

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COVERING NEPAL:  
HOW REPORTING DIFFERS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISTS AND  
LOCAL JOURNALISTS

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ANALYSIS

In August 2015, an ethnic group in Nepal called the Madhesis was protesting the text of a constitution that had been eight years in the making. Making up about 30 percent of the Nepalese population, the Madhesis felt excluded from the process of writing the constitution. They also felt the constitution was discriminatory against them, treating them as second-class citizens. Amid these protests, which often turned violent, Nepal's constituent assembly promulgated the constitution in September.

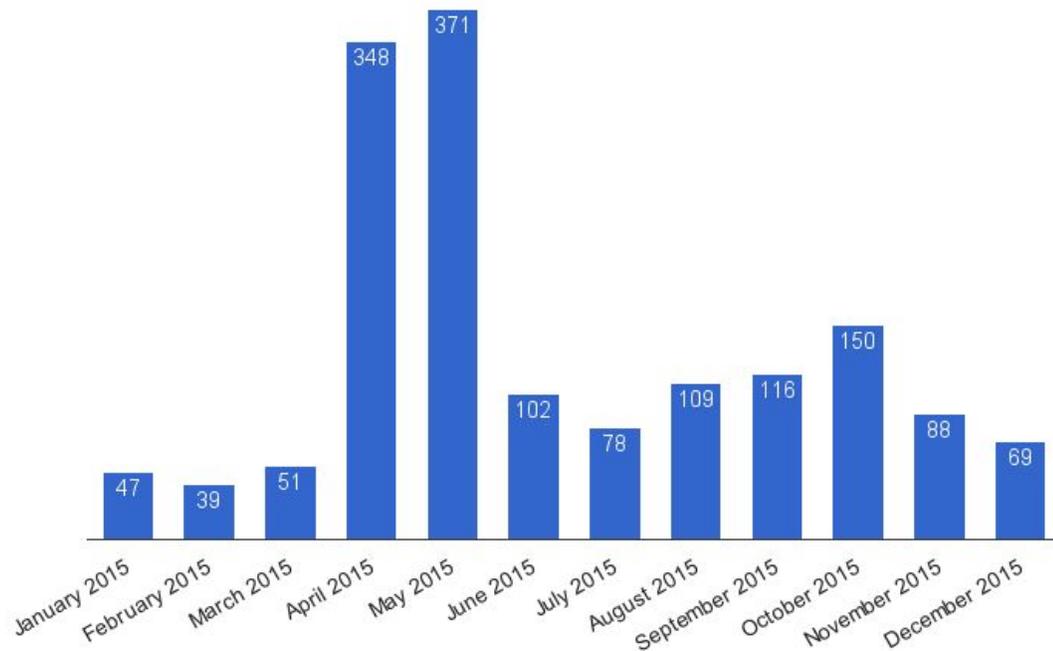
Soon after, a human blockade was set up on the southern border of Nepal and India, the region where most of the Madhesis live, to prevent trucks with essentials like food and fuel from entering Nepal. The Indian government was also unhappy with Nepal's constitution and unofficially supported the blockade. As a result of the blockade, Nepal faced severe food and fuel shortages, especially since it came on the heels of the devastating April 2015 earthquake. It was not until February 2016 that the blockade ended.

This political crisis was covered in varying degrees by international media houses. By its very nature, parachute journalism does not allow for consistent coverage, focusing instead on episodic coverage. In 2015, significantly more articles were published about Nepal in April and May (when the earthquake occurred that killed nearly 9,000 people) than any other time in the

year. The table below shows the distribution of articles published in ten major news outlets like The New York Times, Al Jazeera English, All Africa, The Globe and Mail, Agence France Presse and The Guardian. The most number of articles published were around the time the earthquake occurred, and coverage of the country dropped thereafter; remaining higher than the pre-earthquake period.

