

# **Fake News, Dis-Information and Propaganda in International Relations**

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# Foreword

The papers delivered at the COSATT International Workshop on 'Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda in International Relations' elaborate on these themes from multiple perspectives. They make the point that tactics are employed by various actors with diverse motivations and objectives, ranging from governments and intelligence agencies to political organizations, extremist groups, and even individuals.

The widespread use of digital platforms and social media has amplified the reach and impact of these tactics, making it easier for false information to circulate rapidly and widely.

Currently the government of Sri Lanka is presenting a bill on Security of Online Methods (BSOM), which has been presented by the Ministry of Public Security. The government claims that the purpose of the BSOM is to "prevent harm to the general public from false information spread over the Internet." The apprehension in civil society and also in opposition political parties is that the vague and broadly defined offences in the draft law will criminalise the sharing or publication of any criticism of the government and anyone who organises protests, demonstrations, strikes or any other actions on social media.

The bill contains a new range of offences. These include:

- False defamatory statements
- Paving the way for riots by provocation without reason
- Disturbing a religious assembly through false statements

- Communication of false statements with the sole intention of hurting religious emotions
- Intentionally defaming by a false statement with the objective of arousing violations of the peace
- Circulation of false statements with the intention of causing a riot or an offence against the government
- Communication of statements on incidents to cause harassment

Undoubtedly, the issue of fake news spread by both governments and non-governmental actors is a real one. Fake news refers to fabricated or misleading information presented as genuine news. It can take the form of false headlines, manipulated images, or even entirely fictional stories. The proliferation of fake news is often driven by the desire to generate web traffic, earn advertising revenue, or manipulate public opinion. In international relations, fake news can be used to shape narratives, distort facts, or advance strategic objectives. For example, false stories may be disseminated to create divisions among rival nations, undermine diplomatic efforts, or influence public sentiment during elections or conflicts.

However, legislation to tackle the problems of disinformation which involves the deliberate spread of false or misleading information to deceive or manipulate others needs to be carefully assessed so that it does not lead to an erosion on the rights to free expression and to receive information. Unlike fake news, disinformation campaigns are often sophisticated, coordinated efforts aimed at achieving specific political, economic, or ideological goals. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns when carried out internationally may seek to undermine adversaries, sow discord in foreign societies, or reshape global narratives in favor of the sponsoring

government. Disinformation tactics can include the creation of fictional personas, the use of social media bots to amplify certain messages, or the strategic release of selectively leaked information.

In addition, there is propaganda, which is the systematic dissemination of information, ideas, or narratives to shape public opinion and promote a particular agenda. These methods are employed by governments, political parties, and other organizations to influence perceptions, mobilize support, and advance their interests. Propaganda often employs emotionally charged language, appeals to patriotic or ideological values, and seeks to create a sense of unity or shared purpose. In international relations, propaganda can be used to demonize adversaries, justify military actions, or build alliances by promoting positive images of a country or its leadership.

The impact of fake news, disinformation, and propaganda in international relations cannot be underestimated. These tactics have the potential to exacerbate tensions between countries, erode trust and cooperation, and create a fertile ground for misinterpretation and miscalculation. The papers in this book point to the challenge of dealing with fake news, disinformation, and propaganda through a multi-faceted approach that combines media literacy education, fact-checking initiatives, technological solutions, and international cooperation to promote transparency, critical thinking, and responsible information-sharing.

**Jehan Perera**

Colombo

September, 2023

# Preface

In an era marked by the rapid dissemination of information and unprecedented internet connectivity, we find ourselves confronted by a phenomenon that transcends borders, cultures, and ideologies- the spread of fake news and disinformation. This is a global challenge but perhaps more apparent in South Asia.

The online world is becoming increasingly influential in molding public discourse and driving political events. With millions of users connected online, the negative consequences of false news and disinformation have never been greater. Consequently, fake news, hate speech, and online extremism appear to have saturated content on social media platforms, their harms exacerbated by increasingly powerful network effects and computational systems. South Asia, home to nearly a quarter of the world's population, has diverse societies, cultures and complex geo-political dynamics. This makes the region a fertile ground for the creation and propagation of fake news, and disinformation. In recent years, the rapid spread of information through digital platforms and social media has further underscored the need to study in greater detail the impact of fake news and dis-information on overall international relations.

Many South Asian countries already view disinformation and propaganda as a serious threat to their democrat-



ic systems. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the countries witnessed the dangers of health misinformation, which led to confusion, mistrust, and even loss of lives. False information about the virus and its treatments circulated widely in South Asia, leading to vaccine hesitancy, refusal to wear masks, and disregard for public health measures.

With the aim to study the current status and means to counter fake news, disinformation and propaganda that prevails in the region, Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) in cooperation with the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organized a regional conference on 'Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda in International Relations' in Colombo on March 14-15, 2023. The Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) cooperated with the COSATT to make the event a success. Participants from across South Asia spoke at the event and some of their articles are published in this volume. We are especially grateful to the Honourable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Dinesh Gunawardena for taking time out of his schedule to meet the COSATT delegation at his office.

To combat the threat of fake news and disinformation, governments, civil society organizations, and media outlets must work together to promote media literacy, fact-checking, and responsible information dissemination. We hope this publication will thus be a pioneering work and inspire a deeper understanding of the issues at

hand and motivate all of us to play a role in addressing the challenges posed by fake news, disinformation and propaganda in South Asia and beyond.

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COSATT conference participants with the Honourable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Dinesh Gunawardena in Colombo.



# **The State of Fake News and Disinformation in India**

Dr. Vaishali Raghuvanshi<sup>1</sup>

Fake news is one of the buzzwords which has gained traction in the contemporary era of information revolution. The imprint of the 4th Industrial revolution has been witnessed in the quotidian lives of people across the globe. Digital imprints of the latest industrial revolution has made a remarkable presence in terms of an increasing number of consumption of digital devices which has made it convenient for information to proliferate within seconds. "The velocity of information has increased drastically with messages now spreading internationally within seconds online" (Vasu et al. 2018:3).<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of the fourth industrial revolution has been instantly perceived as a marker of liberation and has given a catalytic effect to strengthening the process of democracy. Increasing use of social media has accelerated the process of empowering people and in

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1 Assistant Professor (Political Science), MMV, Banaras Hindu University, India.

2 Vasu, Norman, Benjamin Ang, Terri-Anne Teo, Shashi Jayakumar, Muhammad Faizal and Juhi Ahuja.2018. "Fake News: National Security in the Post-truth Era- Executive Summary" S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

turn, has strengthened democracies. One of the pertinent example for this would be 'colour revolution' which aimed towards ending authoritarian regime and bringing democratic setup in the countries from Myanmar to Egypt. There is also a flip side to the entire social media movement which narrates a story where state authorities have manipulated the mass consciousness through controlling the channels of information dissemination. An example of this can be seen in countries like China and Russia, where state agencies have controlled the usage of the internet and strengthened censorship.<sup>3</sup>

The most important question which arises here is that what is fake news? Is it a new phenomenon or has it been a part of human existence and statecraft since the dawn of civilization. At this point it is relevant to recall a story from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* regarding *Ashwathama*. Son of the legendary teacher and warrior, *Dronacharya*, *Ashwathama* was blessed to be immortal. *Dronacharya*, who loved his son dearly was fighting incessantly on the battlefield bringing Pandavas to their wits end when a plot was drawn to decapacitate *Dronacharya* by spreading a rumor of the death of his beloved son. Resultantly, when an elephant named *Ashwathama* was killed on the battlefield, a rumor was spread that *Ashwathama*, the son of *Dronacharya*, was killed. This in turn would lead to the killing of *Dronacharya* who would go in mourning and to the ultimate defeat of

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3 Fukuyama, F. (2017) "The Emergence of a Post-Fact World", Project Syndicate, Accessed from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/the-emergence-of-a-post-fact-world-by-francis-fukuyama-2017-01> Accessed on 10/02/2023

he *Kauravas* in due course<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, one is reminded of The New York Sun's 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835 about an alien civilization on the moon leading to increased sale and profitability of the newspaper. The hoax was a series of six articles published in the name of well-known astronomer Sir John Herschel claiming that an alien civilization is thriving on the moon (Vida:2012)<sup>5</sup>.

Fake news, post-truth, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda- whatever name we decide to give it, it is certain that this phenomenon has paralleled the human existence. However, there is a renewed focus on this phenomenon because of the current times whose hallmark is the transmission of information at breakneck speed. With the advent of social media platforms and the ease of creating and sharing content, misinformation can now reach a global audience within seconds. The lack of stringent fact-checking and the tendency for individuals to rely on confirmation bias has further exacerbated the problem. Additionally, the anonymity and viral nature of online communication allow misinformation to spread rapidly, often overshadowing genuine news especially when it is not sensational and requires painstaking and cumbersome fact checks. Sensationalism has always sold well in the world of media. By the advent of print media, exposes and scoops were brought to publication to increase circulation. Sting operations and secretly

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4 The story of Ashwatthama, Mahabharata Online Accessed from [https://www.mahabharataonline.com/stories/mahabharata\\_character.php?id=88](https://www.mahabharataonline.com/stories/mahabharata_character.php?id=88) Accessed on 1/03/2023

5 Vida. István Kornél. 2012. "The "Great Moon Hoax" of 1835" *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Vol. 18, No. ½ pp. 431-441

recorded videos came in vogue in the era of electronic media. Along with such developments was a parallel rise in fake news, especially from desperate media houses. It has existed since the invention of printing presses because of its 'ability to sell and the preference of society at large for scandalous material. In the current times click baits and sensationalizing, often misleading, headlines are used to catch eyeballs. One of the aspects of the information revolution is the creation of a fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news, requiring concerted efforts to protect the information ecosystem.

Before indulging into various facets of fake news, it is important first to understand the meaning of the term "fake news".

