




Spring 2015

# What's Below the Peak? Perceptions of Media from Those that Live Below the World's Most Famous Mountain

Jonah P. Lucas  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Lucas, Jonah P., "What's Below the Peak? Perceptions of Media from Those that Live Below the World's Most Famous Mountain" (2015). *Student Publications*. 356.

[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/356](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/356)

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/356](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/356)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# What's Below the Peak? Perceptions of Media from Those that Live Below the World's Most Famous Mountain

## **Abstract**

This research seeks to explore the perceptions the Sherpa people in the Khumbu region have on the media that has been created about them and their communities. Interviews conducted in the Khumbu region of Nepal with a variety of individuals gave insight into how different socio-economic and educational backgrounds affect these perceptions. This research found that all Sherpa are aware to some extent of the media about them, and its biggest effect is the international tourism trade that it promotes. Furthermore, journalists visiting the region are regarded as normal tourists, and the work they do is considered accurate and suitable by the Sherpa.

## **Keywords**

Journalism, Literature, Ethnicity, Nepal, Sherpa

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Asian Studies | Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | International and Area Studies | International and Intercultural Communication | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

## **Comments**

This Independent Study Project was published by the SIT Study Abroad Program in Nepal following the author's study abroad experience in the Spring of 2015. [Click here](#) for further information about this program.

# **What's below the peak?**

Perceptions of media from those that live below the world's most  
famous mountain

Jonah Lucas  
Academic Director: Daniel Putnam  
Advisor: Ang Sanu Lama

Gettysburg College  
Theater Arts, Organization and Management Studies Double Major

South Asia, Nepal, Solukhumbu  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Development and  
Social Change, SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2015

## **Abstract**

This research seeks to explore the perceptions the Sherpa people in the Khumbu region have on the media that has been created about them and their communities. Interviews conducted in the Khumbu region of Nepal with a variety of individuals gave insight into how different socio-economic and educational backgrounds affect these perceptions. This research found that all Sherpa are aware to some extent of the media about them, and its biggest effect is the international tourism trade that it promotes. Furthermore, journalists visiting the region are regarded as normal tourists, and the work they do is considered accurate and suitable by the Sherpa.

**Key Words:** Journalism, Literature, Ethnicity

## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to all those that affected by the 2015 earthquake, Nepali that had in the days and weeks beforehand had been going out of their way to help me with this research and making sure my time spent in Nepal was comfortable and educational.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Ang Sanu Lama, Frances Klatzel, and Ellie Skeeel for their help in opening doors and assistance in locating key interviewees.

I would also like to thank Ben Plohr for his advice, company, and for having someone to ride out the earthquake with.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Research Findings .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Discussion/Analysis.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Bibliography (Chicago 15<sup>th</sup> B) .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>List of interviews.....</b>	<b>27</b>

## **Introduction**

When most people picture Nepal they picture one thing; the foreboding yet full of adventure Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain. They picture the seven hundred or so climbers who attempt to conquer it every year, and also the Sherpa helpers. Everyone knows that it is the Sherpa people who make climbing to such great heights possible due to their centuries of living at high elevation in their native home, the Khumbu region. Thus these people are all pictured as rugged men of the mountain, climbing up the slopes carrying loads of supplies or helping western climbers. This entire mental picture can be constructed by many people around the world because of one simple fact; the world's high exposure to the Khumbu area through media.

“Everest is a spectacle, feeding on its own image, becoming a bigger version of itself” (Ives 2014). Foreign media outlets around the world crave stories about Everest, and in fact this year there will be upwards of eight film crews camped at Base Camp for the duration of the season in the hopes that something big and newsworthy will happen, to once again capture the attention of the world. Google plans to capture Google Street View images of the summit; with this following after the Street View cameras have already documented many of the small villages and even monasteries in Solukhumbu. The media focus on this small and remote region of the world is undeniable, yet its effects are less certain.

Ever since the mountain was successfully summited in 1953, the Khumbu region in Nepal, northeast of Kathmandu and historically home to the Sherpa ethnic group has been forever changed. In the high altitude plateaus and valleys that hold villages such as Khumjung, Namche Bazaar, Khunde, and Periche the



lifestyle used to be one of subsistence farming for potatoes and conducting trade with neighboring Tibet. Now with over 20,000 foreigners coming to the region every year to trek to Everest Base Camp, and a select few going even higher, tourists and not potatoes are the new cash crop. With this increase in money to the area the Sherpa have been presented with new opportunities and in many cases a higher quality of life. Trekking from one town to the next, one passes by Sherpa guesthouses, teashops, bakeries, and even bookstores. Sherpas own many of them, and often their sons and husbands are guides for the endless stream of westerns that want to hike in this region filled with many of the world's highest mountains.

