

Nepali Bloggers Break Media Blockade

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Just as blogger Salam Pax became a candid source of information deep inside Iraq as it came under attack, outwitting the strictest of controls on reporting, so Nepalis are blogging their way through Royal censorship and media restrictions.



A month into the coup that has imprisoned journalists and prohibited critical reporting of the takeover, King Gyanendra has now imposed a blanket ban on independent reporting on the Maoist insurgency. Journalists are now required to only use information from the army or police on security issues.

But gagging the media under the state of emergency has not been able to control bloggers, and news is pouring out about the situation the people of Nepal are suffering.

The Nepalese state has years of experience in blocking sites, many of them pro-maoist. Recently, however, even mainstream media has been blocked, such as NepaliPost.com and NewsLookMag.com. The new blogs which are flouting the new rules are becoming widely referenced across the internet by international organisations and press. Their content, critical of the human rights and freedom of expression violations being committed by the coup government, is being extensively reproduced. While the blogs themselves may eventually be blocked within the country, their content will still be available. And as people begin to search for reliable information, and in this it certainly looks like Nepal is following the pattern seen elsewhere, these blogs will become a very popular alternative to mainstream press.

Dinesh Wagle, editor of 'United We Blog! For a Free and Democratic Nepal' who boldly and openly challenges the restrictions under his own name, and the RFN Blogger, anonymous editor of 'Radio Free Nepal Blog', both speak to Media Action about blogging from Nepal.

Interview with Dinesh Wagle, of 'United We Blog! For a Free and Democratic Nepal'

Media Action: Do you consider yourself to be in danger by ignoring the restrictions since the coup? Other bloggers write anonymously, why don't you?

Dinesh: I am not blogging against my Nation. In fact, I am not blogging against anyone. I am blogging for democracy, for free media, for civil liberties. So, I don't think I am in danger of any kind. Even King Gyanendra has said that he too wants democracy. I am just helping him to restore democracy and peace in this country as soon as possible.

I don't think posting anonymously will be that useful and effective. If you reveal your identity then it makes your write-ups more trustworthy. For example, anonymous sources can say anything, they can wage a war, and they can bring down a government. But if they have to speak with their identity revealed, they become more responsible. Who is an anonymous blogger accountable to? I am responsible for my career, my future, and my readership. So, my principle is: do whatever you like, but with your identity revealed.

Media Action: How important is independent news and analysis in the current situation? Who can

take advantage of it?

Dinesh: Very important. Since, traditional media are strictly under censorship, we have to make sure that people know everything about everything going in their society. We also know that many Nepalese people can't afford an Internet connection to read our blogs but the world community needs to know, from professional journalists, what's really going on in Nepal.

Nonetheless, we are getting some comments from our Nepalese audiences as well. They say we are giving them information they are not getting in traditional media.

Media Action: What can people or organisations from outside Nepal do to support the movement for the right to communicate and freedom of expression?

Dinesh: By talking about our plight. By doing just what you are doing now. They can create a kind of pressure to the Nepal government to ease restriction in press. They can influence those who can influence here. It's a strange kind of cycle that has to be speedier now.

Media Action: Who are your audience?

Dinesh: We have very few Internet users (about 3 hundred thousands) in Nepal (population: about 25 million) and that is not strange for a 10th poorest nation of Earth. Most of the users are college students and young people who go to Cyber Cafes primarily to chat using instant messengers, to send emails to friends in foreign countries, and surf foreign University sites for possible admission. So, very few people, inside Nepal, read Nepali news sites. Even less people read postings in discussion forums.

And, blogging is a very new thing. I don't think more than 50 percent of those Internet users in Nepal are familiar with blogging. So, we don't really expect many people inside Nepal to read our blog. Still, the situation is changing. Our site statistics show some hits from Nepal too. But in general, the majority of Nepali Internet users don't have habit of participating in discussion forums or reading blogs. Also, they don't have enough money to stay connected for a long time to read all those 'nonsense' postings.

But Nepalese people living around the world do visit our site.