According to David M.J. et al,

"Fake news" is "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people)." (David M.J. et al. 2018:1094-1096)<sup>6</sup>

"Fake news is understood here as a medium for a spectrum

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6 Lazer, David M.J. et al. 2018. "The Science of Fake News" Science Accessed from <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aao2998> Accessed on 25/02/2023



of phenomena comprising five categories: (i) Disinformation – falsehoods and rumors knowingly distributed to undermine national security, which can be part of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns; (ii) Misinformation – falsehoods and rumors propagated as part of a political agenda by a domestic group/the relativisation/differing interpretation of facts based on ideological bias; (iii) Misinformation – falsehoods and rumors propagated without a broad political aim, either with or without malicious intent that achieves viral status; (iv) Entertainment – falsehoods used in parody, satire, or seemingly humorous pieces; and (v) Falsehoods distributed for financial gain”<sup>7</sup>. (Vasu et al. 2018:5)

Although none of these phenomena are new, they have taken on new significance recently with the widespread availability of sophisticated forms of information and communication technology. The sharing of texts, images, videos, or links online, for example, allows information to go viral within hours. Factors such as confirmation bias and selective exposure have always acted as psychological phenomenon that have aided misinformation. Furthermore, humans are inherently social beings, and we tend to trust information shared by our social networks, even if it lacks credibility. Online information sharing has just increased the scale and pace of this phenomenon.

## **Fake News in India**

Fake news is a pressing issue in India, amplified by the widespread use of social media platforms and the

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

increasing accessibility of internet connectivity. The country's diverse socio-political landscape provides ample opportunities for stakeholders to spread misinformation and manipulate public discourse for rallying public opinion in a certain direction. Fake news has been utilized to manipulate public opinion, incite violence, and shape political narratives. Fake news continues to be a growing menace in India, which has seen the most number of fake news incidents compared to anywhere else in the world, as per Microsoft's 3rd 'Digital Civility Index'<sup>8</sup>. This is in consonance with the global trends as the Microsoft Global online safety survey 2023 states that the single most common risk online was misinformation, and disinformation, followed closely by personal attacks. As per the report, misinformation comprises nearly 51% risks online. Misinformation or disinformation is seen to have some role to play in other categories of threats as well. So what appears to be 51% on the face of it is quite more than that.<sup>9</sup>

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) released its detailed document of recorded crime, titled 'Crime in India 2021'. It shows a sharp increase in the incidences of fake news in the covid era followed by a declining trend which suggests that the tendency to spread fake

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8 Business Insider. 6th Feb 2019. "India has more fake news than any other country in the world: Survey" BI India Bureau Accessed from <https://www.businessinsider.in/india-has-more-fake-news-than-any-other-country-in-the-world-survey/articleshow/67868418.cms> Accessed on 11/03/2023

9 ibid

news rises exponentially during a time of crisis.<sup>10</sup>

Addressing fake news requires multi-pronged approach from the points of view of media literacy campaigns, regulatory measures, and collaborative efforts between stakeholders to promote responsible information sharing and critical thinking. However, there are two fundamental aspects of fake news, which should be addressed to improve our understanding of fake news:

- 1) The facilitators of fake news, &
- 2) The responses to fake news

### **1) The facilitators of fake news**

This concerns with questions such as how it becomes possible to disseminate fake news. As such the point of focus is who, when, how, and why fake news is disseminated. Some of the threads of this aspect in relation to the state of fake news in India are as follows.

**Unregulated media** - Since it is accessible to everyone like an open source, it becomes an effective tool for political mobilization along social, religious, business, or ideological issues. Such mobilization is at times done on the basis of fake news as there is lack of regulation on the social media platforms. The vastness of these platforms makes it very difficult to trace the origin of such fake

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10 Varma, Aishwarya, 30th Aug 2022. NCRB Statistics: Figures Show 42% Drop In 'Fake News' Cases in 2021" The Quint Accessed from <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/ncrb-2021-data-shows-42-percent-drop-in-cases-under-ipc-section-505-fake-news> Accessed on 19/02/2023

news. Fake news such as the salt shortage rumor in 2016<sup>11</sup> or that the new 2000 rupee notes have nano chip in them<sup>12</sup> have been viral on social media platforms in the recent past.

**Erosion of media ethics** - The media is increasingly becoming prescriptionist and largely propaganda-driven. Newsroom anchors are not afraid of promoting fake news if it is serving their ends. We see the clickbait system in social media and mainstream media both. Here false or misleading thumbnails or headers are given to attract attention of the user while the content does not confer with the thumbnail or header. Lack of credible fact-checking is another problem in this area. We have seen examples like "President Kovind makes Twitter debut; gains 3 million followers in one hour" being promoted by media houses without any fact check.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a mob lynching case occurred in the state of Jharkhand on the

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11 Hindustan Times. 12<sup>th</sup> November 2016. "Clashes in Delhi over salt shortage rumours, panic buying in NCR towns" *Hindustan Times* Accessed from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/clashes-in-delhi-over-salt-shortage-rumours-panic-buying-in-ncr-towns/story-9xNUxTKCG0xB1vMA16QUeI.html> Accessed on 21/02/2023

12 The Indian Express. 19<sup>th</sup> May 2023. "RBI's new Rs 2000 notes do not have a Nano-GPS chip" *The Indian Express* Accessed from <https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/nope-rs-2000-note-does-not-have-a-gps-nano-chip-inside-it/> Accessed on 21/02/2023

13 Alt News. 26<sup>th</sup> July 2017. "President Kovind gains 3 million NEW followers in an hour? Get real, Indian media" *Alt News* Accessed from <https://www.altnews.in/president-kovind-gains-3-million-new-followers-hour-get-real-indian-media/> Accessed on 23/02/2023

rumour of kidnapping of a child.<sup>14</sup>

**Confirmation bias** - It refers to a human tendency to view and process a given piece of information from the vantage point of their own values, beliefs and life experience. Occurring at a subconscious level, this bias leads to faulty decision making that gives more weightage to information or data consistent with their belief and ignores any such information that counters their existing belief system. Now, given the vast amount of information available through the internet, it is not difficult to find out the information that confirms one's biases and ignore the opposing views.

**Lack of education and scientific temper** leads to intellectual stubbornness that aids fundamentalism. This prohibits individuals to consider any issue on merits as they do not have the intellectual flexibility to change their views when credible evidence is presented for an opposing viewpoint. Lack of digital literacy that enables individuals to identify false information and check the facts from credible sources is also a cause of the spread of fake news.

## 2) The Responses to Fake News

Here the concern is that who, when, how, and why different actors respond to misinformation/disinformation and what

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14 Bhattacharya Ravik and Santosh Singh. 20th May 2017. Seven lynched by mob in Jharkhand over kidnap rumours" The Indian Express. Accessed from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/lynched-by-mob-in-jharkhand-over-kidnap-rumours> Accessed on 25/02/2023

sort of responses should be formulated in order to curtail the spread of misinformation and fake news. The dangers of misinformation and fake news are conspicuous in the society that cannot be ignored. It hampers the process of trust building in society which is the foundation stone for any thriving socio-political setup. The curative response to this phenomena should come from all the quarters of civilized society including politicians, media persons, teachers, and most importantly form the consumers of fake news themselves.

An immediate approach to countering fake news is the removal of online content followed by punitive action. Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 153 (giving provocation with intent to cause riot) and Section 295 (injuring or defiling place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class) are relevant when it comes to legally fighting fake news. These sections are also in common use when fake news threatens to disturb the communal harmony in society.<sup>15</sup> The Information Technology Act, 2000 also has some relevant sections such as the section 66 which can be put to use to curb fake news.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, government and non-government organizations also contribute to countering fake news. Governmental regulation can come from independent

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15 Legislative Department. The Indian Penal Code Accessed from <https://ldashboard.legislative.gov.in/actsofparliament-fromtheyear/indian-penal-code> Accessed on 12/03/2023

16 Information Technology Act, 2000 Accessed from <https://eprocure.gov.in/cppp/rulesandprocs/kbadqkdlcswfjdelrquehwux-cfmijmuixngudufgbuubgubfugbububjxcgfvbsdihbgfGhdfgFHyt-yhRtMjk4NzY=> Accessed on 15/03/2023

bodies. In India, Press Council of India (PCI) and News Broadcasters Association (NBA) are, respectively, two public and private regulatory bodies. While PCI has the powers to warn, admonish or censure news agencies, the NBA represents the private television news and current affairs broadcasters and addresses grievances and complaints against media houses in the framework of a self-regulating mechanism. These agencies have to play a more active role in a more ethical manner. Similarly, fact-check websites such as Altnews and the Quint have to play an active role and increase their reach. However, we need to seek solutions at a more fundamental level. There are five ways in which this problem may be tackled:-

**First,** is to attack the feeding grounds on which the disinformers thrive. We need to develop more resilient societies comprising of people who are not willing to be brainwashed and construct their views on reasonable resources. The development of scientific temperament through a robust primary and secondary educational framework along with the development of professionalism in media are foundational pillars for establishing a society that can counteract fake news effectively.

**Second,** trust between the state and the citizens strengthens the socio-political setup in a nation. The representatives of the people should communicate effectively and deliver correct information and analysis informed by a reliable body of work in order to gain the trust of the people.

**Third,** pertains to regulation. Effective regulatory mechanisms should be created with proper legislation to ensure the curb of fake news.

**Fourth,** purpose and intent of a particular information should be clearly available on online platforms. The origin of the information and the sharing patterns should be accessible to every user. Such transparency can ensure that the end user knows the propagator of the information and their intention along with any financial or political motives involved. While it is important to have plurality of opinion, it is equally important to have the requisite mechanisms and skills to verify the authenticity of these opinions.

**Fifth,** Governments can introduce a certificate course on 'Digital Literacy.' Young generation have adapted to the idea of digital revolution. But do's and don'ts of digital world are yet to be taken seriously by youngsters. There is a dire need to introduce a systematic structure for inclusion of digital literacy in school and university system. In the post pandemic era, screen culture has taken over the entire education system and it has become mandatory to get used to digital devices for attaining education. Dissemination of fake news depends upon the consumption pattern as well. Therefore, in order to tame the increasing proliferation of fake news, it becomes pertinent to introduce a system where fact checking and awareness about such malignant usage of digital media can be taught.