Figure 1

**Total number of articles published on Nepal in 2015 by international news outlets**



Source: Factiva, Inc. Newspapers selected: AFP, Al Jazeera English, All Africa, BBC, The Globe and Mail (Canada), The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal Online, The Washington Post

I was curious about how coverage about Nepal differed between foreign and local publications once all eyes were no longer on the country after the earthquake. I conducted a textual analysis of 50 randomly selected news articles from three publications (My Republica, The Wall Street Journal and The Hindu) over a period of five months: August through December

2015. I selected these publications based on responses from journalists working there for interviews. I also interviewed three journalists — two from My Republica and one from the Journal. (Requests for interviews with journalists from The Hindu eventually did not lead anywhere.) I broke down the crisis into five categories to see which topics about the political situation got the most attention. Scholars like Aliyu Musa and Muhammad Yusha'u say international journalists tend to heavily rely on officials as sources in their reporting. I wanted to see how that played out in Nepal's coverage, so I also analyzed the articles for sourcing patterns, breaking it down to 11 categories of sources.

In my interview with him, Krishna Pokharel, a Nepalese journalist working for The Wall Street Journal's division in India, said that for every story he wanted to write on Nepal, the news event had to be big news and have some regional impact or connection to India. "...there were news events that might be monumental for the people in Nepal, but they might be of no consequence to our [The Wall Street Journal] audience back home and they might not get covered," Pokharel said. The selective coverage of Nepal does not provide a complete picture of the political landscape in the country and gives an incomplete understanding of the situation. Pokharel wrote 37 articles in the August to December 2015 time frame (including those used in my analysis), most related to news in India.

### **Topics covered by newspapers covering Nepal**

Other pitfalls of being an international journalist include a heavy reliance on official sources, a dearth of local context and not a lot of follow-up stories, according to some scholars like Jerry Palmer and Victoria Fontan. Despite that, international journalists are necessary to the news cycle because local journalists can get so accustomed to certain customs and practices that

they no longer see something as newsworthy, Pokharel says. On the other hand, local journalists reported on the details instead of focusing on just the big decisions, says Thira Bhusal, a reporter for My Republica, a print and online news source publishing in Nepali and English languages. “We covered each and every bits and pieces, each and every discussion, debates and disputes on each and every provisions,” he said of the reporting done on the political crisis in Nepal. In the selected time frame for the analysis, My Republica published over 1,400 news articles on the five topics (the constitution writing process, negotiations and talks with political leaders and parties, the conflict with the Madhesis, the economic blockade and its consequences, and other topics).

My textual analysis shows that international news outlets are more likely to devote more space to a number of topics in any single article compared to local news outlets. But international coverage lags behind local coverage, which is more immediate. For example, while local publications like My Republica had daily reports on the writing of the constitution, and the related meetings and negotiations with different political parties in Nepal, it was only in August — months after the earthquake — that The Wall Street Journal picked up the topic again. (Pokharel said he had been reporting on the topic since 2007, when he joined the Journal’s staff.) This ties back to what Pokharel and Bhusal both said about covering events for an international audience. “They [international journalists] would pick only that topic which is readable for international audience; otherwise they would not cover the details like we [local reporters] did,” said Bhusal.

Besides the timing of publishing articles and the space devoted to topics, coverage does not tend to differ much between a foreign publication and a local one. What made the difference

in the coverage was the degree to which a particular topic was covered, which ends up making all the difference in how audiences are informed. Foreign publications devoted a few paragraphs each to at least two out of five topics in any given article. Local publications tended to cover one topic per article, sometimes two. Few articles covered three topics, but never more than three topics at a time. Pokharel said:

“...there were news events that might be monumental for the people in Nepal, but they might be of no consequence to our audience back home and they might not get covered. When you’re working for a foreign publication, you have to keep in mind the audience you’re supposed to write for.”

