



Role of Nepalese National Online Medias in Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in Nepal

*Bhandari Shanti Ram

Save the Children Nepal, Mid and Far west Field Office, Surkhet

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*Corresponding author: Bhandari Shanti Ram

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of Media is pivotal to create public awareness and help government implement its prevention and control strategies effectively. The study reviewed the articles published by the National online Medias of Nepal to identify the types of information they are providing to public. A systemic search of information on COVID-19 published by 8 major online Medias was performed from January 23, 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Nepal to April 15, 2020. Thematic analysis was done to explore the information on COVID-19 provided by the Medias. The study reviewed 210 articles published during the study period. The major thematic areas of communicating information on COVID-19 are found as Sign and symptoms, Preventive measures, and Myths and facts. The review found that the Medias have uncovered the information clearly and consistently. Though they have answered the myths and misconception, certain information on following dietary patterns and doing yoga for prevention of COVID-19 were published without evidence, which might misguide the public. The review concluded that online Medias in Nepal are playing a major role in communicating information on COVID-19 to the public.

Keywords: Media; COVID-19; sign and symptoms; prevention; control; myths

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new corona virus a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (1), which as of 27 May 2020 has affected 213 countries with 5,710,855 confirmed cases and 352,870 deaths globally (2). In Nepal, the outbreak has taken its pace recently (April 2021) ever since the first case was identified on 23 Jan 2020 (3).

During this global health emergency created by COVID-19, the public have special right to receive correct information by the governments whereas the governments also have obligatory roles to communicate accurate information to the public on time. It makes the governments more accountable to their actions and the public are supportive to the governments' decisions in combatting the disease. Whereas the roles of Medias are to inform the public about the government statements and actions through wider perspectives creating awareness to control and prevent COVID-19 among the public (4).

The country is in the state of lockdown for more than 2 months now, and the negative impacts have already been observed in the communities. The Medias' roles should have been more explicit in such situations notifying the issues equally to the public as well as the concerned authorities (5). There are now hundreds of online Medias in Nepal publishing information about COVID-19 to some extents; however, their impact is yet to be studied.

Thus, the present study, probably the first of its type in Nepal tries to analyze how these roles are accomplished by majority national online Medias of the country that helps government and policy makers to strengthen health information communication system. The study also helps Medias to provide accurate, non-biased and timely information to the public during emergencies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