## **Conclusion**

In an age where information spreads with unprecedented speed and magnitude, the proliferation of fake news has emerged as a menacing threat to our society, democracy, and collective well-being. A clear interconnection is seen between fake news and myriad other contemporary challenges faced by society at large. This article has shed light on the detrimental effects of fake news, highlighting its ability to manipulate public opinion, erode trust in institutions, and sow division among individuals. The consequences of this misinformation epidemic are far-reaching. What it attacks is trust which in turn leads to fissiparous tendencies. Enhanced divisions in the society is a threat to pluralism and indeed to democracy. Ultimately, the fight against fake news requires a coordinated and sustained effort from all fronts. It is an ongoing battle that demands vigilance, adaptability, and a commitment to the pursuit of truth. Only by working together can we mitigate the destructive impact of fake news, safeguard the principles of democracy, and foster an informed and empowered citizenry capable of navigating the complexities of our information-rich world. The movement against fake news is therefore a movement to protect democracy and civilization along with cherished political values of liberty, equality, and justice.

# **Addressing Impacts of Fake News and Disinformation**

Saloni Pradhan Singh<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-first century is known as the century of information technology (IT). Journalism is considered as one of the most crucial pillars of democracy as it connects the public to the political, economic and social worlds. With the help of journalism, people are made aware of the happenings in and around the world by connecting them through IT. The public's perception of journalism speaks volumes in itself. They have faith in journalism that it reports the truth of the events in its totality, without any manipulation or bias. However, this might not be true as there are many examples of disinformation and media sensationalisation in the present days. The issue of fake news and disinformation has been increasing everyday as more people are connecting virtually in their daily lives and doing business by working from home on line.

Recognizing the impact of misleading or fake news on the beliefs and behaviors of the public, the Public Engagement teams at the Oxford University clinical Research Unit monitored and documented misinformation and fake news related to Covid-19 in three countries in South and

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1 Author is former member of the National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal. She is also the Executive Chair of DIDI Bahini, a NGO established with the objective of the empowerment of women.

Southeast Asia. In Nepal, 63 percent of 75 misleading posts were in Facebook and 37 percent were on local news platforms. 45 percent of these were about treatment and 41 percent were about the epidemiology of the disease. Furthermore, during the lockdown period, the media especially electronic or IT related communication or social media has been ruthlessly violent in spreading fake news impacting violence against girls and women. Fake news spreads like wildfire especially when it is used for character assassination. Even famous media personalities resort to false contents which they try to sensationalize. They do it for engagements and earn target rating point (TRP) so that they can earn good money.

Now the question comes, Why does fake news spread? 'Fake News' is designed to provoke extremist sentiment, influence political processes, or seed distrust and confusion in society. It's also created to make money. The more clicks on a social media page, the more advertising on the page is seen or the higher the TRP, the more revenue for the page's administrators. This sort of news are used like virus during elections. One of the research of UN Women on Violence against Women in Politics (VWIP) in South Asia reveals that female candidates suffer much more than their male counterparts by fake and humiliating disinformation that is mostly gender biased. Fake news has been used and abused to promote and reinstate gender biased patriarchal norms and values as it has quick impact on society as well as in the public spaces. It not only affects people's perception but also fails to preserve the traditional news ecosystem based on the pillars of truth and reality.

Former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, expressed strong concern on this issue, "When women suffer this violence online, the aim is no different than offline-to control, assert power over, silence, and keep women out of the conversation or from participating and benefiting equally from that space. The rapid spread of the Internet means that effective legal and social controls of online anti-social and criminal behaviors continue to be an immense challenge. And in the age of social media and 'anywhere, anytime' mobile access, cyber violence can strike at any time, and follow its targets everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Fake news or disinformation makes it harder for people to see the truth. So how do we recognize fake news? Compared to real news, fake news tends to include information that is more surprising, upsetting or geared to trigger atrocity, anger or anxiety.<sup>3</sup> Any information that seem doubtful should be double checked. Unknown sources, unverified author, unusual numbers of endorsements (or likes) and memes that focus on major topics, sexuality and gender are other suspicious illustrations. Fake news-articles that are intentionally and verifiably false designed to manipulate people's perceptions of reality-have been used to influence politics, mess up societal cohesion, promote gender harassment or perpetuate existing gender bias and

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2 Gendered Disinformation, Fake News, and Women in Politics | Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org), accessed on Sep. 1, 2023.

3 Why fake news about coronavirus is appealing (and how to avoid it) | Stanford News, accessed on Aug. 28, 2023.

discrimination. But it has also become a method to stir up and intensify social conflict. Stories that are untrue and that intentionally mislead readers have caused growing mistrust among people. In some cases, this mistrust results in animosity, protest over imaginary events, or violence. Then why would anyone do this? People, organizations, and governments (foreign governments and even our own) use fake news for two different reasons. First, they intensify social conflict to undermine people's faith in the democratic process and people's ability to work together. Second, they distract people from crucial and pressing issues so that these issues remain unresolved. Fake news often has the aim of damaging the reputation of a famous person or entity, or making money through advertising revenue.

The Rise of Fake or False or Disinformation is not new, however it has become a hot topic since 2017. Traditionally we used to get our news from trusted sources, journalists and media outlets that are required to follow strict codes of practice. However, the internet has enabled a completely new way to publish, share and comment about information with very little regulation or editorial standards. Many people now get news from social media sites and networks and often it can be difficult to tell whether stories are credible or trust worthy. Because of overload information and a general lack of understanding about how the internet works it has also contributed to an increase in fake news or hoax stories.

Fake news and dis-information has been found especially targeting women, adolescent girls, gender and sexual minorities and this has now become so horrible that it mentally affects certain groups. This is gender based violence. Over the years, more and more celebrities and senior politicians have been harassed in public yet we are becoming powerless and helpless. Just a couple of months ago, a teenage girl took the courage to report a rape case against a famous male personality in Nepal yet it was the girl who was harassed through the social media. All kinds of fake news stories were reported about her and finally she was made to step down. Nepal does not have a national policy to counter disinformation or fake news.

However, recently, the Cyber Bureau of Nepal Police issued a stern warning against creating and posting content on online platforms that could affect investigations of crimes of serious nature. The bureau, in its statement, said that it would take action as per Section 47 of the Electronic Transactions Act, 2008 against anyone found creating and uploading photos or videos containing false or incorrect information on YouTube and TikTok, among other social media platforms. Already, a few YouTube posts have been taken down for sensationalizing issues and spreading false rumors of on-going investigations. As per one of the Senior Superintendent of Police of the bureau such cases have also been filed against several people for violating the law. The warning from the Cyber Bureau follows growing calls from various quarters of the society requesting the Nepal Police to crack down on the spread of false rumors and misinformation.

Lately, social media platforms have emerged as notorious platform in Nepal to spread misinformation. On countless occasions, videos that can affect investigations and harm people's privacy have been published in them. Ever since actor Paul Shah was taken into custody, hundreds of videos have appeared where information of all kinds—mostly unsubstantiated were made available, most of which identifying the minor in direct violation of her rights. This case can be taken as an example how fake news and disinformation victimizes the victims more and as fake and disinformation spreads rapidly, the public blames the victim instead. As a result, the victim might even withdraw the case due to fear and lack of protection. Some former and serving police officials say that the reach of social media puts immense pressure on investigating officials and even complicates the investigation for example we can take the incident of minor Nirmala Panta rape case of Kanchanpur district in 2018. In this case also, a barrage of websites and social media posts and YouTube videos added to the confusion and chaos surrounding the case, which is yet to be solved.

Considering this situation in Nepal, now the time has come to take solid steps towards regulating fake news and dis-information through all means of the Nepali media.

# **Fake News, Dis-information and Disruptive Technologies: A Pakistani Perspective on Hybrid Warfare**

Prof. Dr. Rabia Akhtar<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

A combination of traditional military tactics, cyber warfare, and information operations poses the biggest threat in the twenty-first century. This sort of warfare allows state and non-state actors to achieve their objectives through a range of techniques such as disinformation, propaganda, cyber-attacks, and irregular armies. These strategies can be used to destabilize a region, wreak havoc on an adversary's economy, and demolish an adversary's political structure. Fake news, disinformation, and propaganda combined are the most powerful instruments for conducting hybrid warfare, which is especially deadly because there is greater concealment, and such warfare can be more difficult to detect and respond to.

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Because hybrid warfare is commonly employed in conjunction with other kinds of conflict, such as economic and political pressure, distinguishing between state and non-state actors can be difficult. The complexities of hybrid warfare, as well as the concerns it poses, presents a big burden to militaries. To oppose hybrid warfare effectively, troops must develop methods that are suited to the enemy's specific tactics and objectives. They must also be able to identify and respond promptly to non-state actor threats. They also must be prepared to use a variety of measures, including traditional military force as well as diplomatic and economic pressure, to effectively oppose hybrid warfare.

In a world rife with great power rivalry, China, Russia, and the United States are set to utilize cyberwarfare, misinformation operations, political subversion, and economic warfare against each other, in addition to direct military threats. In the South Asian setting, India and Pakistan continue to deploy hybrid warfare methods against one another in order to achieve greater political goals.