Yet as more and more people come to the region for adventure, they also come to experience the exotic; a notion fed to them by the books, movies, and yearly stream of new stories that focus not only on the climbs but also the local people. The towns and people below the peak become part of a western spectacle rather than being the communities that existed long before trekking become popular. Due largely in part to this media created almost exclusively by foreigners, even the term Sherpa has taken on different and incorrect meanings. Where as a Sherpa is in reality a member of an ethnic group, it now also means guide, porter, mountaineer, and climber. As a majority of the media content created comes from foreign correspondents that fly in to portray the mountain from their own point of view, this international spotlight on a relatively small region and its people raises questions. This research thus looks to answer these questions, mainly; How are the Sherpa responding to these media depictions from foreigners coming into the region they have historically lived and worked in?

What are community members' perceptions of those foreigners coming in, and do

these perceptions change depending on the media? How is the same media viewed differently according to the stratified socio-economic classes of Sherpa in the region? And in what ways have media benefited or harmed community members in the area?

## Solukhumbu

Just as the trekkers and journalists who come to the region would visit and stay in the villages along the trail, the focus of this study takes place in the trailside villages of Namche Bazaar and Khumjung. Namche Bazaar (also known as Namche) is considered the gateway to Everest, and due to its location on the trail as a suitable stop for acclimatization it has grown to be the commercial and tourist hub of the region. It now hosts pizzerias, a Mountain Hardware adventure gear store, ATMs, and bars that show Mt. Everest themed movies every afternoon for free. I spent a little more than a week in this commercialized town, much more than the average of one day that other visitors to the region spend. I spent another week in Khumjung, billed by Sagarmatha National Park as an “authentic” Sherpa village just off the main beaten path. With only a handful of guesthouses and the famous Sir Edmund Hillary School as the only attraction, the village has a noticeably slower pace, less commercialization, and remains slightly less affected by the stream of people that trek by it everyday only twenty minutes away.

## Literature Review

It has been said that a “Sherpa family is made of a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, and an anthropologist,” thus this ethnic group is accustomed to being

examined and looked at by outsiders (Obadia 2008, 117). Yet, it could even be said that the family unit has grown by one yet again in recent years and now includes a journalist. This fact is of importance, especially when it has been proven in numerous studies that media coverage in the form of news stories and promotional material of a geographic area can have an impact on the area's image, and thus subsequently its economic, environmental, and cultural health (Beirman 2003, Sönmez et al. 1999, Fakeye; Crompton 1991). Changes in how outsiders view an area can change destination selection of visitors and shift the focus of development or government support to or away from the area. With media already predisposed to find the worst aspects of an area and its people, this can have huge consequences (Beirman 2003). Considering the fact that the Sherpa people now rely almost exclusively on tourism in one form or another as their only source of income, this gains even more significance.

Not only does media portrayal affect the area as a destination, but also can have a substantial effect on locals and the image they hold of themselves, such as locals perceptions of themselves in Tibet after media exposure (Mercille 2005). In Tibet, Mercille found that locals were getting caught up in disputes about how they should act in accordance with foreigners' views. Not only do these images affect the local people themselves, but these shifted perceptions then have an effect on the destination's image, thus creating a perpetuating cycle (Schroeder 1996). In this way, with just one view expressed publicly visitors expect one thing and then the locals try to replicate this, which then changes how they are viewed creating a never ending changing of customs and views. Depending on the social or economic levels that residents are members of, this affects how the media images are viewed and internalized (Gunther 1992). Differences in wealth

change the level in involvement and participation in the images created, and thus affect in what ways the media is viewed and learned about.

This internalization of projected images is especially troublesome due to the misrepresentation that often occurs. In an in-depth look at the Thakali people of Nepal, William Fisher found that media and even anthropological studies of a people can be very far from the truth due to the common mistake of “mistaking streams for the whole river” and misconstruing the culture entirely (Fisher 2001). The press often makes the mistake of limiting or eliminating the existence of the poor in an area, often for the purpose of selling an area for western consumption (Bullock et al. 2001, Silver 1993).

With the increased fame in some media about Everest, there has already been a noticeable impact on indigenous people and the Sherpa in the Khumbu region. Four years ago a study was conducted that showed the positive and negative affects of the branding of the Sherpa name (Mittleman 2011). With media’s international spotlight, there have been repercussions but also more attention and willingness to fix problems for the now famous ethnic group (Brower 1991). For example, media’s fabrication of the courageous Sherpa guide has created a labor shortage during the harvest season due to the glorification of working in the climbing industry instead of farming (Kholi 2003). Many of the Sherpa people have also realized they are part of the Mt. Everest attraction, and thus have started to act more as performers rather than live in the ways they choose (Fisher 1990). With these affects from media having already taken place, how do indigenous people view the foreigners, especially journalists, which have been crafting these stereotypes? While no such study has been done on the Sherpa population, journalists have received mixed reactions. In some parts of

