"In the beginning we couldn't speak": media and the construction of minority ethnic political identity in republican Nepal

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Introduction Nepal's media have been lauded for their positive contribution to democratic political discourse amidst the turmoil of the post-revolutionary period (Onta, 2006), but today have become the focus of anxiety. Radio in particular, due to the relatively low costs of production and accessibility to listeners with low or no literacy, has seen huge growth in Nepal and corresponding hopes for its potential to improve the lives of Nepal's citizens. However, as a recent policy paper from an independent Nepali research organization, Martin Chautari (Anonymous, 2012, p. 2), explains:

> Despite their somewhat positive roles, FM radios have not been able to carry the voices of marginalized citizens. The concerns of the poor and marginalized citizens living in remote areas, local issues and the language spoken by the majority in those areas have not received appropriate space in FM radios. Not only are there few programs containing local concerns and in local languages, even when they do exist, with a few exceptions, they are given minimum priority in terms of time and space.

The paper goes on to explain that, 'studies have shown that the operational management of FM radios remains in the hands of the powerful and FM radios have been unable to play their expected roles for the rights of the poor and marginalized' (ibid.). In addition, commercialization of the radio sector, and inadequacies in the policy and regulatory framework of broadcast licensing compound these problems. This is leading to competition between radio stations that is eroding the quality of listener experience through signal interference and replacement of community-oriented programming with more advertiser-friendly content (Wilmore & Upreti, 2011).

Inevitably, the impact of these changes is felt most by those who are already politically, socially and economically marginalized (Thorsen, 2013). Foremost amongst these are ethnic (janājāti) and untouchable caste (dalit) communities who have been discriminated against systematically, either overtly during the time of the Shah and Rana autocracies or covertly following the official banning of discrimination in the various constitutions under which Nepal has been governed since the 1950s.

Evidence that patterns of ownership and policy failures have indeed compounded the disenfranchisement of many within the contemporary mediascape of Nepal is not hard to find. The conditions necessary to foster "citizens' media" of the type described by Rodriguez (2001), through which 'a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape' (p. 20), appear to be eroding in Nepal, despite the best efforts of some broadcasters and advocacy groups to foster alternative 'moral economies of communicative activity' (Murdock, 2013) based on public and community arrangements for the production of media content, rather than those based on commercial imperatives (Bhattarai, 2007).

Nevertheless, we must also challenge the assumption that marginalized people are 'passive reactors to…some "system,"' acquiescing to their exclusion from media production. Ethnographic data helps us explore how some producers and consumers from particular ethnic groups—in this case Tamang people—have been 'active agents and subjects in their own history' (Rankin, 2004, p. 70, quoting Sherry Ortner). By examining instances of varying successes and failures of Tamang communicative practices, we are able to see how they have utilised media to construct ethnic identity in the contested cultural spaces of contemporary Nepal. Political agency arises in these circumstances not only from the way that these practices create new forms of social solidarity in the face of on-going discrimination, but also through the formation of new types of consciousness regarding ethnic identities. Such identities do not always accord with the portrayal of ethnicity by political leaders and activists in the public sphere, especially as it relates to the ethnic identity of youths and women.

Public concern over the absence of Tamang and other janājāti programming in Nepal's media not only evidences the struggle for representation of ethnic groups as a whole in the modern nation-state, but also demonstrates how power is mobilised within marginalised communities. Paying equal attention to practices of media consumption, which has itself often been marginalized in the study of the political-economy of media (Morley, 1995), with a subsequent impact on how media contribute to the construction of gender inequality (Meehan, 2012), allows us to widen our analysis to understand how different agents come to view their ethnicity through mediated social practices, rather than simply assuming that the representation of minority ethnicity in programming, including content in minority languages, is in and of itself *equally* empowering for all who such programming claims to represent. Taking inspiration from post-colonial feminist theory, we argue that analyses of minority media in South Asia must avoid 'homozenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women [and others who are potentially marginalized within minority groups] in these countries, [because this] erases all marginal and resistant modes and experiences' (Mohanty, 2012, p. 360).