### **Fake News and Manipulation of Public Opinion**

The erroneous assertion that the polio vaccination was part of a Western scheme to sterilize Muslim youngsters was one example of fake news propagated concerning the polio campaign in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> This claim propagated

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2 Declan Walsh, "Polio Cases Jump in Pakistan as Clerics Declare Vaccination an American Plot," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 15, 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/15/pakistan.topstories3>.

via multiple routes, including social media, radio shows, and religious sermons. As a result of this misinformation, some Pakistani parents refused to vaccinate their children, claiming that the vaccination might hurt or render them infertile. Despite efforts by health officials to vaccinate as many children as possible, this resulted in a return of polio in the country. The distribution of this bogus news was especially devastating in Pakistan, where there is already a high level of skepticism about Western countries and their objectives. The false idea that the polio vaccination was part of a conspiracy exacerbated these pre-existing suspicions, making it more difficult for health officials to control the disease spread. Efforts are currently underway to fight this misinformation and restore trust in the polio vaccine. Health professionals are working with communities to address vaccine concerns and misinformation, and religious leaders are being encouraged to advocate vaccination as a method to protect children's health.

In another example, the erroneous claim that the COVID-19 vaccination contained microchips that could track people's movements and activities was a challenge for the government of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> This misinformation had propagated through social media and messaging applications, making some Pakistanis unwilling to be vaccinated. The claim is false and has been disproved by health officials and experts, but it still exists even

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3 Hajira Maryam, "Pakistan: Conspiracy Theories Hamper COVID Vaccine Drive – DW – 03/12/2021," dw.com (Deutsche Welle, March 15, 2021), <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-conspiracy-theories-hamper-covid-vaccine-drive/a-56853397>.

though the spread of the disease has been managed and the initial euphoria of vaccination is over. As a result of this misinformation, Pakistan's immunization rates were lower than in certain other countries. This hindered Pakistan's efforts to restrict COVID-19 spread and protect its people from the disease when vaccinations were rolled out globally.

### **Deterrence in the Age of Social Media**

The use of social media propaganda as a tool of escalation during a crisis between India and Pakistan is highly likely and is not without precedence.<sup>4</sup> It can manifest itself in several ways:

**Escalation through social media propaganda:** Both countries can use social media platforms to broadcast information about their respective nuclear capabilities, raising tensions amid a crisis. To scare an adversary, a country may choose to release films or photographs of nuclear weapons testing or missile launches. This might potentially lead to a tit-for-tat scenario in which both states escalate their nuclear posturing, resulting in an unintentional escalation of the crisis. Both India and Pakistan have been involved in tit-for-tat nuclearism since their overt nuclearization in 1998.

Misinformation and disinformation: Misinformation and disinformation are major issues in international affairs,

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4 Michael Kugelman and Sylvia Mishra, "Disinformation and Crisis Escalation in South Asia," Stimson.org, May 26, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Disinformation-and-Crisis-Escalation-in-South-Asia.pdf>.

especially when it comes to nuclear capabilities and ambitions. Social media platforms have become a haven for the transmission of misleading information, which can have serious implications. For example, during a crisis, one government may use social media to spread false information about the other side's plans to conduct a nuclear strike. This could result in a hazardous cycle of action and reaction from the other countries. As tensions rise, both countries may adopt increasingly extreme tactics to counter perceived threats, potentially resulting in a disaster and high levels of readiness and alert. Recognizing the possible influence of misinformation and disinformation on international relations is critical. False information can swiftly spread on social media, causing misunderstandings and miscalculations with serious repercussions. As a result, it is critical to remain attentive and to verify any information before acting, especially during a crisis.

**Manipulation of Public Opinion:** Social media has the potential to sway public opinion significantly, both domestically and globally. If public sentiment shifts towards a more aggressive position during any Indo-Pak crisis, political leaders may face increased pressure to take more aggressive actions, even if such actions are not in the best interests of the nation. This emphasizes the need for appropriate social media use and the need for users to exercise caution while expressing their opinions online in a constructive and educated manner.

**Misinterpretation of signals:** Communication links between the two countries are vital especially during

such a crisis which has the potential to escalate to the nuclear domain. Social media can be used to transmit intentions or messages, however the message may be misread or ignored by the other party. This could result in a miscalculation of intentions, escalating the crisis inadvertently.

In a nuclear crisis, therefore, social media can act as a double-edged sword. While it can be used to convey intentions and avoid misunderstandings, it can also be used to exacerbate emotions and cause unexpected effects. To avoid accidental nuclear catastrophe, political leaders in both India and Pakistan must recognize the potential impact of social media and use it responsibly.

Nuclear deterrence, the strategy of threatening nuclear retaliation to dissuade a possible foe from attacking, has changed dramatically in the age of social media. Because social media has increased the speed with which information travels, leaders may have less time to make decisions in a crisis. False alarms or misinterpretations of social media posts, for example, might quickly snowball into a crisis, raising the risk of nuclear war.

Where social media has facilitated direct contact between leaders, it has also increased the potential of miscommunication and miscalculation. A misconstrued tweet or post might be regarded as a nuclear threat, resulting in a hazardous escalation. Furthermore, social media has also provided new avenues for state-led propaganda. States can now use social media to propagate propaganda and disinformation, including

misleading claims about their nuclear capabilities or intentions. This might add to the mistrust and distrust between the two hostile neighbors in any future crisis, potentially leading to a more dangerous and unstable nuclear environment.

The 44-rung escalation ladder developed by Herman Kahn<sup>5</sup> provides a framework for understanding the development of war between nations. The ladder depicts the steps that can lead to nuclear war, from diplomatic protest to full-fledged nuclear exchange. While the escalation ladder was designed for Cold War-era nuclear deterrence, it can still be useful in the age of social media. Social media platforms can instantly transmit information, opinions, and rumors concerning international crises. This can result in the quick dissemination of incendiary information, fueling tensions and escalating conflicts.

Social media also has the potential to spark new conflicts between nations. A controversial tweet or post by a political leader or government official, for example, can spark a diplomatic row or even military action. By creating a sense of public pressure or expectation, social media might make it more difficult to de-escalate situations. For example, if a leader makes a strong statement on social media, they may feel forced to take military action, even if they do not want to.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Paul K. Davis and Peter J. E. Stan, "Concepts and Models of Escalation" (Santa Monica, California: The Rand Corporation, 1984), pp. 6-7

6 "Social Media and The Military: How the Field Grade Leader Should Understand, Approach, and Control Social Media Warfare, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 12, 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1124619>

While the situation has changed since Herman Kahn established his escalation ladder, the underlying mechanisms of conflict escalation remain applicable today. Social media has the potential to intensify conflicts and create new sources of tension, which can contribute to escalation. In the age of fake news and misinformation, signaling between enemies during a crisis involves a multidimensional approach that combines transparency, consistency, trust-building, verification, and direct combat of disinformation. Nuclear adversaries like India and Pakistan must be cautious and use all available channels and resources to ensure that their signals are trustworthy and not misconstrued.<sup>7</sup>

### **Digital Proxies and Disinformation**

Hybrid warfare disinformation operations include digital fighters. They distribute misleading information on the internet and can be quite destructive. One of the most common ways digital soldiers use disinformation is to spread fake news. Fake news is information that is false but is actively disseminated to deceive others. Fake news has the capacity to spread hatred, division, and propaganda, as well as to influence public opinion. In two countries that are also the most hostile nuclear dyad, and crisis-prone, digital soldiers spreading disinformation and fake news during a crisis can influence decision-maki

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7 Adil Sultan, *Universalizing Nuclear Nonproliferation Norms a Regional Framework for the South Asian Nuclear Weapon States* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

Fake News, Dis-Information and Propaganda in International Relations and influence the crisis dynamics negatively.<sup>8</sup>

Rebecca Hersman's article titled 'Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age'<sup>9</sup> is informative to understand the dangers of deep fakes in the age of Artificial intelligence. In her essay, Rebecca discusses several issues created by hybrid threats and cross-domain deterrence. Because the tactics of attack are frequently hidden or masked, hybrid warfare makes it harder to identify and respond to threats. Cross-domain deterrence complicates issues even further because it requires a state to successfully discourage an attack in one domain (such as conventional or cyber warfare) by threatening reprisal in another domain (such as nuclear). This necessitates a high level of coordination and strategy, as well as the creation of new skills to successfully respond to hybrid threats. Rebecca contends that the introduction of new technology and weapon systems, such as hypersonic missiles and cyber weapons, complicates matters even further. Because these systems are difficult to monitor, it is difficult to determine the source of assaults and forecast their consequences.

The European Union's Disinformation Lab (EDL) produced a report in November 2020 showing a 15-year-long disinformation campaign against Pakistan orchestrated

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8 "Social Media and Conflict: Understanding Risk and Resilience," [www.mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Digital-Conflict-Research-Summary-and-Policy-Brief-073021.pdf), July 2021, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Digital-Conflict-Research-Summary-and-Policy-Brief-073021.pdf>.

9 Rebecca Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 3 (2020).



by a network of fake media outlets and NGOs based in India.<sup>10</sup> The "Indian Chronicles" campaign entailed the development of over 750 fake media outlets as well as the impersonation of EU institutions and worldwide media organizations to propagate fake news and propaganda. The Indian Chronicles network was discovered to have promoted misinformation on a variety of themes, including Pakistan's relations with China, the situation in Kashmir, and Pakistan's treatment of minorities. The campaign also targeted international institutions and personalities, such as the UN and important journalists and politicians. According to the EDL investigation, the Indian Chronicles network was tied to the Srivastava Group, an Indian organization that has already been engaged in a number of disinformation efforts.

The use of digital proxies by India to propagate disinformation and fake news about Pakistan exemplifies how technology can be used to manipulate public opinion and weaken the legitimacy of other countries. These campaigns have a high impact on public perception and can have far-reaching effects for international relations and regional stability.

Pakistan and the Challenges of Hybrid Warfare through Disruptive Tech Pakistan is not new to hybrid warfare, but it needs to establish a solid strategy to cope with the risks

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10 Bilal Kuchay, "EU NGO Report Uncovers Indian Disinformation Campaign," News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, December 11, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/11/eu-ngo-report-uncovers-a-15-year-disinformation-campaign>.

that such warfare generates. Disruptive technologies are increasingly being used in cyber warfare. Countries can destabilize their rivals and weaken popular trust in government institutions by exploiting these technologies, which can have serious ramifications for international relations and regional stability.