the world foreigners are viewed as acceptable to the community as long as they come from a higher economic area where they will not compete for jobs, yet for journalists it often depends on what the message is of the content they create (Nyamnjoh 2002, Eribo; Tanjong 2002). With such mixed opinions, it thus becomes essential for indigenous people to have a control over the media content created about them (Hallman et al. 2013). In other parts of the world, the movement of civic journalism has sprung up as a way for marginalized communities to create a voice for themselves through self-publications and review of outside publications (Ginsberg 1991, Loto et al. 2006). With so much dependent on the media image being crafted by foreigners, is this the path the Sherpa should take? Many studies have looked at media's effect on indigenous populations and the consequences it can have, but no such study has looked at the Sherpa's situation and how they feel about the media storm surrounding them.

## **Methodology**

The research findings presented in this paper came mainly through seventeen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals over the course of three weeks. The first week of research was spent in the village of Khumjung in the Solukhumbu region; interviewing storeowners, lodge owners, school teachers, and residents who do not directly interact with the tourist flow that travels through the village. This was done in order to gauge the opinions of those that may not be directly influenced by the money that is brought in due to the foreigners. The time spent in Khumjung was spent with a homestay family, which gave me greater credibility and led to more open answers from those I spoke with. A little more than a week was spent in Namche Bazaar, which

allowed me access to interviews with park officials, bookshop owners, café owners, and prominent members of Namche with vested interests in the community and region. The last week was intended to be spent in Kathmandu interviewing scholars who have studied and worked on the subject at hand, but was cut short due to unforeseen circumstances. The remaining time was spent travelling between destinations, where impromptu conversations with guides and lodge owners often took place, which gave further insight into the subject and in many ways validated the more formal findings.

Further research also focused on the analyzing of media being created and the observations of ways in which it is viewed in this area. While the only media present in the more rural village of Khumjung were small shops that had one bookcase each of western novels written about the area, in Namche the media was much more prevalent and thus people more aware of it. In a town of only 1,500 residents there are numerous large bookstores selling books and movies, as well as multiple bars and cafes that show Khumbu-themed movies every afternoon. I observed some of these movie showings, taking notice not only of the content but also of the event itself. Thus, while in Khumjung my research focused more on the perceptions the Sherpa people have of the media even when having not been directly exposed to it, the research in Namche focused more on the media being sold and consumed within the town to foreigners and Nepalis alike.

While this research is fairly non-controversial and is an easy and comfortable subject for most people to speak about, my status as a foreigner did limit the information I was able to gather. Although interviews were almost entirely conducted in Nepali, some potential interviewees were not able to or did

not wish to make time, or only spoke the Sherpa language. Every attempt was made to make the experience as easy as possible for those being interviewed; one interview was completely written out for an interviewee to accommodate his hard of hearing and Nepali was almost always spoken to make the experience easier for those spoken to. Yet, even with concessions such as these some information could not be gathered due to time constraints and offices being closed during the limited times I was at locations. Another potential barrier was that due to my status as a foreigner, interviewees may have been more reluctant to speak freely about the foreign media created. It may have been uncomfortable for some to express their dislike or negative thoughts about media created by people they viewed as similar to me, and thus this may have affected some responses.

Every effort was also made to protect the subjects interviewed and make them aware of the voluntary nature of their participation. While some were hesitant at first to speak and have their answers written down, after fully explaining my status as a student and the intention of the research they were much more willing. Before arriving in the field I prepared a script in Nepali in which I explained myself, my research focus, and their ability as participants to not answer any question and stop at any point with no consequences. While for many of the interviews and conversations it seemed culturally inappropriate for the respondent to sign the consent form supplied by SIT World Learning, the form was talked about with every respondent and the form was offered on every occasion. All recipients that did not sign the form gave explicit verbal consent of their participation, and permission to use their full name in this document. All respondents were offered the option of being anonymous or to be given a pseudonym.

## Research Findings

Initially, the biggest question going into this research was, have the Sherpa even seen or read the books and movies that have made them so famous, and thus so prosperous? Even in the village of Namche Bazaar, lining the small streets and alleys are multiple bookstores, most of which sell movies as well. While the books are everything from titles by the Dali Lama to *The DaVinci Code*, the biggest section in each of these stores was the section of “local” books, the ones about Mt. Everest, Nepal, the Khumbu, and Sherpas. Yet, even with such a strong presence, exposure to the books varies quite a lot among those that call this region home. Overall, very few people have seen little if any of the media that has made them and the area so famous. Relative distance to the main trekking route, which sees the most tourists pass by, did factor into exposure levels, with those in villages that cater to tourists more likely to have seen or read something. At the same time, in the village of Khumjung, which is billed by Sagarmatha National Park as an “authentic Sherpa village,” very few people had much exposure at all. In those cases most people at least had a friend or family member that had read or watched something, and had subsequently told them about it. Not only did location but occupation also played an important role in levels of awareness to the media. Those involved in the tourism trade were more likely to have seen the media, especially guesthouse owners, shop keepers (whose shops were directed at tourists and not locals,) and café owners. For both location in relation to major trekking routes and occupation, the level of familiarity with Khumbu books and movies can be directly related due to the foreigners influence. Exposure more easily came to those that were interacting with foreigners who often consume and talk about the books on the trail. By



already being involved in the tourism industry, these people were more likely to have had their attention drawn to the books and media, as well as having more incentive to look into them in order to better serve their customers.