Background: media and minority representation in republican Nepal
Before 1990 Nepal was ruled by a monarchy with close to absolute power, although this was rapidly eroding from its zenith in the 1970s. Political parties were banned under what was dubbed the Panchayat system, but operated with increasing support from bases in India. Media were largely state controlled and

used to promote both the monarchy and successive governments' policies of modernisation and development. Rent seeking and corruption became endemic, but (not surprisingly) were seldom overtly discussed in the media. State-controlled media also supported an aggressive drive toward cultural unification that emphasised the Hindu religion and Nepali language of the ruling elites as the essential components of national culture and identity.

Riaz and Basu (2010) go so far as to describe these attempts at nation building as a form of 'internal colonisation' that denied the ethnic, religious and linguistic reality of Nepal's complex population. Census data, always politically charged, seemed to indicate that, even at the height of the Panchayat system, mother-tongue speakers of Nepali formed only a bare majority of the population. Likewise, identification of Hinduism as the majority religion also oversimplified the complex role that religion plays in the network of political relationships in the Himalayan region (Burghart, 1984). Not surprisingly, these official discourses of nationalism and development led to the exclusion of many minority ethnic groups from government and the bureaucracy (Pradhan, 2002).

The contradictions between the representation of ethnicity in the Panchayat nation-state and the reality of minority ethnic people's experience of political disempowerment and poverty are part of the explanation (but, of course, not the only reason) for the collapse of the Panchayat in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Subsequent censuses have included direct questions regarding ethnic identity and these have made the pattern of ethnicity in Nepal much clearer (Sharma, 2008). At the same time, political revolution and the liberalisation of the media have created new opportunities for ethnic inequalities to be openly debated.

Print media were quick to expand during the decade following the establishment of a democratic system of government. By 2005 there were 3,740 newspapers registered for publication, either as weeklies or dailies, although only 323 were being regularly published (Bhattarai, 2007). Likewise, licenses were granted to independent FM radio stations from 1996, despite the reluctance of successive governments to liberalize broadcasting. Fifty-six licenses were issued (with 46 actually broadcasting) by 2004 (Bhattarai, 2007), but the Maoist 'People's War' led successive governments to limit the expansion of radio, fearing, often with justification, that radio was serving the interests of the Maoist forces (Hutt, 2006). This culminated in the attempted suppression of press and broadcasting freedom during the brief return to absolute rule under King Gyanendra (February 1st 2005 to 24th April 2006). The collapse of the monarchy's rule following the declaration of an accord between the Maoists and other major political parties, accompanied by the declaration of an interim republican constitution and elections for a Constituent Assembly, accelerated the expansion of FM broadcasting. By 2013 there were 515 licensed FM stations, of which 360 were actively broadcasting (UNESCO, 2013).

Pradhan notes that 'language became the most visible and emotive issue around which [janājāti] activists mobilized within and among communities' (Pradhan, 2002, p. 14), and radio offered a means through which these identities could be articulated (Suryadi, 2005). Broadcasting in languages other than Nepali has

often been a focus for agitation by ethnic minorities, because the state broadcaster, Radio Nepal, did not broadcast in other languages prior to 1990, which increased the sense of marginalization felt by these communities (Parajulee, 2007). The liberalisation of media production has served as an index of the changing political landscape of Nepal since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1990. Broadcasting in languages other than Nepali and programming that addresses a wider range of cultural concerns is certainly occurring. The sheer number of new, independent media producers and the fact that in some cases they reflect obvious local demand for more linguistically diverse content seems to support the claim that, even in the midst of immense public frustration with the slow pace of political and economic progress, media at least are changing for the better (Onta, 2006). However, there is also growing concern that this progress is being undermined and this will have a particular impact on ethnic and caste groups who have the greatest need for improved representation in the media to advance their socio-political status and welfare (Onta, 2002, pp. 264-266).