Pakistan needs to strategize against Indian manipulation of social media platforms which has been done by utilizing bots to amplify messages and artificially boost the reach of specific material.<sup>11</sup> Disruptive technologies also allow states to use deepfake technology to make incredibly realistic videos in which genuine individuals appear to say or do things that they never actually did. These videos have the potential to disseminate misleading information and cause confusion, mistrust, and anarchy. Many social media accounts being run by Indian handlers have been using deepfakes to generate chaos in Pakistan in the name of sectarianism in an already polarized society.

Another challenge for Pakistan is to guard against cyberattacks which has the potential to do the most damage given the attribution issues associated therein. Cyberattacks can disrupt infrastructure, such as power grids or communication networks.<sup>12</sup> This can lead to

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11 Ananya Paul, "Bots in Indian Politics," Medium (Medium, March 16, 2020), <https://medium.com/@MANIfication/bots-in-indian-politics-44367fd18eea>.

12 Dr. Hammaad Salik, Rao Ibrahim Zahid, and Babar Khan Akhunzada, "Cyber Threats to Pakistan's National Power Grid," The Geopolitics, February 13, 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/cyber-threats-to-pakistans-national-power-grid/>.

turmoil and instability, as well as the dissemination of incorrect information and propaganda. Guarding against hacking and leaks is yet another challenge that needs to be addressed by Pakistan in earnest. Adversaries and hostile parties may hack into Pakistan's systems in order to steal sensitive information or leak harmful information to the public. This will always have the potential to cause political upheaval and damage public trust in government institutions.

Disruptive technologies provide a variety of instruments and methods for disseminating misinformation and manipulating public opinion. As technology advances, these techniques are expected to become much more sophisticated, making it increasingly impossible to separate fact from fiction in the age of social media.

There are ten concise policy recommendations based on which Pakistan can chart a way forward to combat hybrid warfare waged against it using disinformation and fake news in the age of social media:

1. Improving information collection and surveillance capabilities in order to better anticipate and respond to hybrid threats.
2. Improving its security forces' ability to adapt to unconventional warfare techniques, such as cyber warfare.
3. Creating successful communication tactics in response to hostile propaganda and disinformation activities.

4. Developing a national defense strategy designed to deal with hybrid threats.
5. Strengthening regional and international collaboration to combat hybrid warfare.
6. Improving cyber defense techniques to protect vital infrastructure and information technology systems.
7. Developing early warning and fast response solutions for hybrid threats.
8. Putting in place strong legal and regulatory frameworks to safeguard the country against hybrid threats.
9. Improving its security forces' ability to respond to hybrid warfare threats.
10. Strengthening international partnerships and alliances to combat hybrid warfare.

# **Tech-Facilitated Gendered Disinformation and its Impact on Liberal Democracy**

Dr. Mallika Joseph<sup>1</sup>

No other recent event in history has shown the mirror to the world on the disparities among gender as much as COVID-19 did. While more women lost their jobs, formal and informal, the pandemic also showcased women's leadership in handling the health crisis-be it Kerala's Health Minister KK Shailaja or New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden. These examples are few and far between due to the abysmal rates of women's leadership in politics.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, of the eight regions covered worldwide, South Asia ranks among the lowest. Woefully, among other verticals such as economics, education, and health; South Asia has achieved just 25.1 percent gender parity in the political empowerment sub index. Within the region, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Nepal rank better, with women participating widely in the political process and holding the highest office in the country; Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have backslid.

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Ten years ago, the European Parliament undertook a study on the role of the new media for increased political participation in the context of women in decision-making and argued that “if women politicians were to use new media tools more effectively, this would allow them to become leaders in this field as politicians, including female, are overall not very innovative at using new media.” The study also proposed that “new media can be used in diverse ways to either directly or indirectly engage women in ‘political’ discourse” (European Parliament 2013). If the study was repeated today, it would surface mixed results.

Even as more women parliamentarians and women in leadership positions take to new media to bridge the gap between them and their constituencies and overcome marginalisation, they are waking up to the crude reality of personalised attacks and trolling. New media has become the principal vehicle in this post-truth political world characterised by disinformation, misinformation, intentional lies, conspiracy, and fake news. And women have been particularly impacted by it, given that language, in general, has been steeped in patriarchy and misogyny. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in new media through various bots, and the recent introduction of AI chatbots like the ChatGPT (known for its “tendency to confidently provide inaccurate information”), has not equalised the narrative around gender. In contrast, they have exacerbated the inequalities given that the datasets these new technologies train on are unsupervised unfiltered content already available online with all its marginalisation, patriarchy, hate speech,

misinformation, and fake news embedded within truth and fair representation. Therefore, it was of little consolation when OpenAI pulled back its AI-generated text detector in July 2023, acknowledging a “low rate of accuracy”.

The international campaign #NotTheCost, Stopping Violence against Women in Politics, flags three characteristics that distinguish violence against women in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016). First, women leaders are targeted because of their gender. Second, with their sexist and sexual content, in their very form, these threats are gendered. Finally, the principal aim is to impact the active participation of women in the political sphere.

In 2020, Amnesty International published its study on online abuse faced by women politicians in India during the 2019 General Elections. Seven million tweets over a period of three months mentioning 95 women politicians were analysed. The study found that one in seven tweets mentioning these 95 women politicians were problematic or abusive; in terms of the volume of tweets, it was roughly 10,000 problematic and abusive tweets each day targeting these 95 women politicians. One in every five problematic and abusive tweets was sexist or misogynistic. The study also revealed that women politicians in India faced nearly twice as much abuse online as women politicians in the UK or the US. The number of abusive tweets correlated with the online presence of the women politicians-the more popular they were on Twitter, the more problematic and abusive

content they received. Muslim women politicians, women from marginalised communities, and unmarried women politicians were targeted more. While women politicians across the political spectrum were targeted online, those not affiliated with the BJP faced more abuse. Hindi was used more in most problematic and abusive Twitter content-53.9% of problematic and abusive tweets were in Hindi compared to 31.4% in English.

Similarly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) study surveying 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries (Africa:18, Europe:15, Asia-Pacific: 10, Americas: 8, and Arab countries: 4) found that in addition to being women, there were a few aggravating factors being young (under 40), and drawn from a minority community, that made women parliamentarians particularly vulnerable to various types of attacks.

The Amnesty International and Inter-Parliamentary reports surface some harsh truths. Notwithstanding the measures to address abuse against women at home, workplace, and in public areas, the online space continues to be ungoverned. Women are more vulnerable online, and the violence they experience is intersectional traversing identities rooted in "race, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, abilities, age, class, income, culture, religion, and urban or rural setting" (Amnesty International 2020).

A similar analysis of the targeted vilification of women online across the world reveals a distinct pattern. Speaking to women leaders from Hungary, Brazil, India, Italy,



and Tunisia, revealed that the “gendered disinformation campaigns - followed by avalanches of hate, threats and abuse - have been deployed strategically by illiberal forces and authoritarian leaders to silence opposition and stifle calls for better governance” (Lucina Di Meco 2023a). This trend must be understood within the overall pattern of shrinking civic space by radical political parties and authoritarian governments that effectively use misinformation, fake news, and online abuse as a deliberate strategy to silence dissent.

The co-founder of #ShePersisted, Kristina Wilfore, explains, “gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership while painting women leaders as inherently untrustworthy (insinuating a woman is dishonest or not trustable is a tried and true attack), unqualified (one of the biggest barriers women face when seeking office), unintelligent (tropes about women as dumb and unfit for the job are a prominent feature of gendered disinformation, made worse with objectifying sexualised content), and unlikeable (which for women can be the death knell of their campaign)” (Kristina Wilfore 2022). On the other hand, it has made it difficult for women political candidates to set their own narratives (UN Women 2020).

The online attacks against women leaders serve two purposes. On the face of it, it aims to damage their credibility, as online content perpetuates violence in an ungoverned space where the initial misinformation is

shared, retweeted, and disseminated widely. But more fundamentally, these attacks target the value system these women foreground—be it representativeness, inclusivity, diversity, or liberal democracy. And the attacks become even more vicious and personal if the women who voice these perspectives are powerful, influential, and drawn from political, media, or activist backgrounds.

A systematic attack on particular viewpoints from women in leadership positions, particularly those from marginalised and underrepresented communities, serves to maintain the power dynamics and stifle the growth of democracy. Online misogyny and disinformation are, therefore, not just a threat to women's leadership; they are a threat to democracy itself. They should be considered early warnings of the backsliding of many hard-won women's rights (Lucina Di Meco 2023b), in addition to their impact on democracy and democratic institutions.

Further, gendered misinformation campaigns are quite successful in deterring young women from entering politics as the attacks are often not just on the women leaders but on their families; rape threats targeting their young children have become an increasing and worrying phenomenon (Lucina Di Meco 2023c). What is even more disconcerting is that this online onslaught on women in politics is oftentimes not as random or unplanned.

Though in countries such as India, measures are already in place (one-third of reserved seats for women in Gram Panchayats), and new ones are proposed (Women's

Reservation Bill for 33 per cent seats for women in Parliament and State Assemblies) for increasing the presence of women in politics and political decision making, the socio-cultural landscape is yet to evolve in accepting, much less celebrating women political leaders. South Asia had the first woman prime minister in the world. Following Srimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, the region has had many women prime ministers (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India) and presidents (Nepal, Sri Lanka and India). Yet the region is unable to provide the space for women leaders in politics, as evidenced by the 2023 Global Gender Gap report.

The online ecosystem has not been particularly kind to women, as it does not have the necessary checks to monitor and address the full spectrum of disinformation, attack, and abuse women leaders face. For instance, India does not have the appropriate legal measures for women to complain about online fake news, abuse, and smear campaigns (Eliza Mackintosh and Swati Gupta 2020). And for those who have lodged police complaints, cybercrimes largely being faceless and nameless, it has been difficult to bring in any kind of accountability. Therefore, most of these online abuses against women go unreported and underreported. Further, algorithms popularising and amplifying negative content regardless of their veracity and the advent of bots have made governance of social media extremely problematic and increasingly impossible. Far from being accountable, social media platforms have let themselves be used for mainstreaming misinformation for political or commercial benefit (Future of India Foundation 2022).