### **Types of sources used by newspapers covering Nepal**

Many studies have found that international and parachute journalists tend to rely more on officials as sources rather than using subject experts or citizens (Erickson and Hamilton, 2006; Macdonald, 2008; Musa and Yusha’u, 2013). When it came to covering Nepal, the use of officials as primary sources of information was high across both local and international publications, especially since the stories were related to the political crisis. As shown in the table below, the number of sources used by the local publication is higher whereas the foreign publications spoke to a comparatively lesser number of officials, which Bhusal says is because foreign journalists “always talk to very limited sources.”

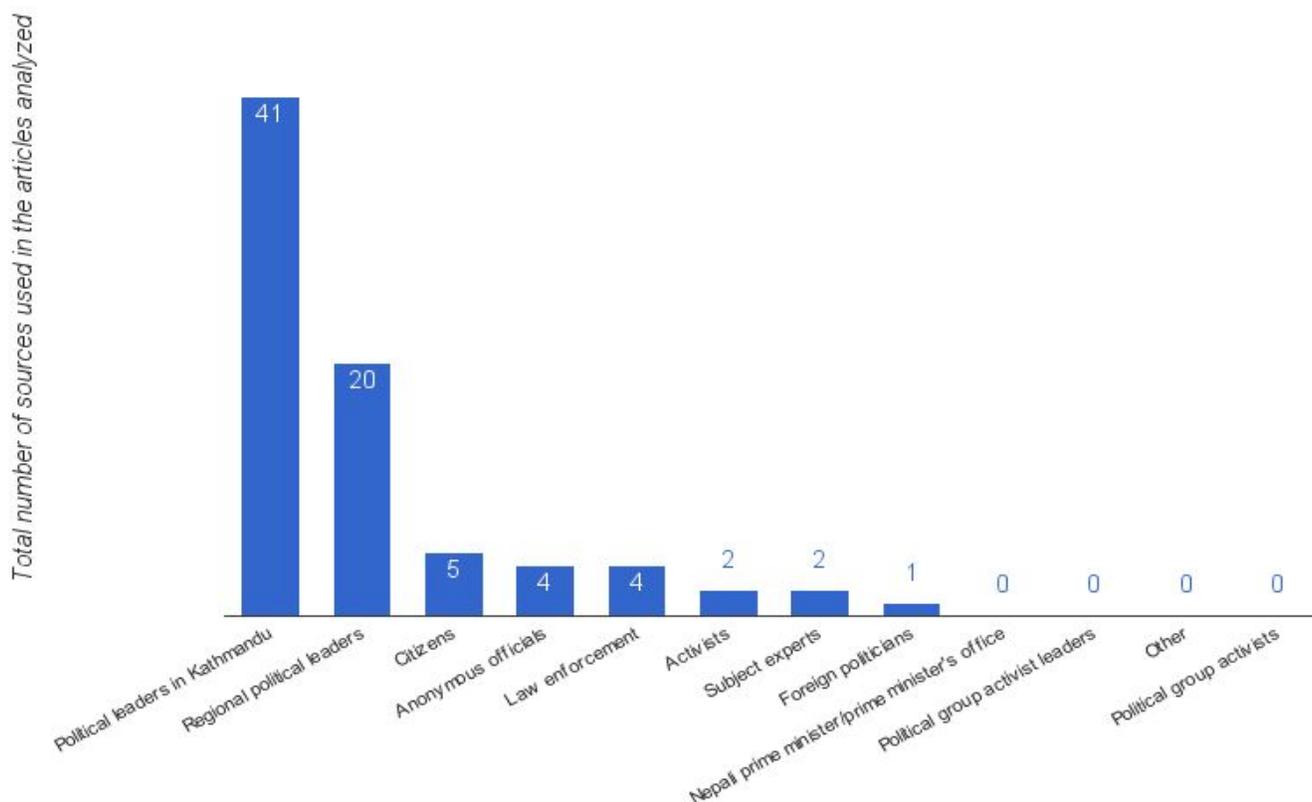
<b>Table 1: Total number of sources used in all articles, broken down by newspaper and type of source.</b>			
<b>Types of sources</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>		
	<b>Republica (23 articles)</b>	<b>WSJ (7 articles)</b>	<b>The Hindu (20 articles)</b>
<b>Nepalese officials</b>	65	27	13
<b>Foreign officials</b>	1	8	18
<b>Anonymous officials</b>	4	5	15
<b>Activists</b>	4	1	2

