Chapter 49
Media, Social Media, and the Securitization of Mental Health Problems in Nepal:
Yama Buddha's Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to unfold the trend and nature of mainstream and social media coverage on mental health issues in Nepal through suicide case of Yama Buddha, a popular musician. Using the securitization theory and concepts of threat construction and threat neutralization, major findings through content analysis and key informant interviews reveal reputed mainstream media following cautious route towards threat neutralization and therefore, maintaining a level of journalistic professionalism. However, especially in the other online media, blogs, and other social media, there were sensationalist words and tone used to attract the audience, triggering various sorts of emotional responses, thereby fulfilling the act of securitization. Major recommendations from this chapter include more awareness and understanding about the nature and type of mental health problems; capacity building of journalists and media professionals to better understand and report on mental health problems; development and proper implementation of media guidelines on reporting mental health issues.

INTRODUCTION

Anil Adhikari, popularly known as Yama Buddha, a celebrated Nepali rapper reportedly died of suicide at his residence in Ruislip, United Kingdom on January 14, 2017, leaving scores of his fans and followers in shock. This tragic incident triggered a wide attention about celebrity suicides, especially linking

to the dreaded late twenty's club of global celebrities such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and Amy Winehouse. Extensive mainstream and social media coverage of Yama Buddha's suicide also led to the ongoing debates and thereby public discourses on rising cases of suicides and mental health problems in Nepal.

About 90 percent people living in Nepal are suffering from psychiatric problems and there is 'insignificant attention' given to this sector (Uprety & Lamichhane, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of proper knowledge and understanding about the subject matter, lack of mental health specialists; poor implementation of policies and guidelines and lack of adequate resource allocation for mental health sector has aggravated the stigma surrounding mental health in Nepal (Luitel, et al., 2015). This stigmatization has led to under-reporting of many mental health cases and lack of proper care and attention towards the issue.

This chapter attempts to unfold the trend and the nature of stories reported in mainstream and social media on mental health and suicides in Nepal, meticulously unfolding the media reporting about Yama Buddha's case and how different discourses on mental health, suicides and stigma have been developed as a result of the attention the celebrity's death gathered.

Events occurred in this world including suicides are a 'shared reality' held not only by individuals, but also institutionalized in everyday practices and public artifacts such as media coverage (Uchida et al, 2015). While communicating a certain message through media, stories present socio-cultural attitudes and values apart from presenting objective facts, consequently generating a collective perception. However, the story teller or the journalist brings in his/her individuality making stories more interesting. In that sense, media coverage is not just a collective or macro phenomenon, but also comprises of individual psychological facts.

Social media has added a new dimension in the era of communication. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide that space of inter-linkage where 'weak links' or connections could be established with another person or group without having any previous interaction or good understanding about such people and groups. The power of digital media is as such today that a celebrity suicide case could go viral in no time that such news can have both effects – positive in terms of building a discourse and bringing mental health issues into the mainstream of national health debates on one hand while on the other hand, the lack of understanding about mental health and suicide, in the lure for 'dying to be famous' thus promoting more number of suicides. The fact that the number of Facebook users in Nepal rose from 0.85 million to 4 million in the space of 4 years (2011 to 2014) goes to show the escalating figures of social media usage amongst Nepalese and the impact as well as vulnerabilities it brings along with growing number of users (Anil, 2014).

In that regard, the authors would like to analyze in depth about the type and nature of media reporting on mental health/suicide issues and whether and how the Nepalese media is 'securitizing' such issues. Furthermore, with the social media analysis, it would also be useful in drawing the nature of discourses on mental health issues carried out at the public level and how that is contributing to the construction or deconstruction of stigma surrounding mental health issues in Nepal.

For the purpose of this chapter, the authors collected primary data about Yama Buddha death stories from various mainstream electronic and print media published from January 14, 2017 until end of April, 2017. Ten Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were also taken with mental health professionals, mainstream media and social media researchers to understand the broader context. Furthermore, relevant literature reviews were undertaken to gather more global and local evidence to gain an in-depth insight and understanding on the issue.

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