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How the media struggled in Nepal's earthquake rescue

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The media in Nepal has been instrumental in keeping people connected and updated about the recent magnitude 7.8 earthquake that hit the country on Saturday April 25.

However, initially the quake did not create a major reaction, as small scale tremors are not uncommon in the country. The Nepalese people were also unclear about the extent of the disaster as local media struggled to react to the earthquake.

The reality of the scale of the disaster began to sink in when heartbreaking pictures of the damage started emerging. Live footage and pictures from the international media gave some insight into the extent of the devastation in the earthquake ravaged nation.

The time taken by the Nepalese media to respond is not surprising. Our research has found that Nepalese media outlets categorise disasters as current affairs, without a specific accountability for disaster reporting.

On this occasion, the lack of reporting by Nepalese media early on was added to by the damage the earthquake had caused to media infrastructure itself.

Media coverage

The role of the media in any disasters is significant. But there has not previously been research into the media's treatment of disasters in Nepal, or the frameworks or models that might guide the media's approach.

Our research, published last year, collected 477 news stories on natural disasters in Nepal over a 12 month period from four sections of Nepalese media: print, on-line, radio and television.

We identified that the principal focus of media attention was on the response phase of disasters and on the human interest aspect. There was limited reporting that encouraged the development of any disaster resilient infrastructure in Nepal.

This is surprising not only given that Nepal is known to be prone to earthquakes, but also given the scale of the media in the country.

Nepal has a population of about 29-million, yet there are approximately 10,000 people involved in different media organisations throughout the country.

The principal source of news for most people in Nepal is community radio. There are approximately 350 radio stations, and most are independent and community owned. Radio Nepal is the government controlled national transmission run from Kathmandu and regional transmission centres.

Nepal also has 568 registered daily newspapers among a total of 6,500 newspapers and magazines. Only about a dozen such publications have a wide circulation, such as the government owned Gorkhapatra Daily and the privately run Kantipur Daily and Nagarik Daily.

There are 81 licences issued to run TV stations in Nepal but only about a dozen of TV channels operate regularly.

Media struggles

The immediate aftermath of disaster resulted in confusion within the leading media outlets with a lack of coordination by the government of the rescue efforts.

While the government owned Nepal Television (NTV) continued transmission, the privately owned Kantipur TV experienced disruption because of the earthquake.

It only continued transmission by setting up a temporary news desk set in the open in Kathmandu. The station has this week setup transmission from a cafeteria until the safety of the station building can be established.

Radio Nepal continued transmission despite the disruptions but most of the community and privately-owned radio stations were hard hit and are still struggling to resume services.

Nepal is a pioneer in community radio in South Asia. However, few community radio stations were advised to develop any necessary measures to withstand an earthquake.

Most newspapers continued their publication despite damage to their buildings, but distribution was halted so their reporting was not getting out to many people.

This prompted a surge in on-line viewing of newspapers including Onlinekhabar.com (only online), ekantipur.com (online version of Kantipur Daily newspaper), nagariknews.com (online version of Nagarik Daily newspaper), annapurnapost.com (online version of Annapurna Post daily newspaper) and setopati.com (a popular digital paper.)

Despite the widespread damage it was still possible to maintain access to the internet much of the time.

Social media

Social media has also been a powerful tool in ensuring communication, as foreigners and reporters already in Nepal were able to inform the world via Facebook and Twitter.

For example, Nepal's Prime Minister, Shusil Koirala, first knew about the earthquake from a Tweet from the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The proliferation of mobile phones in Nepal also made communications easier. Even in remote villages, people working their farms have their mobiles with them.

After the disaster, though, people could only rely on the mobile phones for a few hours due to disruption of electricity supplies.

International media coverage

The massive coverage of the Nepal earthquake by the international media has been instrumental in generating help and resources. People world-wide have been exposed to the crisis.

However, the extent of international interest has its downside, as it creates expectations that may be unrealisable.

For example, some media reports suggested Nepal had refused assistance from countries such as New Zealand and Taiwan. This resulted in media and social media backlash particularly among Nepalese living abroad who were worried about their families and friends in Nepal.

However, the assistance had not been refused, rather Nepal was giving priority to aid from neighbouring countries.

Nepal's government was struggling to co-ordinate the rescue and relief operation and the airport capacity was the limiting factor.

The international media has also been exploring the damage outside of the capital as well. Agencies such as Australia's ABC, India's Zee TV and some other international TV channels have been reporting from the villages surrounding the Gorkha district, which was severely hit by the earthquake.

Some people affected in these areas had not been in touch with the outside world and one ABC reporter, Samantha Hawley, was among the first outsider they encountered after the disaster.

This has highlighted the remoteness of the affected areas in Nepal and the difficulties faced by rescue personnel struggling to reach them.



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