Ideally community radio stations that serve the needs of distinctive audiences are differentiated from commercial radio stations and thereby enabled to give 'voice to the voiceless' (Banjade, 2006). However, Nepal's current regulatory environment provides little or no protection to community radio stations, which have to operate under the same legal and regulatory framework as commercial broadcasters. Consequently, although broadcasters may aspire to operate as community broadcasters serving the needs of their local communities, they are forced to compromise these ideals in the pursuit of scare sources of revenue. This has resulted in 'a fiercely competitive environment in which [there are] problems of signal interference and the need to increase audience sizes to capture advertising revenue' (Martin & Wilmore, 2010, p. 868). Thus Radio Palung (a community radio station based in the hills of Makwanpur), for example, sought funding from The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to establish a relay tower to increase the size of their broadcast radius. They stated that this was "to fulfill listener demands from other remote areas" (interview, 2009), but would also give them a larger listenership and consequently a larger market for revenue-raising from advertising. Many other stations pursue the costly goals of increased transmission power and tower size (Wilmore & Upreti, 2011), plus even lengthier programming schedules that entail the use of content sought from either commercial networks or INGOs, which is almost exclusively Nepali language and often focused on the concerns of the nation's capital, Kathmandu, where they are invariably produced (Pringle & Subba, 2007). Political interference by parties and government continues to be of concern (Rijal, 2014), as does a chronic lack of media professionals with appropriate levels of training in journalism and content production, especially from minority language groups, given the fact that Nepali dominates all post-primary education (UNESCO, 2013, pp. 66-75).

"We can't make the whole program in Tamang language": challenges of creating Tamang language media

The Tamang are one of the larger ethnic groups of Nepal, making up approximately five percent of the population (Sharma, 2008) and more than fifty percent of the population of Makwanpur district (Government of Nepal, 2007), the location of the ethnographic material used in this chapter. Tamang people are of Tibeto-Burmese descent with language similar to Tibetan, and distinctive ritual and cultural practices (Holmberg, 2005). The Muluki Ain (lit. 'law of the land'), Nepal's first national legal code was promulgated in the 19th century by the then ruling Rana regime, and classified the people who are today known as Tamang as an 'enslaveable' in order to guarantee a ready source of corvée labour. This fealty to the ruling elite was further enshrined by the way the Muluki Ain subsumed the Tamang into the Hindu caste hierarchy, despite most being Buddhist (Hofer, 1979).

A government edict in 1932 formally declared that Tamang was now the official term used to refer to the groups who had hitherto been called or self-identified as Lama, Murmi, Sain and Bhoté or Bhotiya (March, 2002). By doing so the state imposed a uniformity on Tamang communities that, whilst potentially unwarranted and the basis for on-going discrimination, has today transformed into a janājāti identity that is enthusiastically adopted by many Tamang individuals and organizations as a means for confronting the legacy of discrimination. Although Tamang people continue to suffer from worse levels of poverty compared to those from other ethnic groups in their localities and are greatly underrepresented in both public and private institutions, organisations of different types have placed the Tamang at the forefront of the janājāti movement (Kukuczka, 2011). This includes organisations that promote the formation of a Tamang national identity.

The janājāti movement draws on the past objectification and abuse of ethnic groups of people in Nepal, which has been railed against by Tamang people (see for example Holmberg, 2000). As Tamang (2001, p. 22) asserts:

> The Janājāti movement rests on the shared concerns that virulent discrimination persisted historically in multicultural Nepal. The movement is based on the common experience of the ethnic and indigenous populace that despite the traditional rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' and democratic equality, discrimination is continually reproduced. They feel it intensely in almost every dimension of their lives, including economic prosperity, political participation, educational access, and cultural dignity.

Although not specifically mentioned by Tamang, we can include the lack of access to and representation in media as one of the most significant ways that these feelings of discrimination are experienced daily.