Though social platforms such as Twitter claim to have increased measures to reduce online disinformation and abuse, particularly targeting women, they are far from adequate in addressing the issue. According to the Troll Patrol India report, "Online abuse against women on this scale does not have to exist on Twitter. The company's failure to adequately meet its human rights responsibilities regarding online abuse will continue to silence women on the platform unless Twitter undertakes, with urgency, concrete steps to effectively tackle this problem" (Amnesty International 2020).

Misinformation, fake news, and online violence are a threat to democracy. The situation is further exacerbated when online platforms are used to intimate and shrink the space for dissent and free expression, particularly of women and marginalised communities. Over the past decade, many qualitative and quantitative studies have flagged the problematic ecosystem of online abuse facilitated by a lack of governance, accountability, and unchecked technological algorithms and bots. With the advent of advanced AI, such as ChatGPT, the onus should be on social media platforms to disallow their misuse.

Many states have stringent regulations against gender-based violence. These need to be updated to include online disinformation, fake news, and problematic and abusive content targeting women. Further, given that the internet is not a domain that the government has authority over, governments should work in partnership with the private sector, particularly those that are engaged in big data, to ensure that the online space is

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recovered and remains a safe space devoid of misogyny, disinformation, deep fake, and abuse.

Women have been reticent in calling out on the incessant online violence. Most women leaders who face it opt to remain silent because they do not wish to fuel it further. Ignoring malicious tweets has ensured they die down. However, unless misogyny is acknowledged and called out, it cannot be addressed. Governments must make this possible by providing the appropriate legal framework within which this can be addressed.

The participation of women in politics is crucial for true democracy. Decades of work on gendering the political landscape and empowering women are on the brink of getting unravelled because of the toxic online environment where technology has made it easier to perpetuate deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny online, literally pushing women off the political bandwagon. However, emerging technologies also offer the opportunity to strengthen democracy by equalising access and participation. The state and society, along with the private sector, should be equally invested in developing the norms for an online ecosystem that is inclusive, democratic, and participatory. It is doable.

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# **Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda: Cutting Across Fields Beyond Politics**

Avishka Ashok<sup>1</sup>

## **Idea of disinformation and fake news in India**

In August 2022, the United Nations published a report titled 'Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms'<sup>2</sup> highlighting the challenges posed by disinformation and fake news. Although it is considered to be difficult to define the term 'disinformation' due to its ubiquitous understanding and approaches, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has used the term to represent "false or misleading content that can cause specific harm, irrespective of motivations, awareness or behaviours."<sup>3</sup>

Authors Julie Posetti and Alice Matthews, in their paper, 'A short guide to the history of 'fake news' and disinformation' note that the concept has existed for the greater part of the human civilization. However, the act

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2 "Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms 2022", United Nations General Assembly Seventy-seventh session, August 2022, N2245924.pdf (un.org)

3 Ibid.



of spreading misinformation increased substantially with the advent of the printing press in 1493.<sup>4</sup> Since its origin, the idea of fake news has transgressed extensively, affecting societies on a macro and micro stage.

Similar to the rest of the world, the idea of fake news is not entirely foreign in the Indian culture. In Indian mythology, Valmiki Ramayana states that the character of *Shurpanaka* attempts to incriminate *Sita* while narrating her ordeal to her brother *Khara*.<sup>5</sup> In a more political and factual sense, ancient Indian civilizations such as the Nanda empire, Maurya empire, Satvahana empire, Chola dynasty, and others, misinformation was used a political tool to win over territories and establish dominance. The Mughal Empire's dawn in India and the forthcoming wars were fought based on intelligence provided by spies on the other rulers in the Indus valley civilization; which was easily manipulated.<sup>6</sup> During the independence movement, disinformation spread across the Indian subcontinent and impacted the British rule negatively. For example, in 1897, Indian soldiers feared disrespecting their religion as a rumour spread across the ranks regarding the use of cows and pigs in the making

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4 Posetti, Julie, and Alice Matthews. "A short guide to the history of 'fake news' and disinformation." International Center for Journalists 7, no. 2018 (2018): 2018-07.

5 Desiraju Hanumanta Rao & K. M. K. Murthy. "Book III : Aranya Kanda - The Forest Trek Chapter [Sarga] 19." Valmiki Ramayana, 2002, [https://valmikiramayan.net/utf8/aranya/sarga19/aranya\\_19\\_frame.htm](https://valmikiramayan.net/utf8/aranya/sarga19/aranya_19_frame.htm)

6 Parpia, Shaha. "Mughal Hunting Grounds: Landscape Manipulation And 'Garden' Association." Garden History 44, no. 2 (2016): 171-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44987900>.

of the rifles' rounds<sup>7</sup>; the animals were considered holy in the Hindu and Muslim religion respectively. The information eventually led to an uprising against the British in the same year and is considered to be the beginning of the independence movement in the region.

However in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concept of disinformation has caught the attention of state institutions. The modern idea of fake news became more threatening when it was complimented by two greatest inventions of our times: fast and accessible internet and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

India has become one of the biggest global markets for smartphones; owing not just to the size of the Indian population but also the extremely cheap internet rates. In 2022, 30 million smartphones were shipped across the country. <sup>8</sup> In 2016, internet usage and smartphone ownership had increased by almost six percent between 2013 and 2015 and continued to increase steadily since 2014. Yet, it lagged behind most other emerging economies.<sup>9</sup> However, by 2016 Instagram had become extremely well used amongst users aged between 16 and 25, Facebook was well used by users aged 20 and 40; but WhatsApp was used by all age groups, including

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7 Mike Dash. "Pass it on: The Secret that Preceded the Indian Rebellion of 1857." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 24 May 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/pass-it-on-the-secret-that-preceded-the-indian-rebellion-of-1857-105066360/>

8 Shangliao Sun. "Smartphone market in India - statistics & facts." *Statista*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.statista.com/topics/4600/smartphone-market-in-india/#topicOverview>

9 Ibid

a very small minority within the elderly community. Between October 2014 and January 2021, the total number of WhatsApp users increased from 70 million to 530 million.<sup>10</sup>

In the present age, the internet is considered to be the biggest enabler of dis-information and impacts almost every Indian citizen in the country, regardless of the religious background, educational qualification, profession and other existing criterion. However, understanding the demography of the Indian users helps in understanding the different modes through which misinformation is spread and the reach it has in the society.

### **Case Study I: Political and religious disinformation and fake news**

In 2013, a fake video circulated the Indian social media displaying the lynching of two men from the majority Hindu community by individuals from the minority Muslim community. The video, however, was a propaganda clip originating in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the lack of factual knowledge, the incessant sharing of the clips led to one of the deadliest communal riots in over a decade in

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10 "Number of WhatsApp Users in India." Dazeinfo, 19 May 2020, <https://dazeinfo.com/2020/05/19/number-of-whatsapp-users-in-india-graphfarm/#:~:text=In%20November%202016%2C%20India%20emerged%20as%20the%20biggest,India%20for%20the%20first%20time%20since%20its%20launch>.

11 Rajesh Ahuja. "Muzaffarnagar riots: fake video spreads hate on social media." Hindustan Times, 10 September 2013, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/muzaffarnagar-riots-fake-video-spreads-hate-on-social-media/story-WEOKBAcCOQcRb7X9W-b28qL.html>

Muzaffarnagar, India. In 2020, a 44 second clip of a BJP leader appealing for votes against the ruling AAP party in Delhi made rounds on WhatsApp. This was the first time deep-fakes were used in a campaign to manipulate the masses before an election.<sup>12</sup>

However, political manipulation is used by actors within and outside the state institutions. India's dropping rank on the World Press Freedom Index from 136<sup>th</sup> in 2017 to 150<sup>th</sup> in 2022 is a clear giveaway of the worsening standards of journalism in the country.<sup>13</sup>

In the above mentioned cases of fake video clips, the factors defining the fake from the natural are difficult to determine, even for a well-read individual. When such videos are circulated to a vast population with limited knowledge of the possible manipulations available to mankind, it is convenient to form a perspective that is completely based out of lies and non-factual data.

### **Case Study II: Fake news and disinformation in the COVID-19 pandemic**

In 2020, the world was beginning to catch up with the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. In India, after an initial

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12 Niles Christopher. "We've Just Seen the First Use of Deepfakes in an Indian Election Campaign." VICE, 18 February 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgedjb/the-first-use-of-deepfakes-in-indian-election-by-bjp>

13 "World Press Freedom Index 2022: India slips 8 places to 150th position." Times of India, 3 May 2022, [http://timesofindia.india-times.com/articleshow/91291820.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.india-times.com/articleshow/91291820.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

lull of about three months, economic activities and other educational institutions began digitizing their operations. Even though the opportunities for dissemination of disinformation is wider on the internet due to the lack of efficient and fast fact-checking mechanisms, there was a significant spillage into the print media during the pandemic. The data revealed by the National Crime Records Bureau in 2021 reported a 214 percent increase in the number of cases of fake news during the pandemic year.<sup>14</sup> Alongside dealing with a fairly new virus, India was forced to battle unreliable sources of information, news and research which often overpowered the scanty fact-based scientific information on the virus available on the internet.<sup>15</sup>

There was a significant increase in the average screen time of each individual in an Indian household as professionals began remote working while children started attending lectures from home. Disinformation and fake news was conveniently delivered to users who now had more access to the internet. The online media was flushing out new and unchecked information on the virus, its origin, its impact of the human health system, the vaccines and its possible negative impact on the human body, other home remedies to cure those affected by the virus and more.