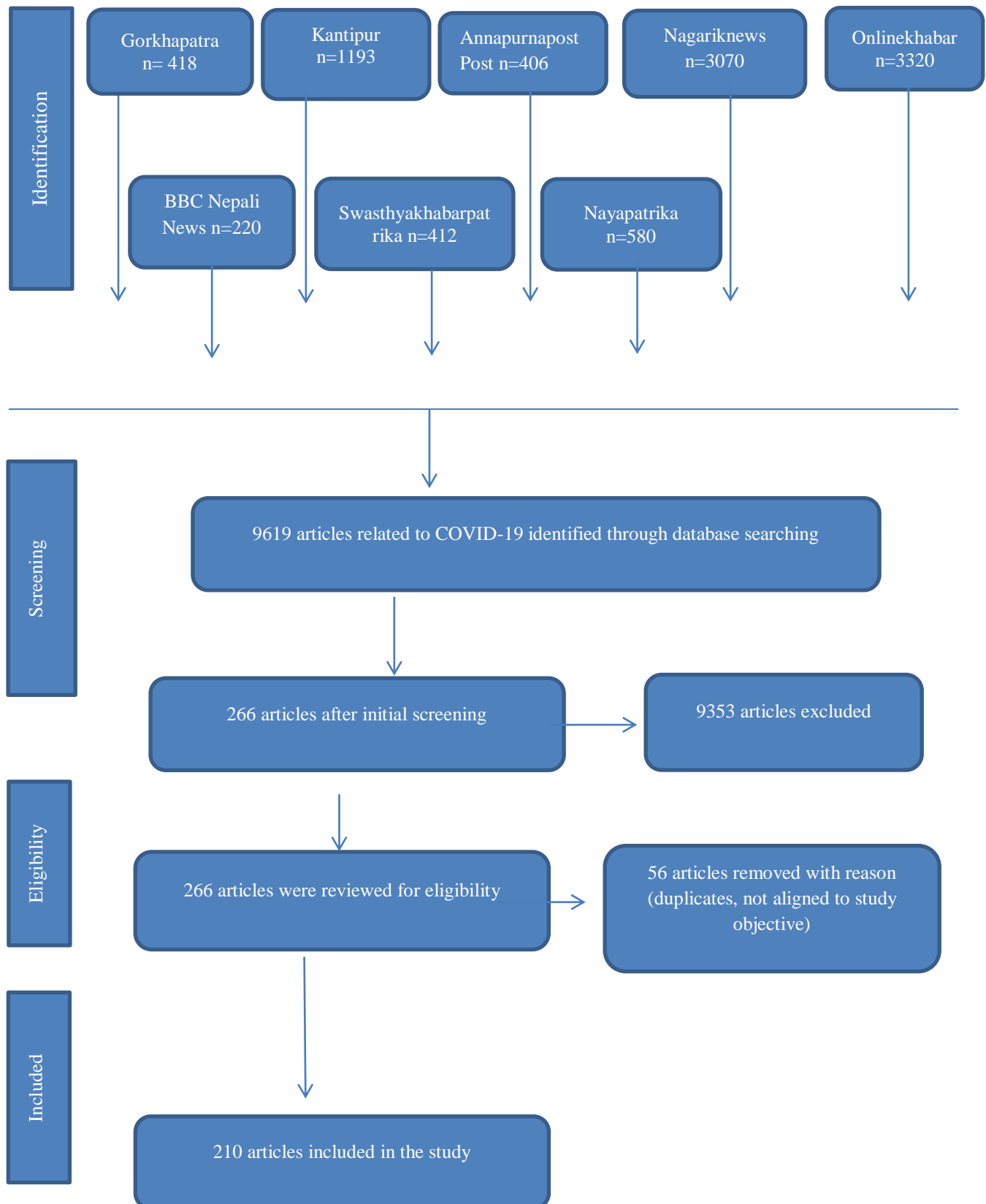
The study was conducted reviewing the national online Medias to extract the information provided to create public awareness on prevention and control of COVID-19 in Nepal. The duration of the study was nearly 3 months, from the day COVID-19 was first identified in Nepal (23 January 2020) to April 15, 2020.

Search Strategy

Among the large number of online Medias in Nepal, the study has selected eight Medias (Gorkhapatradainik, Ekantipur, Nagariknews, Annapoornapost, Onlinekhabar, Nayapatrika, BBCnews, and Swasthyakhabarpatrika) based on their high coverage, maximum number of viewers and followers and nature of the Medias – whether they are national and published in Nepali language. Of the selected Medias, six also have English supplementary versions and five are available in printed forms. However, information published in Nepali language was chosen due to high volume of informatuion published in Nepali language and understanding levels of the viewers. All the news related to COVID-19 published during the study time was reviewed from the archive and the relevant information were extracted. Then, the key information was translated into English language and narrative synthesis was done. The key words like COVID-19, symptoms, prevention, myths/facts were used to identify the relevant articles published in the Medias. The WHO's guidelines, Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) website and the published evidences were used to check the authenticity of information provided by the Medias.

Selection of Material

The study overviewed 9619 articles related to COVID-19 found at news section, health section, corona updates, public opinion and experts' advice, individual interviews and research articles published during the study time in the Medias. The reviewer then scrutinized the title and the contents according to the objectives, which then found 266 relevant articles, which were then systematically reviewed. During the process, 56 articles were removed because of the duplicity, not being within the scope of the study and finally 210 articles were included in the study and thematic analysis was done. The picture of the selection process is given below:

Fig. 1: Selection of materials

RESULTS

The study identified three major thematic areas as sign and symptoms, preventive measures, and myths and facts while communicating information regarding COVID-19 through the online Medias. The preventive measures were further identified as cleanliness, social (physical) distance, (self) isolation and quarantine, using facemasks and gloves and boosting immunity power to prevent corona virus.