In this section we use the example of a Tamang language radio production in Makwanpur district to demonstrate how ethnic exclusion from media occurs in practice. The setting is Hetauda, the district headquarters and municipality of

Makwanpur district, where 'Hetauda FM' (a commercial radio station) produced a Tamang language local version of a radio program called *Naya Nepal* (New Nepal), produced by Kathmandu-based non-government organisation (NGO), Equal Access Nepal (EAN). *Naya Nepal* (NN) provided a platform for the explanation, discussion, and promotion of peace, reconciliation, justice, security and the democratic process that was underway following the formal cessation of the civil conflict in 2006. The local version, referred to by its Tamang name *Chhar Nepal* (CN), was one of many local versions supported by an EAN initiative funded by USAID and the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) to increase the accessibility of information to marginalised communities. CN discussed issues of justice and inequality, using a format prescribed by EAN: topic introduction by a presenter, report, interview, and vox pops. EAN also provided a range of supports to assist local productions, including funding, training and the provision of community reporters, who recorded the opinions of people throughout Nepal for broadcast within the NN and CN programs.

The production and broadcast of CN faced many challenges, including the instability of the FM sector, the frequency with which new stations are established, over-reliance on aid funding, and difficulty sourcing Tamang speakers. There was also a major conflict between the presenters and management of Hetauda FM. The presenters, including the CN presenter, quit and formed their own FM station with the financial backing of a former producer at Hetauda FM who had gone on to establish a prosperous media hardware distribution company. The making of CN was halted as another Tamang-speaking producer was recruited. The new producer continued to work with the community reporters until funding ended, at which point the CN program ended to make way for more commercially-appealing programming.

Chhar Nepal produced and broadcast programmes that discussed issues of justice and inequality, with particular reference to minority groups. In one episode the issues faced by indigenous Chepang people[i] were addressed. CN, which followed a format prescribed by EAN of topic introduction by a presenter, report, interview, and vox pops, faced a problem that was endemic to making the program—the difficulty of sourcing people who could speak Tamang. Chepang people are not Tamang speakers and the program was broadcast as a mixture of Tamang and Nepali languages. Even when programs focussed exclusively on Tamang issues and included Tamang people, there was reluctance to speak in Tamang language. The community reporters could often be heard sighing audibly when Tamang people, most often girls and young women, would decline to comment in Tamang language before dissolving into giggles. Commenting on this challenge, one community reporter said, "it's a bit difficult to get Tamang experts for *Chhar Nepal*. We can't make the whole program in Tamang language. It's a weakness [of the program]" (interview, 2009). Such unwillingness to speak in Tamang appears to arise, at least in part, because voice is a proxy for agency and as such is tightly constrained within the habitus of broadcasting (Ahearn, 2000; Kunreuther, 2006).

There was little evidence that the program was well listened to. While it is arguable that political claims to ethnic identity and rights are strengthened by

the inclusion of local languages in mainstream media such as CN, this implies that there is an audience for the program that listens to and understands it. The producers of CN maintained that it had an audience in remote areas of Makwanpur where Tamang people were unable to understand or speak Nepali, a situation in which the bi-lingual nature of the program would surely create problems. However, it was hard to find anyone who claimed to be a regular or even occasional listener, even amongst avid radio listeners. When asked directly, people would claim that the program aired during scheduled power cuts and so they weren't able to listen to it.

Minority groups entering into the mediascape often find themselves unable to assert a continuing need for broadcasting in languages other than Nepali unless this is supported by external agencies, such as INGOs, whose support may not be sustained in the long-term, as was the case here. The potential power of broadcasting to reduce inequalities through the provision of space in the mediascape may not be realised in practice even when space is opened for content. Of particular concern is the continued reluctance of janājāti people with access to media production facilities to make use of this opportunity due to the deeply inculcated habitus relating to the 'natural' use of Nepali as the warranted language of communication in the media and the habitus of media industry practice.