<b>Experts</b>	2	0	4
<b>Citizens</b>	5	5	6

However, even in stories related to the economic blockade and protests, more government and law enforcement officials were used as primary sources. According to Bhusal, politicians make themselves available to the journalists — even foreign journalists — for comments or questions. “At the end of the day, they would brief the pressmen or talk to them over phone, personally, in person, and then we go for the printed editions,” he said.

With that being said, local journalists have a wider variety of government official sources as opposed to foreign publications. International publications tended to use more quotes from ambassadors, the prime minister (or a spokesperson from the prime minister’s office) or other high-ranking officials from political parties. As seen in the image below (Figure 2), political leaders in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, and regional political leaders elsewhere in the country are the top most used sources for the local publication. While it would make sense for stories with a larger political theme to feature more politicians as sources, there were many articles where quoting regular citizens would have added to the narrative. In his interview, Bhusal said reporters from My Republica spoke to a variety of people for their stories, experts, human rights activists and citizens. But based on my analysis of the 27 articles, only five citizens were interviewed for stories, and two activists and subject experts were used as sources. This trend is also seen in reports from The Wall Street Journal and The Hindu, where citizens only accounted for five and six sources, respectively. Further analysis on more articles would show how far this trend is followed.

### Types of sources quoted in My Republica from August to December 2015



Ghimire said international and parachute journalists who come in to report on Nepal tend to already have their own circle of sources that they use from which they typically do not deviate. He said:

“...they [international journalists] have their own hanging out places, their own set of people who subscribe to the same value system, who subscribe to the same thinking processes, so theirs becomes a different world. And when these journalists come in, obviously they are their first point of contact, and they have already made up their mind about the stories.”

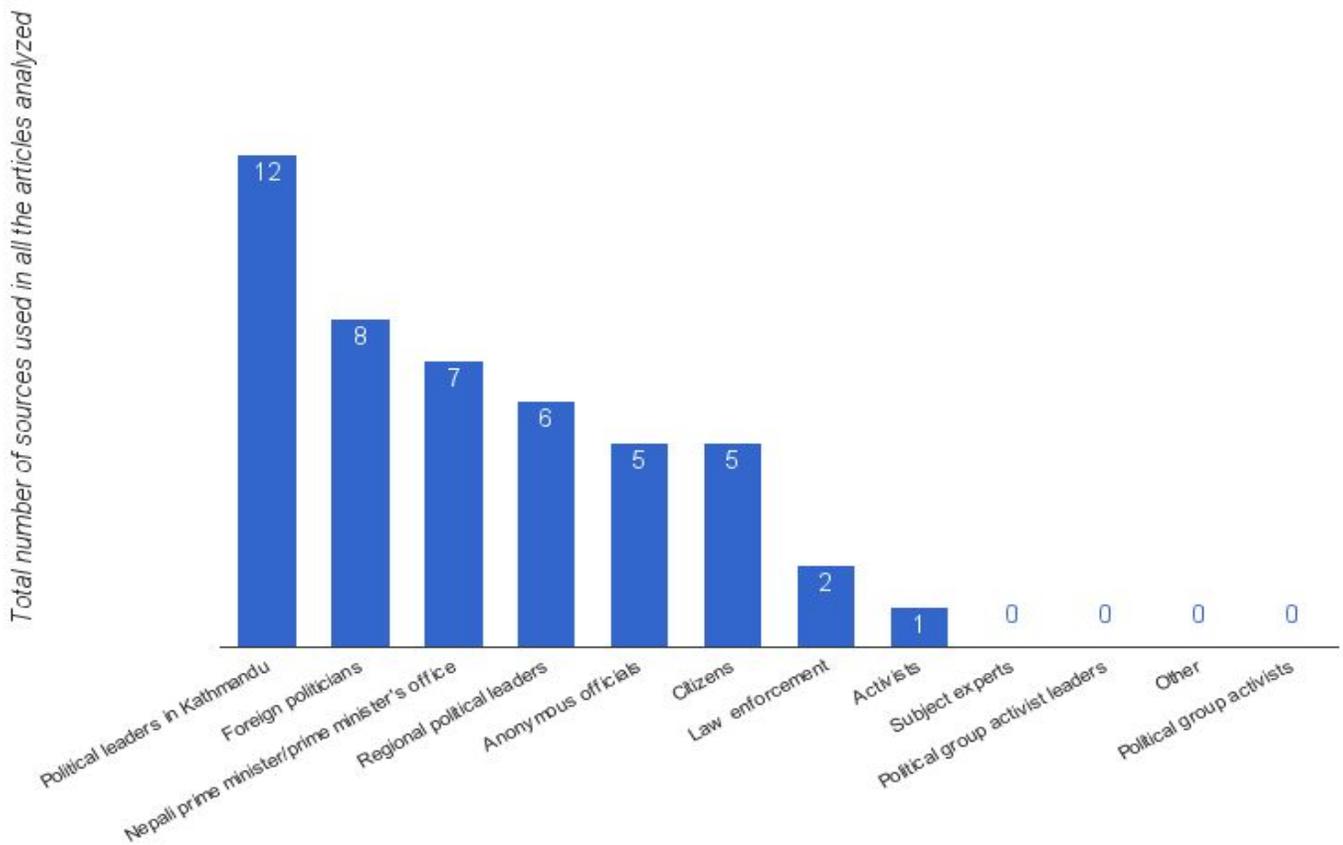
Pokharel said of his sources that they were those he had cultivated from when he lived in Nepal. And, as it is anywhere else in the world, he would call the ones whose numbers he did not