Sign and Symptoms

The study found consistency among the online Medias while communicating sign and symptoms of COVID-19 to the public that all of which indicated fever (100.4 degree and above), dry cough and shortness of breath as the major symptoms of COVID-19. The Medias added other symptoms such as fatigue, muscle's ache, pneumonia, sore throat, diarrhea, loss of taste and smell, chest problems and headache as the additional symptoms of the new corona virus. Majority of the Medias also provided information on confusing symptoms between common cold, seasonal flu and COVID-19 suggesting people not to get confused of seasonal flu with the corona virus, as it is the time of seasonal flu in the country. Information about asymptomatic status of COVID-19 among the infected patients were also published by the Medias suggesting people to become extra vigilant.

Preventive Measures and their Authenticity

Cleanliness

The Medias highlighted cleanliness measures such as hand washing, disinfecting surroundings and surfaces, kitchen and utensils, vegetables and fruits as well as clothes and money to prevent COVID-19 pandemic.

The hand-washing measures the Medias emphasized were about washing hands with soap and water at least for 20 seconds or rubbing hands with alcohol based hand sanitizer, not to touch their nose, mouth and eyes with hands, and to cover their nose and mouth with tissue paper/handkerchief or an elbow while coughing or sneezing. Few Medias even uploaded videos of hand washing method on their pages while others highlighted hand washing with soap and water over the use of hand sanitizers. However, one Media presented the result of a study by UNICEF stating more than half of the total population in Nepal does not have access to soap and water at home: Total 33 percent, or 3 out of 10 people living in urban areas in Nepal, do not have access to proper hand washing facilities.

The study identified the Medias notifying some extraordinary locations that might be the hotspot for the new corona virus transmission such as ATM machine esp. keypad, elevators, commonly used key board and mouse, cinema halls, door handles including public transportation and toilets, which might cause havoc if gone unnoticed.

Some Medias notified to disinfect the surroundings and surfaces at homes and offices, kitchen and utensils, fruits and vegetables as well as money to reduce the risk of COVID-19 pandemic. The Medias mentioned pregnant women should pay extra attention to sanitation while she can breastfed her baby after washing hands, wearing facemask and gloves. Healthy people visiting senior citizens should wash their hands and wear facemasks properly. One of the medias highlighted the requirement of policy to manage waste generated during treatment of corona virus.

Social (Physical) Distance, (Self) Isolation and Quarantine

The study found the Medias uncovered the news about social distance and ways to maintain it, dos and don'ts during (self) isolation and quarantine. Majority of the Medias suggested maintaining at least 3 feet (1 meter) distance from other if s/he is coughing or sneezing and not going out of the house unless urgency. While some Medias suggested 2 meters (6 feet) or even 6-8 meter (24 feet) distance that corona virus can travel up-to the distances and may cause illness. However, the WHO suggested at least 1 meter (3 feet) distance between people coughing and sneezing (6).

While caring the corona patients at home, some Medias suggested them to keep isolated at a room or at least 1 meter away from others while sharing the room. They need to use separate bathroom or clean after each use; avoid going to work/school or at public vehicles and cover their mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing.

Majority of the Medias suggested people doing exercise, reading books, listening music and talking to loved ones as well as limited use of social Medias while staying at quarantine. The Medias also published general/government's advice to follow by the corona suspected people staying at home or 14 days quarantine. The elderly and people with underlying health conditions should strictly avoid going out and meeting people to prevent COVID-19 pandemic. The Medias also informed public about the app developed by the Ministry of Home Affairs to monitor quarantined people and their movement in quarantine.

Wearing Facemask

Mixed views were observed in the Medias whether wearing a facemask could prevent and reduce COVID-19 infection. The study found all the Medias published information about facemask; some information favored the claim and some did not. The favorable information asserted people should wear face mask if they are having flu like symptoms or

dealing with corona virus patients/suspected, while going out or visiting the grocery and shopping malls or being at public transportation. On the other hand, information related to the critical viewpoints stated the mask does not always necessarily protect someone from corona virus infection. People should not wear mask if not infected or not assigned to work with corona patients. The Medias also informed people that the surgical masks do not protect against bacteria and viruses; however, they are quite helpful while sneezing and coughing. But N-95 masks have some level of protection that they have 95% protection level to enter against the particles of less than 0.5 microns. As per the WHO, wearing a medical mask can limit the spread of certain respiratory viral diseases, including the new corona virus. In all settings, the WHO recommended a risk-based approach by the users to use medical mask.