Yet, simply being exposed to the international media pieces about the region did not guarantee that the people had read or seen them. For example, at one guesthouse the owner had a large collection of Everest and Sherpa-themed books, which she kept in a case as a sort of book exchange program. Even though she had this collection in her own home, she had never read any of them, nor even had an idea about what they were about other than very vague notions (Pem Futi Sherpa 2015). Others, when asked their perceptions of the media gave answers like “Why should we even watch them” or “Those are for tourists, not us.” In essence, many believe that they have no reason to read the books or watch the movies that feature them and their ethnic group so heavily, as they are not the intended audience anyway. Even in the bars and cafes of downtown Namche, there is a glaring example of Nepali’s refusing to watch movies about the area and the Sherpa people that inhabit it. Everyday at 3:00pm, in multiple locations there are free showings of movies and documentaries, yet at every one the Sherpa guides who usually never leave the sides of their clients are noticeably absent. They drop their clients off and pick them back up as soon as the movie is over, but never stay to watch the films that simply “aren’t for them.” The Sherpa realize that while they may be the ones this content is about, no one ever intended for them to consume it, and thus they do not.

Further exacerbating this problem is that the foreigners who create the media do so with a foreign audience in mind, and thus either willingly or unknowingly create barriers that lessen the ability for locals to read about

themselves. One bookstore owner in Namche that was interviewed had multiple full shelves of books like *Into Thin Air* and *The Will to Climb*, but had no idea what they were about as they were in English, a language he is not able to read (Kailas Sherpa 2015). Language being a barrier is not simply a matter of the books selling better when written in English, they were never intended for the Sherpa and thus were never translated. Even the Sagarmatha Community Library, which has a wide selection of books in Devnagari and English, only has a few books in English about trekking and the Khumbu. The library is intended for locals and not foreigners, and thus has only a few books on its shelves similar to those that flood the shelves of stores only a few storefronts down the road. Thus, with the content about them and their home area often over-priced and in a language foreign to many of them, it comes as no surprise that much of the media is still an unknown.

While it may be true that most Sherpa have not seen the movies or read any of the books, that doesn't mean they don't have an opinion on them. Whether it be from a neighbor, family member, or friend, through the rumor mill, or just through guessing, everyone I spoke with had an opinion on the movies and books being written and wanted to share. Overwhelmingly, people thought the media being created was well done and entertaining. They would cite friends and relatives who had seen a documentary and reported back that it was "good fun," "entertaining," or "gave a good impression." One individual in Khumjung raved that the books at the bookstore down the road were all terrific... when she had never even read any of them (Chuma Kaple 2015).

This phenomenon can be explained by two facts that quickly became apparent. The first was that many people were simply watching to be entertained,

and when the movie or book kept their attention the entire time they were satisfied with it. Many of the respondents when asked if the media had a good message simply said that it was fun to consume, something to enjoyably pass the time. They either don't really know what it is about, or just don't care. For those that did see the media as more than just entertainment, they appreciated how the media had crafted the image of themselves for foreigners. Ang Purba Sherpa liked the movie they watched because it made Sherpas appear "strong and tough, and shows the world how hard we work" (Ang Purba Sherpa 2015). One respondent had read a popular western novel in which his grandfather was heavily written about. Both the grandfather and Chiring Sherpa felt that the western author did a good job and had portrayed all events accurately without misrepresentations, at the same time making the Sherpa look good and show how hard they work (Chiring Wangchu Sherpa 2015). Many other respondents when asked about the messages that are shared with the world stated they believed the messages were accurate of the Sherpa people, and that they were thus positive.

### The Effects of Media

While it is one thing that the Sherpa have in fact been exposed to much of the media about them and the region in which they live in, and think it is overall fairly accurate, it is another question entirely whether they believe the abundance of media to have a positive or negative influence on their lives. Many of the respondents believe that media was either positive or negative, with this division being broken into two categories; media's ability to bring business and prosperity and its ability to teach or harm the spread of culture.

