cent. As stated, the only significant difference between the two categories is with regard to their subject: transparency refers to financial issues such as the extent to which funding provided by I/NGOs was transparent, cases of corruption, and the type of earthquake relief services offered by I/NGOs, whereas accountability and governance refer to practices more generally that attempt to induce responsible behaviour.

There is a notable lack of gendered reporting in the news coverage. Onlinekhabar has predominantly reported its news institutionally, which aligns with its focus on event-based reporting and news based on remarks from public officials, as previously highlighted. In contrast, while The Kathmandu Post has emphasised news commentaries, a substantial 72 per cent—41 news items—are authored by men, compared to just 7 per cent—4 news items—authored by women. Among the four news items written by females, one is an opinion piece, and three are detailed news commentaries by the same journalist. Whether the lack of gendered reporting is due to a shortage of female journalists or other underlying factors cannot be determined from the limited survey of news items. Additionally, only one news item is based on the Rastriya Samachar Samiti.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the coverage of I/NGOs in The Kathmandu Post and onlinekhabar shows a media landscape in Nepal where I/NGOs are under scrutiny and positive work gets only occasional attention. Both outlets have focused more on government's regulatory actions on I/NGOs and transparency and accountability. Over the past decade, 30.23 per cent of all news items have been about the government's efforts to regulate I/NGOs, which reflects the government of Nepal's stance that regulation is necessary and complying with national plans and policies. There is little variation in geographical coverage, 88 news items are national news, mostly in response to the federal government's actions. News from Gorkha (4), Biratnagar (3) and single news from Jajarkot, Jumla, Dang, Doti and Sindhupalchowk shows this trend and highlights the challenge of including diverse perspectives and voices. Moreover, while broad coverage is good for accountability and transparency, it can also overshadow positive work—even erode public trust and hinder I/NGOs' operational effectiveness. To address these challenges, the media should contextualise I/NGOs' challenges and only include credible voices in their reporting.

To do that, journalists should strive for balance by regularly highlighting I/NGOs' positive work. This can be done by featuring success stories and case studies that show their impact on local communities. The media should also try to cover more of the underserved regions. And training for journalists on I/NGOs operations can help to deepen their understanding of the sector and produce more informed reporting.