In its demise this particular example of janājāti media seems to confirm pessimism regarding the ability of Nepalese media to support the empowerment of minorities. However, the following description of Tamang media audiences provides a counterpoint by showing how particular types of media consumption practice—in this case, radio listener clubs—assert more confident expressions of ethnic identity. In doing so, we also invert one of the normative assumptions in studies of the empowerment of minorities through media usage, which is that control over production is the most crucial determinant of this empowerment, whilst consumption tends not to be regarded as having the same capacity for progressive political empowerment. We do not deny that control over and involvement in the production of media content is of vital importance, but we instead demonstrate that consumption activities may play an important role in the development of the confidence required for minority peoples to enter into the public sphere and media institutions. Radio listener clubs have been used in a range of contexts as elements of development programs. Studies from Malawi, Nigeria and India demonstrate that group radio listening consumption practices contribute to participants' ability to talk about and act on challenges they face (Martins, 2003; Mchakulu, 2007; Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004).

Awāj uṭhāune: to raise one's voice

> *I used to think that people are disrespecting us and discriminating against us only and that this did not happen to anybody else…Before I could not say anything and was scared thinking what to say and how to speak. A year ago SSMK [Sathisanga Manka Kura] broadcast one program which matched our situation…only then I realised that I should oppose and challenge others if [their views are] not acceptable*

to me (Dudumaya, interviewed 2009).

Dudumaya, a young Tamang woman who heads the *Janahit Yūba Samuha* (Youth Group for People's Welfare, hereafter referred to as 'Janahit'), is the middle child of a Tamang family displaced from a remote area of Makwanpur by a flood in 1993. Janahit is a listeners' club associated with the SSMK radio program, which provides a forum in which young people can gather, listen to and discuss the program. However, many groups also conduct activities to raise awareness in their local communities on issues discussed in the radio programs. The Janahit club members undertook a number of awareness-raising activities that have elsewhere been conceptualised as productions or remediations (Greenland, 2012; Greenland & Skuse, 2015). To undertake these activities the club members first needed to develop the confidence to be assertive, a confidence gained by socialising with other young people via the listener clubs.

The Janahit club members live in Banaspati, a village created to house victims of floods that left hundreds homeless in 1993. Banaspati is both disadvantaged and divided owing to the diversity of the flood victims who may otherwise not be poverty-affected or neighbours. Additionally, social ties between inhabitants have been slow to build owing to the ever-present caste and ethnic divisions within the village. The Janahit club members often spoke about not knowing anyone and consequent social isolation. This changed when a number of young Tamangs, who later formed the Janahit club, met through a Tamang cultural organisation. They became friends and developed supportive relationships that helped to build trust and norms of reciprocity between the members (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). A major concern for many was the poverty and disadvantage experienced by inhabitants of Banaspati village. Seeking support from various organisations, they formed a club to foster their ability to address social issues. The members often referred to themselves as a collective and, while club members exercised agency as individuals, the club created a platform that enabled collective agency (Ahearn, 2000).

The Janahit club members described this agency as the 'ability to speak'. Tulkumaya, the younger sister of Dudumaya and a member of an affiliated child club established by Janahit, said that before she joined the club she had mostly stayed at home and did not have close relationships with other people in the village. Suman, another club member, claimed that, "I joined [the club to] give me confidence so that I could speak among people and face them" (interview, 2008). Similarly, many founding members spoke about the transformation they experienced in finding their voices incidentally through the club, which became a space for experiences that helped club members develop their confidence. As Bimla explained, "My peers can't talk or face other people...but I can...The club gave me confidence" (interview, 2009).