Boosting Immunity Power to Prevent Infection

Majority of the Medias highlighted relationship between immunity power and virus infection in people's body. They said, the strong immunity power one has, the less virus infection is to experience by her/him. As per the Medias, the dietary patterns determine our immune system and, thus we need to eat healthy and balanced diet taking adequate amount of nutrients, minerals, carbohydrates, fats and vitamins including gluten free and antioxidant foods. Sufficient water and balanced diets boost immunity system. They suggested to eat green vegetables, fruits, milk and nuts regularly, and to avoid harmful substances like cigarettes, tobacco and alcohol. Foods with spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric, oatmeal, black cumin, basil, coriander, etc. help increase immunity power. The Medias also highlighted people need to do regular exercise and maintain high body temperature by drinking hot water to prevent corona virus.

Most of the Medias asserted elderly and people with underlying health conditions and pregnant women have to be extra cautions during this pandemic as they have quite weak immunity power. Youngsters' immune is equally not resistant to corona virus. A media claimed the new corona virus might recur at some people (14%) when their immunity power is weaken.

A Media asserted that yoga also helps avoid corona virus since it enhances the immune system in people's body. Meditations and *pranayama* (yogic breathing exercise) are also helpful, while people are also suggested not to stay in fear and anxiety of the corona virus, which weakens their immunity power. Another Media stated women have different immunity power than men, which might have been resulted in low infection and death rates among women due to the corona virus globally.

Myths and Facts

Majority of the Medias have presented the myths and facts about corona virus associating them with the age factor, drinking water, wearing facemask, temperature (weather condition), BCG vaccine and life span of corona virus. Some other issues, such as loss of taste or smell, gender pattern, faiths or beliefs, and the corona virus transmission through sexual contact, vegetables and fruits from the market and pregnant woman to a child were also considered.

The study revealed majority of the Medias well clarified the information about age factor and corona virus infection having said the elderly people are at more risk of corona virus infection than young and children. However, stating that the Medias didn't avoid the fact that all age-group people are at risk of corona virus infection. The notion that drinking hot water and frequently having water prevents corona virus was just a rumor for the Medias; and so were the claim regarding corona virus getting inactive during summer season and staying in the sun prevents us from corona virus. Majority of the information related to BCG vaccine provided by the Medias were similar. They stated that the countries where BCG vaccine was compulsory were less infected by corona virus might be just coincidence. However, a Media notified a study by a group of UK and US researchers claiming that the infection and the death rates of corona virus where BCG vaccine was compulsory, was 10 times less for each. Some other Medias clarified whether antibiotics are effective at new corona virus concluding that antibiotics work against bacteria not the viruses.

While discussing corona virus infection being less in Nepal and South Asia, one of the Medias presented experts opinions stating Nepalese habit of hand washing before meals and after using toilets; not using and/or availability of risky development structures such as crowded lifts, underground trains; BCG vaccine and Nepalese lifestyle (though not evidenced) and presumably their resistance power might have played an important role in stopping the spread of corona virus infection. Few Medias also presented the issue whether corona virus transmits through sexual contact having said that healthy persons in a relationship do not have to change their sexual behavior. Similarly, some Medias asserted there is no evidence that corona virus has been transferred through foods, vegetables and fruits purchased from the market. Neither are there any cases of corona virus transmission from animals to human and vice-versa. However, they suggested people need to wash their hands when they contact with animals. Further, some Medias clarified misconception related to eating meat and eggs stating corona virus is something transferred through droplets not by meat and eggs; however, one should cook them well before eating.

Whether eating garlic prevents from corona virus was highlighted by majority Medias stating that garlic has potential to fight many diseases, however, there is no evidence that eating garlic can reduce the effects of corona virus infection. Few Medias published information propagating faith or beliefs linking them to safety from corona virus. One of the Medias stated *Bisket Jatra* (New Year carnival) including many other *Jatra* (carnivals) are associated with pandemic in

Nepal. Celebrating these festivals enhances self-confidence and will power and people can fight against corona virus too. However, there is no evidence that celebrating festivals can prevent corona virus. Similarly, one of the Medias published a news story about Raute (The jungle men/nomadic people of Nepal) who were reluctant to the new corona virus declaring themselves as the king of the forests, and the corona virus would not affect them.