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14 Apurva Vishwanath. "NCRB data: 214% rise in cases relating to fake news, rumours." The Indian Express, 16 September 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/214-rise-in-cases-relating-to-fake-news-rumours-7511534/>

15 Shruti Menon. "Coronavirus: The human cost of fake news in India." BBC, 1 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53165436>

For example, during the first wave in Wuhan, videos surfaced on Instagram showing Chinese citizens fainting in public spaces. Although research found that the SARS-Cov-2 can travel six feet in air, the news was twisted to inform people of its airborne transmission.<sup>16</sup> In May 2021, a Member of the UP Legislative Assembly (MLA) encouraged a gathering to consume cow urine to develop a natural immunity from the coronavirus.<sup>17</sup>

The pandemic once again redefined the religious insecurities within the country. In April 2020, the outbreak of a cluster of cases from the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic group in Delhi, led to a sharp increase in allegations against the Muslim community who were accused of intentionally spreading the virus. Around the same time, a video clip of an individual from the minority community spitting into food was shared on WhatsApp<sup>18</sup>, encouraging citizens to boycott Muslim business. The fake video and other disinformation suggesting restriction against non-vegetarian diet during the pandemic resulted in a loss of INR 130 billion rupees in the poultry industry, which is

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16 Prabhash K Dutta. "Covid-19: How far can coronavirus travel in air to infect a person?" India Today, 7 May 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-19-how-far-can-coronavirus-travel-in-air-to-infect-a-person-1799831-2021-05-07>

17 Express Web Desk. "BJP lawmaker's Covid prescription: Drink cow urine daily on empty stomach." The Indian Express, 9 May 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-mla-surendra-singh-cow-urine-covid-7307827/>

18 Sagar Singh Bisht. "'Thook Jihad'decoded: Why Muslims Spit on food" True News India, 25 November 2011, <https://truenewsindia.com/thook-jihad-why-muslims-spit-on-food/>

dominated by the Muslim community.<sup>19</sup>

### **Case Study III: Social and economic cohesion and fake news.**

In 2020, rumours about Northeast Indians being targeted in Bangalore city was spread soon after the COVID-19 cases were reported. Multiple articles were shared within a day, leading to thousands of people leaving the city.<sup>20</sup> In 2012, a similar rumour spread in Bangalore, and over 6,000 people out of the 2.5 lakh populace working in the city, went back home.<sup>21</sup> Despite the community being a minority in the city, they take up a significant part of the workforce.

In a country as vast as India, disinformation impacts the society in two ways, it either unites the community as a whole, like the Northeast Indian community who left the city in groups from all economic classes, or divides the social cohesion. One example is of a video that was shared widely of a sexual assault by a person from one community towards a woman from a particular

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19 Shruti Menon. "Coronavirus: The human cost of fake news in India." BBC, 1 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53165436>

20 "Northeasterners continue to face racist attacks in Bangalore." Firstpost, 27 March 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/northeasterners-continue-to-face-racist-attacks-in-bangalore-8416251.html>

21 Sharath S. Srivatsa and Deepa Kurup. "After rumours, northeast people flee Bangalore." The Hindu, 16 August 2012, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/after-rumours-northeast-people-flee-bangalore/article3776549.ece>

community. The fact checkers later found that the video wrongly informed the people about the ethnic background of the individuals involved with the intention to spread hate and violence against one specific community.

### **The actors aiding disinformation and fake news**

Besides the common contributors such as the fake content creators and the publishing entities who receive economic remunerations, there are multiple actors that facilitate the continuation of disinformation and fake news.

Political institutions play the role of a significant actor in this industry. First, let's look at political actors such as parties who encourage disinformation prior to an election for electoral gains. Before the 2019 general elections, there was a sudden surge in articles that suggested that then leader of the Congress Party was richer than Queen Elizabeth. It was later debunked to be misleading.

There were also videos shared which tried to portray that PM Modi had lied about his educational qualifications but the video in question was not the complete version of the interview. Modi went on to clarify that he completed his higher qualifications through external exams after formally leaving school.<sup>22</sup>

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22 "India election 2019: The debunked fake news that keeps coming back." BBC, 19 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47878178>



A new trend nowadays is also the political parties having their own IT cells to influence trends on social media.

Moving away from digitized fake news, the state is one of the biggest actors who aid in printing disinformation in textbooks. Union Home Minister addressed the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and said: "Putting together our history, embellishing it and rewriting it is the responsibility of the country, its people and historians."<sup>23</sup> However, such perspectives don't just change the opinions of people, it is completely altering and removing the history that once existed. There is an entire new generation which will grow up learning a completely different history than the rest of us. Such actions will once again impact the social cohesion as people began seeing the "other" in a united community.

The most influential actor, however, is the role of science and technology. Fake news content creators are now assisted by smart technology, making it increasingly difficult for fact checkers to identify the correct from the fake information. The use of photoshop, and other applications substantiates the fake news and makes people believe the propaganda served to them.

### **Reasons why India should be worried**

The Indian smartphone user base has a lot of potential to grow since many people still do not have internet

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23 Christophe Jaffrelot, Pradyumna Jairam. "Will the revised History of India have an impact on future generations?" The Indian Express, Tamil issue, 1 December 2019, <https://tamil.indianexpress.com/opinion/bjp-has-been-effective-in-transmitting-its-version-of-indian-history-to-next-generation-of-learners/>

subscription. The 5G smartphone shipments in the first quarter of 2023 surged by 14 percent year-on-year.<sup>24</sup> However, the initiative by the central government to digitize the economy and availability of cheap internet plans by private sector firms such as Reliance Jio, has resulted in a significant increase. The smartphone user base in India is predicted to cross 75 percent by 2025. In 2019, there was a 15% increase in smartphone users in India. This number crossed 500 million. This means that there is a larger audience to reach out to.<sup>25</sup>

India will have to work on creating a digitally literate population. The digital divide also includes education levels and income. In 2016, only nine percent of the population with lower education levels were online and accessing the internet, as compared with 38 percent who had higher education levels.<sup>26</sup>

However, with the expected increase in users of smartphones and internet services, the scope for spreading disinformation is higher and must be contained effectively.

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24 "India's 5G smartphone shipments grow by 14% in Q1 2023: Report." Free Press Journal, 5 May 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-in/money/topstories/indias-5g-smartphone-shipments-grow-by-14-in-q1-2023-report/ar-AA1aMz90>

25 IANS. "Over 50 crore Indians now use smartphones, 77% on Internet." The Hindu, 30 January 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/gadgets/over-50-crore-indians-now-use-smartphones-77-on-internet/article30691614.ece>

26 Venkat Ananth. "Only 17% Indians own smartphones: survey." Live Mint, 23 February 2016, <https://www.livemint.com/Consumer/yT14OgtSC7dyywWSynWOKN/Only-17-Indians-own-smartphones-survey.html>

# **Fake News and Propaganda in the Maldives**

Aanifa Hussain Siraj and Khaathima Yoosuf<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction:**

We are all aware that spreading disinformation and fake news is a global problem, and it is evident in the South Asian region as well. As today's modern world is greatly influenced by the media, it is important to consider the causes and effects of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda that keeps spreading throughout the community. In this paper, emphasis will be from a Maldives perspective on how the Maldives as a nation and its current circumstances have been impacted by the transmission of false information and propaganda.

## **What is fake news, dis-information and propaganda?**

Fake news is most frequently and simply described as incorrect or misleading material that is presented as news. A common goal of fake news is to harm someone or something's reputation or to profit through advertising. These are fabricated articles that are circulated on purpose to mislead readers or draw large numbers of

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<sup>1</sup> Authors are associated with the 'Dhiyares News Media, in the Maldives.

users to a certain website. In other words, deliberate lies are spread online, even when the author is aware that they are fabrications.<sup>2</sup>

It might also be stories that, while not entirely true, have some kernels of reality. This is due to the fact that those who write them, such as journalists or bloggers, may not verify all the facts before the article is published or they may exaggerate some of them.<sup>3</sup>

Disinformation is quite similar to false news. Disinformation, not to be confused with misinformation, is incorrect or misleading information that is spread to influence others. It was around long before the internet and comes in a variety of forms. No matter if one resides in an autocratic or democratic state, all nations suffer with the propagation of false information online. It frequently involves contentious political issues, such as immigration, immunization, or laws governing gender, sexual orientation, racism, and other factors.<sup>4</sup>

An agenda or point of view is promoted through propaganda. Propaganda can have a variety of objectives, but frequent ones include forming people's beliefs, persuading them to back a certain cause or political candidate, or motivating them to act in a certain way.<sup>5</sup>

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2 <https://www.ionos.com/digitalguide/online-marketing/social-media/what-is-fake-news/>

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/38906931>

4 <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/what-is-disinformation-how-to-stop-it>

5 <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-does-propaganda-work-5224974>

## **Maldivian Perspective**

Many Maldivian media outlets deliberately mislead the people by disseminating disinformation. Most often, this is done for political or ideological reasons.

False information and news stories are also circulated to malign a certain person, usually a politician or even the government. Some media outlets frequently take quotes out of context to present public figures in particular light.

Looking back, there were issues with how some websites propagandized against the Maldivian opposition during the previous 2018 presidential elections. These unsettling conjectures have some foundation because it was clear that the media was being abused to sway public opinion as soon as the Maldives was placed under a state of emergency in early February 2018. Despite the state of chaos news articles titled "Life is Normal Here on the Sunny Side of Life" were published on websites. In an effort to draw attention away from the situation in the nation, the site's authors attempted to depict the country as peaceful despite the 45-day state of emergency that had been declared.<sup>6</sup>

Using DNS analytics, a preliminary investigation into how various news websites functioned was conducted. It made known the existence of a Maldives-based network for all these news and views.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://maldivesvoice.com/2021/12/11/exploit-of-media-its-influence-to-mobilize-hatred-for-mdp-led-govt/>

The study's research findings showed that several of these websites were fairly new. Some organizations were started a year before the 2018 presidential election and ceased to exist after that.