Dudumaya, quoted at the start of this section, realised she could oppose the views of others if they were not acceptable to her. By doing so she evidenced how developing confidence to speak is a political endeavour. Her comment is linked to the term *awāj uṭhāune*—to raise one's voice (Kunreuther, 2009). Voice is a metaphor for agency (Kunreuther, 2010) and has figured centrally in

political agitation for change since the 1990s (op. cit.). Dudumaya and the Janahit club members used their newly found voices to assert themselves as knowledgeable, modern and developed during various public activities. For example, at the celebration of Tamang New Year in Banaspati village attendees engaged in a program of eating and oration. Guests were asked to speak about the Janahit club and make suggestions for improvement, each one of which was criticized by Dudumaya. Invitees later stated that they felt taken aback by Dudumaya's fierce defense of the club and called her proud and self-important. These responses make evident the surprising impact of vocal intervention by a young Tamang woman. Her opposition to criticism was also a deeper response to past and current attitudes and behaviours that position Tamang youths and women in less powerful positions relative to others both within and between Nepal's ethnic groups.

Dudumaya's defense against the criticisms was an active process through which she was crafting a subjectivity that is different from historical narratives that position Tamang as backward, unable to speak and unworthy of being listened to. Such self-transformations are an integral part of a locally experienced and practiced modernity in which young Tamangs are aspiring to futures different from those of their parents. This is, as a SSMK producer once described it, an achieved future rather than an ascribed one. In acting thus, Dudumaya was asserting agency as a Tamang person, but also as a *young* Tamang *woman* in particular. Such self-assertions of agency are part of the local experience and practice of janājāti identity in contemporary Nepal. Similarly, Bordonaro (2009) has discussed how young men in Guinea-Bissau have used discourses of development and modernisation to subvert traditional power relations, and in so doing have been able to create discursive spaces in which they can act with agency that they would not have been otherwise accorded.

Discussion
Today the formation of the new federal republican Nepali state continues to influence Tamang ethnic identity, as it does the identity of all janājāti peoples. However, the utilization of janājāti as a pan-indigenous category of identity and the mobilisation of this collective identity to influence the direction of political change in Nepal demonstrates that the relationship between state formation and ethnicity is changing. Janājāti identity was once a mechanism for subjugation and internal colonisation, but is today being used as a tool of liberation (Kukuczka, 2011).

Processes of identity formation are today subject to greater contestation due to the opening up of the communication context. This contestation has tended to be seen in terms of the obvious public political discourse surrounding crucial matters such as the mobilisation of janājāti communities during the Maoist People's War and the role of janājāti representatives in the Constituent Assemblies. These issues have been publically discussed and argued over in the Nepalese media, and it is the absence of janājāti control over these media representations that is of greatest concern when we consider questions of media content production. The continuing paucity of content in minority languages generates fear that elites will again dominate janājāti identities. Our examination

of the difficulties experienced by Tamang radio producers in Makwanpur support this fear. Calls by organisations such as The Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB) and Martin Chautari for reform to Nepal's media policies and regulations to protect community broadcasters take on particular urgency given the delicate political situation while the new federal constitution comes into effect.

It is equally clear that we should not assume that janājāti audiences simply acquiesce to the construction of identities in terms that are wholly determined by the political or commercial imperatives of those who control media production. Media researchers have provided ample evidence and argument to support the claim that media consumers frequently appropriate and reinterpret media content to suit their own social and political purposes (see for example Novak, 2010). It is also important to note that this appropriation does not simply take the form of 'mainstream' content being resisted by 'alternative' audiences according to interpretations that align with the political aims of those who claim to be the 'official' political representatives of minorities.

This may happen, of course, and exclusion from the mainstream mediascape often leads to alternative media activities designed to support opposition groups that form around the ethnic identities of those who are often excluded from power. Given the prevailing political culture in Nepal, there is no reason to assume that those who control janājāti political groups and parties will behave any differently to the major political parties, such as the Nepal Congress, UML and Maoists, when attempting to co-opt media organizations to their own ends.

However, the examination of media consumption practices, particularly radio listener groups, indicates that other forces are influencing the formation of identity. Firstly, janājāti identities, especially those of janājāti youths, are being constructed in the midst of rapid movement towards a market-based, capitalist economy (Liechty, 2003). The poor living standards of very many Nepalis remain of paramount concern, especially when they lead to problems such as trafficking and economic migration into forms of debt bondage. Intransigent support for market reforms based on neoliberal ideology by successive Nepali governments are clearly leading to a polarisation of living standards, because for many Nepalis, particularly those living in urban or peri-urban areas, including janājāti peoples, living standards are improving.