Apart from them, some Medias informed the public stating neither cold weather/snow kills the corona virus, nor bathing with warm water prevents its infection. Against the rumors, the Medias declared that the virus never moves with Chinese products, and no mosquito bite can transfer corona virus. Besides, the hand driers and the UV lamps do not kill the corona virus either. The Medias further notified that the rumors such as corona detection by thermal scanner, alcohol and chlorine destroys corona virus in the body, regular nasal congestion, prevents corona virus were the rumors too. The Medias also presented the fact that respiratory infections can affect pregnant women but there is no possibility of miscarriage due to corona virus.

There were some detail myths and facts published by a couple of Medias, which were referenced with WHO, UNICEF and MoHP, Nepal. The news uncovered total 24 myths and realities in order to inform people and to stay away from misleading news about corona virus. These myths range from corona virus transmission via mosquito bites to eating fats, garlic and turmeric to prevent corona virus.

DISCUSSION

The information related to prevention and control of COVID-19 pandemic published during the 1st identified case in Nepal (23 Jan 2021) to 15 April 2021 were analyzed to identify what information the public were obtaining from the Medias.

The study found the Medias provided information that fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, tiredness, pneumonia, diarrhea, loss of taste and smell as the common symptoms of COVID-19, which were consistent with the information provided by the WHO and Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP). The study has shown that the infected person of COVID-19 pandemic can be asymptomatic or symptoms vary from common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Distress. Beside this, it was also found that some patients have extra pulmonary symptoms like diarrhea, vomiting and anorexia. (7, 8). Recently, loss of taste and smell is also identified symptoms in cases of COVID-19 in Europe. (9). The Media highlighted the information that the infected patients can also be asymptomatic, which is very crucial for the public to understand to become aware on the precautions required even without symptoms.

The Medias highlighted the importance and steps of hand washing as one of the major preventive measures to COVID-19, which is more applicable in Nepalese context comparing to the use of hand sanitizers. Studies suggest that social distancing is a recommended measure to control community transmission where the linkages of the cases are not clear (10). The importance of social distancing has been uncovered by majority of the Medias, however inconsistencies were found in the information about the required social distancing ranging from 1 to 8 meters though the recommended social distancing to prevent transmission of virus from human to human is 1 meter (11). Such inconsistency in the information might create confusion and lack of trust in the public.

Controversies exist in the information provided on the use of masks as a preventive measure. Some Medias focused on using mask while others criticize about the effectiveness of using mask to prevent corona. Masks should be used as effective measures to control transmission of corona virus but the use of mask alone cannot provide adequate protection from corona virus transmission (12). Hence, clear and consistent information about the importance and use of mask through the Medias is crucial.

Moreover, the Medias were found to publish a lot of news regarding boosting the immunity power to get protected from corona virus and the use of herbal medicines to prevent the virus infection. Though there are many fruits and vegetables known to increase the immunity power, and a balanced diet is required to remain healthy, there are no any proven evidences till the date that the use of medicinal herbs, doing yoga, certain spices like garlic protect from COVID-19 pandemic. Unless they are proven, such misguiding news to the public should be avoided by the Medias.

It was found that a large number of myths are prevalent in Nepalese society regarding COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that the Medias have addressed the existing myths with appropriate rationale and this information was authentic compared to the WHO guidelines. The rumors about misleading information were in a way circulated via Social Medias though the Medias under this study cleared out the misconceptions well. Though limitation exists in the study regarding no coverage of local newspapers and Social Medias, the study found that the National Online Medias have been playing a very positive role in providing the public with relevant, factual and timely information and helping the government in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

CONCLUSION

Overall information on sign and symptoms, general prevention and control of COVID-19 were found uncovered by the Medias clearly and consistently. In addition, the Medias have guided the public in overcoming the misconceptions

and myths regarding COVID-19 in Nepal publishing the relevant news. Thus, it was found that the online Medias had played a significant role in informing the public about COVID-19 in the pandemic situation though the limitation remains on the education level and availability of the information to the public. Emphasize on certain information like wearing face-mask with consistent information is lacking. Similarly, limitation exists in providing some evidence-based information like use of medicinal herbs, yoga etc. that is said to increase immunity power to prevent corona virus infection. Hence, such information should be published only after scientific proof.

Acknowledgments:

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Conflicts of Interest:

There is no any conflict of interest in this article.

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Data table - Roles
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