“We are all money minded now” (Sonam Sherpa 2015). Although a short and simplistic answer to one of the many questions posed, this phrase became much of the driving force behind this research, with all questions and answers seemingly always reverting back to these six words. With so much money flowing into the Khumbu region every year from both foreign climbers and the even larger trekking business, the Sherpa have positioned themselves to gain a large share of it. While the means about which they collect profit from foreigners differ, they now view all foreigners as dollar signs, whose presence in the region every year for just a couple months can provide for their families for the entire year. Thus, almost unequivocally, everything that they now do is with this mindset of profit making. Every decision is made with the potential for the most money in mind, and they view their surroundings and the people around them as ways of making money. This all-consuming mindset of profit also affects their views of media and the content that is created about them and their home communities. The majority of responses to inquiries about whether media was positive or negative for the area was a pleased statement that media equates to more people visiting and thus more money. Respondents noted that it didn’t even matter whether the media stories are flattering or derogatory, as both put the area in the international spotlight and translate into more money in their pockets. Almost everyone in the area stands to make more money if more foreigners trek here; from the bar owners who show documentaries everyday at 3:00 as a way to seduce tourists into their establishments, to the book sellers who can get rid of more merchandise with more people, to the guesthouse owners who can fill their rooms. There is even a preferred type of media which some feel equates directly

to more people; “Cameramen are the best, people can see the region and then fall in love with it” (Chuma Kaple 2015).

This ever-increasing flow of money has benefitted the region and its people in ways other than just making people wealthier. One of the most well known effects of the fame and money that the international spotlight has created is the Edmund Hillary School in Khumjung, now a shining example of the benefits that a little western money, expertise, and attention can bring to a rural lifestyle. The abundance of media about the Sherpa have made them some of the wealthiest, best educated, and most assisted people. While this terrific for perpetuating the Sherpas’ high quality of life, some now believe that perhaps media is helping too much. Sonam Sherpa, a resident of Namche Bazaar and curator of the Sherpa Cultural Museum, believes that with so much media attention, non-governmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations now focus too much on the area. After the recent earthquake that struck Nepal, the media focused mainly on the cultural heritage sites in Kathmandu that were destroyed and the avalanche at Mt. Everest base camp. As Mt. Everest makes for better news, the Khumbu was featured longer and more prominently on media, which Sonam believes will result in much greater aid, even as other parts of the country struggle with greater damage and less international assistance. This disparity can be attributed to the international spotlight thrust on the Khumbu, and the subsequent flood of donors that focus on this area fully aware of the greater publicity their aid will receive. Along with unequal representation in receiving international aid, the region gets help in a different form, which can often be detrimental. With so much of the media content often highlighting the plight of children in the region, the area attracts foreigners who

try to do their part to “save the Sherpa,” often causing more harm than good.

Shambhu Sherpa, the headmaster at the Edmund Hillary School, has seen a rise in foreigners trying to do their part to help children by paying for a year of their education. However, while in theory this practice is helpful in actuality it leaves the child and the child’s family lost and unable to continue to pay for the schooling, which the foreigner started. Thus, while media may bring more money to the region, the ways it is spent can determine whether it is beneficial or not.

The Khumbu area is rich in culture, being the historic home of the Sherpa people. Thus, many of those interviewed cited the need to share culture as a large byproduct of the international fame they have received. Yet, while the desire to share culture and information may have been unanimous, the positive and negative effects of it were less clear-cut. Some believe that the books, movies, documentaries, and news stories that are consistently being churned out by foreign writers and producers have and continue to be a great asset to the region. In many ways, it is because of this media that many people are more educated about the Sherpa people, and they thus have a stronger culture because of it. Yet, respondents also felt this only holds true depending on the motivations that exist from those doing the learning. While scholarly books and articles, such as *Gaiety of Spirit: The Sherpas of Everest*, by Frances Klatzel give more and better quality information than mainstream books like *Into Thin Air*, any media can teach foreigners if the motivations are sound. However, many of the foreign visitors “simply want to be entertained, and not actually learn true knowledge” (Sherap Jangbu 2015). Thus, this popular media becomes stylized to better

serves its purpose of entertaining, and becomes less informative and educational in nature.

While the media itself may be flawed in its educational purposes to better entertain, the same can't be said about all those that sell this information. While some bookstore owners and café owners who show documentaries do it for “the easy money” and “because that's what tourists buy”, others do it out of a genuine interest to teach others about their culture and their home (Rajan 2015, Anonymous 2015). Many of the bookstore owners sell popular books in multiple languages, and when asked they replied that they genuinely want to teach the world about their home, and think this may make the information spread easier. In the cafes that show documentaries, while the owners do concede that it brings more people into their business, one of the cafes shows only documentaries and not stylized movies like the *Into Thin Air* film version, which he feels is less accurate and not in documentary fashion. Yet while these intentions may be good, even those with good intentions skew what media is shown, as one café “only shows accurate documentaries that have happy endings” (Jagadish 2015). After all, there cannot be too much education and learning going on... this is a vacation destination after all.