The construction of janājāti identity is, therefore occurring in the midst of the arrival of new resources for identities based on commodity consumption. Not only do these compete with other forms of identity construction, possibly even being portrayed at times as inimical to 'traditional' cultural elements of identity, but they also generate new resources for ethnic identity formation. As noted above in relation to production, there is no necessary reason why consumption activities should align with normative assumptions regarding the adoption of individualism as a direct corollary of neoliberalism. Consumption may reinforce social connections as much as it divides and discriminates, but it then becomes imperative to examine under what circumstances such different outcomes occur (Miller, 1995).

The considerable investment, both financial and otherwise, that consumers put into decision-making regarding the purchase of commodities and the subsequent uses to which these are put indicates that consumers are well aware of the possible consequences of their actions, although Bourdieu also indicates that the habitus of social actors often precludes reflexivity when making such calculations (Bourdieu, 1977). Media consumption itself becomes a key means through which consumers become expert 'players of the game' and come to an understanding of the different symbolic valuations placed upon commodities within the totality of the market in all its dimensions, both economic and cultural, with potentially serious social consequences for those making miscalculations.

These risks are more pronounced for those marginalised because they lack other forms of capital, especially cultural capital related to one's ethnic positioning in the political landscape of the nation-state. It is for this reason that we see janājāti consumers in Nepal keen to utilise media resources and collective activities to coordinate consumption, including the consumption of media content itself, through activities such as listener groups. We see this process at work in the situations described in this ethnography when Tamang members of listener clubs utilise media content as means to 'create social spaces for collective reflection on individual experiences of subordination and powerlessness' (Rankin, 2004, p. 203).

The raising of consciousness examined here is (at least!) triply articulated, because the members of the listeners club not only reflect on their relative disempowerment as Tamang people in Nepal, but also as youths and/or women in a society that often allows little scope for young people—especially women—to engage in meaningful political action. It is also important to note that the organizations through which janājāti identities are most vigorously promoted are often dominated by a limited (male and highly educated) cross-section of society. As Kukuczka (2011, p. 424) observes:

> It is crucial to note that most activists by virtue of both having an intellectual university background and being members of their respective group follow an agenda and have the knowledge and authority to speak for the group as a whole. However, 'ordinary' people and activists do not necessarily share the same view on issues related to ethnic identity, the interpretation of history and resulting claims. Therefore ethnic activism can possibly result in the homogenization of a group by promoting a certain set of practices and features and denying others.

However, consumption activities, as evidence from feminist media studies research consistently demonstrates, frequently offer spaces for identity construction that often defy or critique normative expectations regarding women's agency (Meehan, 2012), although the reverse can, and often does, happen.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research provides holistic insights into the practices that Nepali consumers engaged in to construct varied expressions of collective and self-identity that both acknowledge historical and existing inequalities, whilst also creating shared audience experience that fosters a capacity to speak out on matters of concern. The question that now remains to be asked, rather than prematurely answered, is how a new generation of janājāti youth—brought up in the turbulent political climate of new Nepal and the changing context of an increasingly commercial mediascape—will use this capacity to speak out and take consequential action in their lives. This cannot be predetermined, but we can and should be attentive to the full complement of voices raised, for it is the range of voices heard today that makes today's Nepal a truly different place. We do not deny that control over and involvement in the production of media content is of vital importance, but we instead demonstrate that consumption activities may play an important role in the development of the confidence required for minority peoples to enter into the public sphere and media institutions.

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i Chepangs are marginalised indigenous people of Tibeto-Burmese descent living predominantly in the central region of Nepal, including Makwanpur district (SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and Nepal Chepang Association, 2008; Bista, 1967). Similar to Tamang people, Chepang people were included in the caste hierarchy in a low position, which enabled their subjugation.