already have. As seen in the image below, official voices dominated the narrative in reporting from the Journal. Pokharel said:

“Like politicians from these political parties in the south, Madhesi parties, I know them — not personally, but as a journalist, as my sources. Reaching out to the governmental spokesmen, most of them are... their contact details are easily available on government websites. If their direct numbers are not available, you try their official numbers and eventually reach them.”

Figure 3

**Types of sources most quoted in The Wall Street Journal from August to December 2015**

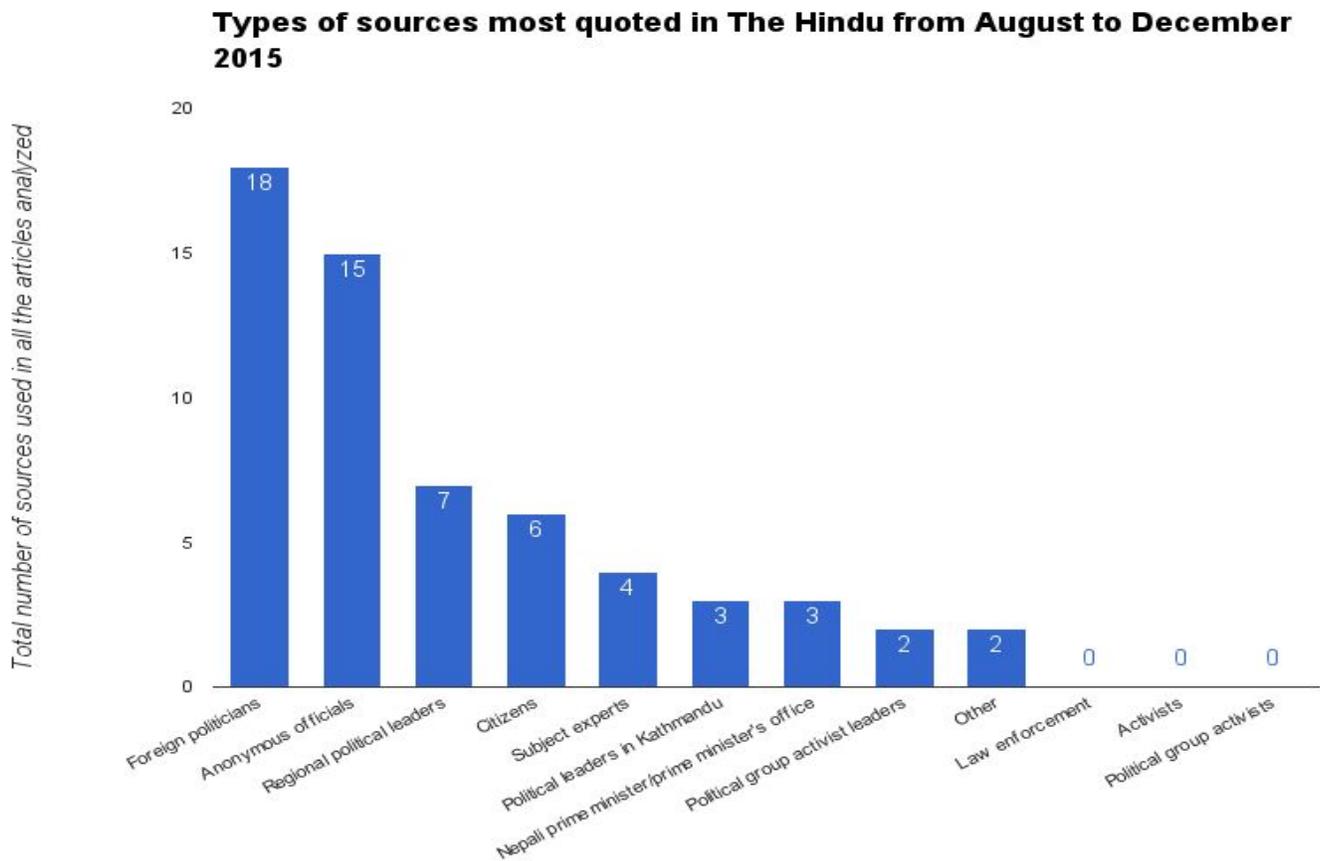


One aspect of using officials as sources is quoting them anonymously. It was more common to see international publications use anonymous sources than for local publications to do so. Combined, The Hindu and the Journal used a total of 21 anonymous sources, whereas My

Republica only had four anonymous sources. It begs the question about editorial policies that play a factor in choosing sources, as well as questions about access to sources on the record.

Among the top five most used sources for international publications, anonymous sources were the second most used in The Hindu and the fifth most used in the Journal. The Hindu relied less on political voices from Nepal compared to the other two newspapers.

Figure 4



Using quotes from the prime minister of Nepal, or from a spokesperson from the prime minister's office, was also a more common practice among the international publications. The Wall Street Journal tended to use tweets from the prime minister's account when quoting him. In

my interviews with Bhusal and Ghimire from My Republica, we did not talk about the lack of quotes from the prime minister or his spokesperson. It is possible that the prime minister was not a source because politicians more directly involved with the writing of the constitution were used as sources.

Other sources that can be tapped for covering Nepal include the expatriate community, which can provide useful background information on what is happening on the ground, says Ghimire. Another way for international journalists to get around relying heavily on officials as sources is to use social networks like Facebook and Twitter, which “gives you some idea of the narrative that’s building and different ideas being contested,” says Ghimire. The idea of using social media to leverage sources leads to an “open space of information exchange” instead of a “closed system of newsgathering,” which would be the traditional, official sources (Heinrich, 2012, pg. 767). Talking to a multitude of sources is also a good practice, says Bhusal, especially since it provides a range of perspectives on a topic. “...some [sources] hold moderate views, while some are too radical. You also have to talk to other ethnic groups, you have to talk to major political, other political forces, and...experts.” At the end of the day, however, both Ghimire and Bhusal agree there is no substitute for actually being on the ground.