While locals may put their own filters on the media that visitors have access to, there is a larger problem of what lens or filter the media puts on itself. While it can be greatly beneficial that the Sherpa culture is being written about and that information is finding its way onto a world stage, what happens if those that are “teaching and preserving culture don't even practice the culture themselves” (Shambhu Sherpa 2015)? This can lead to information being skewed and involving an inherent outsider bias. Sonam Sherpa feels that because

of this, media can't be relied on to preserve culture, and although he reads to try and learn more he started his own museum to preserve the culture without having the inherent western bias.

While it is beneficial to teach culture and spread ideas around the world, some would argue that what is happening to the Sherpa in the Khumbu is not a healthy sharing of educational information but a romanticization of their culture in order to sell more copies of whatever media may be created. The Sherpa people and their culture has been so featured and in the process twisted by media that "even today depictions (of Sherpa) are almost-mythical, self-sacrificing beings who are subservient to western desires" (Ives 2014). Not only is the media turning the Khumbu into an exotic location, but in that process is oversimplifying the culture and lifestyle so it can better craft that message. One bookstore owner in Namche, a Sherpa herself, sells books and movies about Sherpas, and although she has never read them feels they are wholly inaccurate and too simplistic. There are feelings that this media, similar to the guidebooks also on the shelves, tries to dumb down an entire culture and way of life into three or four sentences (Anonymous 2015). Not only is information then lost, but what is included is wrong and misleading. This combining of information has already had a drastic affect on the Sherpa people and their identity. Whether travelling in the Khumbu or even back in America, there is a widely held belief that Sherpa is not so much an ethnic group as it is a job description. It is quite common to hear questions such as "how long have you been a Sherpa?" or other statements which have replaced an ethnic identifier with the job of carrying loads and guiding foreigners on treks and climbs (Reid 2003). Due almost entirely to the media's careless portrayal of the Sherpa people; the Khumbu, Mt. Everest, Buddhism, portering



and guiding, and Sherpa have all become synonymous. Foreigners now view all these topics as one and the same, and in the process forget some aspects, embellish other, and overall create false images and ideas.

### Perceptions of Journalists

The Khumbu communities may have many thoughts on the media about them, but have many fewer opinions on those that are writing and creating these stories. Many of the respondents had very little idea what the journalists that pass through the area do, and simply left them to their own devices. An even bigger response viewed them simply as more tourists, and didn't care about them as journalists or their work, but rather their business and the money they would spend as trekkers in the region. However, journalists and filmmakers on the other hand viewed the Sherpa people as some of the nicest and most honest/forthcoming people they had ever met. They stated that the Sherpa always knew when a journalist was in town, and everyone always wanted to be interviewed. While this openness may have been beneficial, the reporters were well aware that this eagerness to talk stems back to the fact that people know media coverage and journalists are the key to their economy. Considering profit drives the foreign media who fly in to get the next story, it makes sense that both groups have created a mutually beneficial relationship.

While all of the media is being created from foreigners, respondents expressed that the community preferred this rather than the option of having fellow Nepalis write the books and create the movies. "Foreigners are really good at making movies and stories, we like them" (Sherap Jangbu 2015). This statement sheds light on a thought held by most Sherpa, with such a large

deficiency in the necessary skills and funding, no one thinks a fellow Sherpa or even Nepali could create anything nearly as good as the foreign content, and thus are satisfied with the status quo. While some expressed that theoretically a native writer would be preferred which would lessen the biases and western perspectives that are often unknowingly included, they are aware of the realities and thus are content. The national park agrees that local writers would be beneficial, but they have no programs nor provide any assistance to make this happen

When it comes to having a say in the content being published and dispersed, there are multiple thoughts on this issue. While the Tengboche Monastery requires all photographers and videographers to get permission before filming, this is an exception rather than the rule. Other respondents expressed a curiosity at why the control of the content about them would even be necessary. It was agreed that if people are directly quoted, such as Ang Purba Sherpa was in an article written about Khumjung, than he should be able to see beforehand what the story will look like, but communities at large have no need to control what is said about them (Ang Purba Sherpa 2015). Not even the park, which requires a permit to be bought for any filming done within its borders, has any control of the messages that are being said about it. There is an attitude of “why would we?” and even filmmakers working in the area responded that as the topics are often uncontroversial there is no need (Chiring Wangchu Sherpa 2015, Matt Rilkoff 2015).

As much as there is no desire to control the media images, there is a strong wish that the money being created from these movies, books, and stories would find its way back into the communities in the Khumbu. While many of the media personnel have promised that they will send proceeds back, in almost

every case this is a lie that never comes true (Sonam Sherpa 2015, Shambhu Sherpa 2015, Ang Purba Sherpa 2015). Most journalists and their publishers keep all the profit they make from their media content, and while some do try to help the communities with their stories, such as soliciting donations for local schools, the majority do not. It is this scenario that has motivated some Sherpa to demand that profits from international media stay in the Khumbu, but nothing is being done about this.