Media Action: What is your intention, or your objective, in writing the blog?

Dinesh: As of now, we want to make it a forum for free expression. As I have written in this blog on the subject: <http://jshanks.com/archives/00000026.php>

We like blogging because of its informal nature. Traditional news reports tend to be a bit formal. Blogs can be very much informal and flexible. But we at United We Blog are very serious regarding the fact that blogs should be truthful, very much truthful and factual. For us, blogs are a medium of expression, yes, but not the means to spread anarchism. Freedom is not anarchy. Blogs are not rumours but first hand accounts. For us, blogs are personal statements that are first true, and factual. We, the Himalayan bloggers, believe that blogging too should be bounded by ethics and personalised professionalism.

Our blogs should give first hand experience of the Nepalese media sector and the volatile political situation. Since we are journalists, no one can give a better insight regarding the Nepali media sector. That's why we have come up with new section in our United We Blog! called MediaWatch. We don't encourage violence in our blogs. We blog for peace. We blog for democracy. We blog for freedom of expression.

Since the state of emergency was declared every radio station in the country has been stopped from working normally except Radio Nepal, the government radio. Its nemesis is the blog Radio Free Nepal, RFN.

Interview with RFN Blogger

Media Action: What are you trying to achieve through the blog?

RFN: Through Radio Free Nepal, I am trying to inform people around the world about the situation in Nepal and attract their attention to Nepal. For Nepalis, at home and abroad, it is an uncensored news source. And I also want international communities to think about Nepal and help from where they are to restore democracy in Nepal.

So far I have been able to attract a lot of attention to Nepal, and this is very good for Nepal.

Media Action: Who are you writing for, where are your audience? How big is your audience?

RFN: What I can see it that RFN is very popular because there are hundreds of bloggers writing about it and many journalists querying me. A search in Google for "Radio Free Nepal" returns nearly 10,000 results, which is pretty good for a one month old blog.

Media Action: How extensive are the measures you are forced to take to protect your identity?

RFN: I do not post directly in the blog - some close-friends are helping me to post in the blog. Posting anonymously is a bit difficult because I can't access the blog from everywhere, I have to wait until nobody is around to write the post and its keeping me pretty busy. Association with other journalists is not dangerous and what I am doing is trying to persuade journalists, whom I know closely, to write for RFN and some have written.

Media Action: Is there any support that people or agencies outside Nepal can offer those of you struggling for freedom of expression within Nepal? What would you call on us to do?

RFN: The support we need at this time is for the restoration of democracy. The people and agencies outside Nepal can either pressure the King to return democracy or spread the word about Nepal so that more interest will be generated and there will be more pressure on the King to restore democracy.

They should issue press releases, temporarily stop aid to Nepal and write about Nepal so that more people can be aware of it.

I hope the democracy will return soon to our country and I can reveal my identity.

Nepal Blogs

United We Blog, for a free and democratic Nepal.

<http://www.blog.com.np/>

Blogdai

<http://nepalnow.blogspot.com/>

For a Democratic Republic of Nepal
<http://demrepubnepal.blogspot.com/>

Peace for Nepal
<http://peace4nepal.blogspot.com/>

Radio Free Nepal
<http://freenepal.blogspot.com/>

International Nepal Solidarity Network
<http://insn.org/> (has a special section on Press Freedom)

WACC has received messages from its contacts in Nepal, describing the difficult situation and has expressed solidarity with communicators in the country.



One example of the bloggers' work... when three editors, Kabir Rana of Deshantar Weekly, Gopal Budhathoki of Sanghu weekly and Rajendra Kumar Baidh of Bimarsha weekly were summoned by the King's administration to explain why they had published blank opinion pages immediately after the Royal coup on February 1, there was very little made of it in the mainstream media. Their protest was fully reported however by Radio Free Nepal, with photographs too.

See the recently blogged items on [Sangeeta Lama](#) , WACC scholar and Nepalese journalist, and [Kanak Mani Dixit](#) , editor of Himal, supported by WACC.