### **Discussion/Analysis**

With this research pointing out the many differences in opinion that exist about the topics being covered, a natural hypothesis is that involvement in the tourism trade and the inherent business that is generated due to media would affect the responses of different individuals. Albert Gunther proved that different socio-economic backgrounds can affect the different ways media is received by people, and this proved partially true in this instance (Gunther 1992). While neither economic levels nor direct involvement in the tourism industry changed perceptions, education level did. Most respondents associated media with more money for the region and thus thought it beneficial, yet those with higher levels of more formal education stressed the potential harm media could do to their culture. This finding follows Gunther's research, and proves that education levels bring an awareness to media that is not inherent in all those exposed to it.

One of the biggest issues that they had with the media was its power to teach others about Sherpa culture, especially since it often has a high probability of being incorrect. There are those that felt media was beneficial as it can be a way to teach and preserve information about the area and Sherpa culture. Yet

those that are trying to preserve the Sherpa culture are not Sherpa, and those that are trying to write about the Khumbu region don't live in the Khumbu. Thus, even if the information is trying to be used as an educational tool, how accurate can it be? This has forever been a problem with researchers coming into indigenous groups to try to learn everything and then disseminate the information gathered. While the Sherpa are accustomed to being studied, other ethnic groups that have been studied in Nepal have been misrepresented, and what is stopping the Sherpa from having the same fate (Fisher 2001)?

One of the worst ways in which the Sherpa are being misrepresented is by having their lifestyle, culture, and everyday lives broadcasted to the world in an overly exotic and adventure-inducing way. Edward Said in 1993 warned about western representations of the East portraying the indigenous people as exotic, and this is now being perpetuated by the foreign media in Nepal (Said 1993). This portrayal, which holds ties to colonialism, is damaging for the Sherpa who “are not a display case, (but are) normal people living our lives” (Sonam Sherpa). The danger with this misrepresentation is not only the incorrect information that is being spread, but the tendency that indigenous people often have to take on the identities that are projected to others, which could have lasting implications for the Sherpa people (Mercille 2005, Schroeder 1996).

While foreign media may be causing harm inadvertently civic journalism, where the local community creates the media about themselves rather than foreigners, is not taking hold. While it has been successful in other communities with populations similar to the Sherpa, the Sherpa have no intention of making media themselves, and concede that foreigners are simply more proficient at it (Ginsberg 1991, Loto et al. 2006). There isn't even interest to try and regulate as

a community what the foreign media do create. There is research showing that self-control of media projections are essential to indigenous communities well-being, yet the Sherpa want no part (Hallman et al. 2013). Respondents expressed that simply put, the system that is happening around them now is satisfactory.

## **Conclusion**

After the earthquake and subsequent avalanche at the base camp of Mt. Everest on April 25, 2015, one of the images widely projected of the natural disaster was a wounded Sherpa being carried at base camp. The foreign media, already at base camp waiting for a story to happen, were quick to project this image around the world once again using the Sherpa people and the Khumbu region as the unofficial face of Nepal. While this image was straightforward, this was the exception rather than the rule; other depictions haven't been as much. Two years ago when there was a fight on the slopes of Everest between Sherpas and western climbers, the results were quite different. The climbers took to the Internet while still in base camp, conducting interviews with media outlets and sharing their side of the story with the world. Yet at the same time the Sherpas simply went back to work carrying gear for the same foreigners; they had no means to share their side of the story, and the foreign journalists weren't interested in telling it. Thus, the story told to the world included angry Sherpas fighting Europeans for no reason at all, a story that far from the truth.

While this foreign media is consumed by those in the Khumbu region, the feelings on it are mixed. For many, including those that haven't actually seen or read anything but simply know about it, the media about them and their home communities can be simply written off as a way to bring more people and thus

money to the region. Yet for those who are better educated and thus exposed to more, the story is slightly different. They see the constant presence of foreign media as potentially harmful to their culture and way of life, and something to be wary of.

While the foreign correspondents, writers, and filmmakers are in the Khumbu however, they are often treated simply as more paying customers, and the content they create seems to have no sway on how they are received. If anything, they hold a slightly privileged status since it is well understood that they hold a large control of the economy in their pens and cameras. Although often Sherpas want to be interviewed and have a say in what is told to the rest of the world, there is no organized attempt or even desire to somehow put a control on what is published about the region.

Calling attention to the fact that this research had to be abruptly ended before it was completed, there is much room for further research into this topic. Continued research would be beneficial to look further into how media is affecting the Sherpa and their way of life. Are people changing as a result of the images they see, and what would this look like long term? Furthermore, research could try and show some of the media to those that have had little exposure and get their reactions to the piece, really extracting what is noticed and what the thoughts are. This research only served as an overview of how Khumbu media is perceived, and thus looking deeper into these same questions could reveal interesting findings.

Sherpas like Jamling Norgay have written books and are now widely acclaimed authors with an international audience. I read his book about his father being the first person to climb Mt. Everest, and it was remarkably different from

other books I had read about the same subject. Many feel now that not only are the Sherpa gaining more power on the slopes of Mt. Everest, but also in the media where they are slowly finding their own voice through a select few representatives. Of course, these new views are from foreign writers.

## **Bibliography**

- Beirman, David. "Restoring tourism destinations in crisis: A strategic marketing approach." (2003): 1146.
- Brower, Barbara. *Sherpa of Khumbu: people, livestock, and landscape*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Bullock, Heather E., Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams. "Media images of the poor." *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 2 (2001): 229-246.
- Eribo, Festus, and Enoch Tanjong, eds. *Journalism and mass communication in Africa: Cameroon*. Lexington Books, 2002.
- Fakeye, Paul C., and John L. Crompton. "Image differences between prospective, first-time, and repeat visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley." *Journal of travel research* 30, no. 2 (1991): 10-16.
- Fisher, James F. *Sherpas: reflections on change in Himalayan Nepal*. Univ of California Press, 1990.
- Fisher, William F. *Fluid boundaries: Forming and transforming identity in Nepal*. Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Ginsburg, Faye. "Indigenous media: Faustian contract or global village?." *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (1991): 92-112.
- Gunther, Albert C. "Biased press or biased public? Attitudes toward media coverage of social groups." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1992): 147-167.
- Hallmann, Kirstin, Anita Zehrer, and Sabine Müller. "Perceived Destination Image: An Image Model for a Winter Sports Destination and Its Effect on Intention to Revisit." *Journal of Travel Research* (2013)
- Ives, Katie. "The End of the Everest Myth." *Alpinist*, April 28, 2014.
- Kohli, M. S. 2003. *Sherpas, the Himalayan legends: including the untold story of Phu Dorje, the first Nepalese to climb Sagarmatha*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors.
- Loto, Robert, Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, Linda Waimarie Nikora, Rolinda Karapu, and Alison Barnett. "Pasifika in the news: The portrayal



of Pacific peoples in the New Zealand press." *Journal of community & applied social psychology* 16, no. 2 (2006): 100-118.

Mercille, Julien. "Media effects on image: The case of Tibet." *Annals of Tourism Research* 32, no. 4 (2005): 1039-1055.

Mittelman, Melissa, "Sherpa Inc. Cultural Commoditization of the Sherpa Identity" (2011). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. Paper 1161.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. "Local attitudes towards citizenship and foreigners in Botswana: an appraisal of recent press stories." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28, no. 4 (2002): 755-775.

Obadia, Lionel. "The Conflicting Relationships of Sherpas to Nature: Indigenous or Western Ecology?." *Journal for the study of religion, nature and culture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 116-134.

Reid, T.R. "The Sherpas." National Geographic, May 1, 2003.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage, 1993.

Schroeder, Tim. "The relationship of residents' image of their state as a tourist destination and their support for tourism." *Journal of Travel Research* 34, no. 4 (1996): 71-73.

Silver, Ira. "Marketing authenticity in third world countries." *Annals of Tourism Research* 20, no. 2 (1993): 302-318.

Sönmez, Sevil F., Yiorgos Apostolopoulos, and Peter Tarlow. "Tourism in crisis: Managing the effects of terrorism." *Journal of Travel Research* 38, no. 1 (1999): 13-18.

### **List of interviews**

- Rilkoff, Matt. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 12, 2015.
- Reid, T.R. 2015. Email message to author. April 6, 2015.
- Sherpa, Pem Futi. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 12, 2015.
- Sherpa, Ang Purba. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 14, 2015.
- Sherpa, Nima Dorma. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 14, 2015.
- Sherpa, Shambhu. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 14, 2015.
- Ikin, Bridget. 2015. Email message to author. April 12, 2015.
- Kaple, Chuma. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 16, 2015.
- Sherpa, Yangdi. 2015. Interview with author. Khumjung, April 16, 2015.
- Anonymous. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 21, 2015.
- Sherpa, Mingma. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 21, 2015.
- Rajan. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 21, 2015.
- Sherpa, Chiring Wangchu. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 22, 2015.
- Sherpa, Sonam. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 22, 2015.
- Rana, Ramkrishna. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 22, 2015.
- Jangbu, Sherap. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 23, 2015.
- Sherpa, Kailas. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 23, 2015.
- Jagadish. 2015. Interview with author. Namche Bazaar, April 24, 2015.