The same case was experienced in the COVID-19 wave. When COVID-19 first began to spread in the year 2020, the Maldives government held daily press conferences, a lot of new, never-before-seen media outlets appeared out of nowhere, and they spun the websites with online news about how well the government was managing the situation. Majority of these news organizations have vanished and are no longer existent. Many people asserted that they were "media" that was funded by the government and used to spread false information to the populace to support it.<sup>7</sup>

Sponsorship contributed to the propagation of false information. For instance, when looking at the Maldives, the majority of mainstream media outlets are backed by government-owned companies, which, result in information withholding. The media will not discuss any improper behavior by its sponsors. So, some media outlets are not as independent as they might appear as they receive funding to propagandize.

In order to gain views, the majority of Maldivian media outlets propagate false information, or to advance someone's political career or represent someone in a certain light, particularly in politics.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://en.sun.mv/58871>

The "India out" campaign was launched by the alliance of the Maldives' opposition political parties, PPM and PNC. According to the campaign's organizers, it was against Indian military's presence on Maldivian soil. They organized demonstrations, marches, and poster campaigns all around the country. However, this campaign has been put on hold as a result of a presidential decree declaring it to be a national security threat. Meanwhile, the government and ruling party supporters claim that the campaign is a nationalistic propaganda spread by the opposition in order to turn people against the government and gain political advantage. In August 2022, India's Ministry of External Affairs in a special briefing said that the "India Out" campaign in the Maldives was based on "misinformation and false propaganda"<sup>8</sup>

The Sunday Guardian released articles saying, "the propaganda campaign" aimed at India appears to be an early manifestation of the election strategy of the Opposition coalition and seeks to lay the groundwork for the next presidential election.<sup>9</sup>

However, it also needs to be underscored that lack of proper and correct information from the side of government was also one of the reasons this campaign grew nationwide.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://themaldivesjournal.com/39106>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/india-out-campaign-in-maldives-based-on-misinformation-and-false-propaganda-mea-article-93301824>

Because the government didn't make the necessary disclosures, the opposition asserted that there are [indeed] Indian military personnel and weaponry present in the Maldives and that the government of the Maldives had entered into agreements that undermine the nation's independence.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the government denies all of these allegations, they did not provide sufficient evidence when people requested it under the right to information laws.<sup>11</sup> The Maldivian government filed a lawsuit and is doing everything in its power to withhold the data after the information commissioner ordered the disclosure of the number of Indian military personnel present in the Maldives.<sup>12</sup>

In 2018, President Ibrahim Mohamed Salih assumed office, with his party securing a supermajority in the parliament. While his government has faced accusations of corruption and mismanagement, the opposition remains weak. This political landscape has given rise to a concerning decline in media freedom in the Maldives.<sup>13</sup> Although media sometimes deliberately spread fake news and dis-information, most of the spread comes with influence of power-hungry people themselves. State-owned enterprises, such as the State Electric Company (STELCO), Maldives Water and Sewerage Company, and

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10 <https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/indiaout-maldives-opposition-expanding-links-china>

11 <https://themaldivesreport.com/360/>

12 <https://themaldivesjournal.com/31178>

13 <https://themaldivesreport.com/407/>



Maldives Transport and Construction Company, provide substantial funding to media outlets as stated before in this paper. For example, STELCO spends MVR 600,000 on 30 different media outlets every month.<sup>14</sup> However, these enterprises do not aim to promote their services through advertising, but rather to control media coverage.

Maldives has thus dropped 15 spots in the latest press freedom index.

The media's reliance on government money undercuts its obligation to hold the people in power accountable. Important concerns are frequently disregarded, and media coverage frequently

supports the official line. Additionally, human rights violations in prisons go unreported, keeping the public in the dark.<sup>15</sup>

The younger generation is losing trust in the media as a result of fake news and deceptive content. Disinformation is eroding audience and media trust since no one can tell today what information is to be believed and what not to believe. Due to state sponsorship through advertisements, nexus between media owners and politicians – the cycle of propaganda and disinformation continues.

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14 <https://themaldivesjournal.com/49851>

15 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/maldives-investigate-death-in-custody-and-allegations-of-torture-on-individuals-in-custody/>

Most people naturally assume that what they see is accurate, but if individuals need to re-confirm what they see or read in the media, the younger generation will naturally lose trust in the various media outlets relying instead on what their friends or family say about a given incident or topic.

Therefore, fake news and propaganda have become pervasive issues in many countries around the world, and the Maldives is no exception. With the rise of social media and the internet, it has become easier for individuals and organizations to spread false information to a large number of people, often with the intent of influencing public opinion or achieving a certain goal.

Fake news and propaganda in Maldives are often used to manipulate public opinion and influence political decisions. This is particularly evident during election campaigns, during which political parties and candidates use social media to spread false information about their opponents, their policies, and their personal lives. The aim is to create a negative image of the opponent and to sway voters.

Unfortunately, this tactic is often successful, as many people are quick to believe and share information that aligns with their pre-conceived beliefs or biases.

Fake news and propaganda in Maldives have also been used to fuel ethnic and religious tensions. In recent years, there have been instances where false information has been spread about certain ethnic or religious groups,

leading to discrimination and violence. This is a dangerous trend that can have long-lasting consequences for the social fabric of the country.

The impact of fake news and propaganda is not limited to politics and social harmony. It also affects the economy, as false information about businesses and products can lead to a decline in consumer confidence and a loss of revenue. In addition, it can damage the reputation of the country in the eyes of foreign investors and tourists, who may be hesitant to invest or visit a country that is perceived as unstable or unreliable.

In a survey conducted by the Maldives Journalist Association in 2019, nearly 80 percent of young people in the country said that they had encountered fake news on social media. This highlights the urgent need for greater media literacy and critical thinking skills among young people in the Maldives.

To address the issue of fake news and propaganda in the Maldives, young people have taken various initiatives. For example, some young people have established fact-checking websites and social media accounts to verify the accuracy of news stories. Others have launched social media campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of fake news and to promote media literacy among their peers.

In addition, civil society organizations have also taken steps to address the issue of fake news and propaganda. For example, the Maldives Journalist Association has

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launched a campaign to promote media literacy and to educate the public about the dangers of fake news.

Due to the negative effects fake news has on society, it is everyone's duty to stop it from spreading. It is crucial to determine which of your information sources are disseminating accurate information, false information, or are maliciously trying to mislead you.

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- 15 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/maldives-investigate-death-in-custody-and-allegations-of-torture-on-individuals-in-custody/>

# **Disinformation and New Technology: Responsibilities and Challenges for South Asia**

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## **Introduction**

In South Asia's complex digital security landscape, disinformation, propaganda and 'fake news' have emerged as new challenges for the region's democracies. While the significant expansion of the internet and the consequent interconnectedness have offered its inhabitants new opportunities for learning, innovation and progress, threat actors with diverse motivations - state and non-state actors alike - have misused the same opportunities to launch propaganda operations by engaging in disinformation and 'fake news'. These disinformation tactics are insidious, vicarious, and well-calculated, designed to push fear over facts, thereby exploiting the existing political and socio-economic fault lines in South Asian societies.

This paper does a deep dive into this challenge by looking at the factors driving disinformation in South Asia and the related technological dynamics. It is broadly divided

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into three parts. The first part looks at the unique context of South Asia, which has allowed disinformation to thrive. The second part closely examines emerging technologies' role in enabling disinformation spread. The third part discusses how India has tackled this menace by addressing its multiple dimensions. Finally, the paper offers some broad suggestions for think-tanks and civil society organisations to advance efforts to combat disinformation.

## **Disinformation in South Asia**

While disinformation operates in multiple contexts, for the purpose of this paper, it is defined as the deliberate spread of false or misleading information, often to deceive, mislead, or manipulate the recipients of the information. It involves disseminating fabricated or distorted facts, data, or narratives designed to influence public opinion, or shape perceptions. Disinformation can take various forms, including 'fake news' articles, doctored images or videos, distorted social media posts, or misleading propaganda campaigns. According to the United Nations, disinformation can affect a broad range of human rights, undermining responses to public policies or amplifying tensions in times of emergency or armed conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding the context in which propaganda and disinformation are thriving is essential. South Asia, as a region, has one of the world's largest internet user base,

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2 "Countering Disinformation," United Nations, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation>.

with approximately 1 billion users.<sup>3</sup> They are digitally savvy and have shown excellent skills in adapting and leveraging information technology for their benefit. However, these are also first-generation internet users with a limited understanding of cyber security or digital issues. They have poor digital skills and lack awareness about cyber hygiene habits - the dos and don'ts on the internet, to protect themselves in cyberspace.<sup>4</sup> This lack of awareness makes them vulnerable and easy prey for disinformation, propaganda and 'fake news'.

Another critical dimension of this problem is that internet access and consumption in South Asia are primarily through smartphones, unlike in other parts of the world. The low cost of devices and the cheaper mobile data rates have driven this trend. For instance, the average cost of 1 GB of mobile data in India is approximately US\$ 0.17, in Pakistan US\$ 0.36 and in Sri Lanka, about US\$ 0.27.<sup>5</sup> This has allowed more and more people to be part of the digital revolution. The Covid-19 pandemic has only reinforced these trends. During the repeated lockdowns, with most of the segments of the population staying at home, many spent extended time over

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3 "Country Comparisons – Internet users," The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/internet-users/country-comparison>.

4 Priyanka Chaturvedi, Sameer Patil and Aradhana Gupta, "Nurturing Responsible Young Netizens through Digital Civics," Observer Research Foundation, Accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/nurturing-responsible-young-netizens-through-digital-civics/>.

5 "Worldwide mobile data pricing 2022," Cable.co.uk, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/>.



phones. While mobile phones offered them a chance to connect with the outside world, it also made the spread of disinformation much more rapid and acute. Thirdly, the mainstream media in the region, as in other parts of the world, is facing a credibility crisis, accentuated by the lack of sufficient financial sustenance.<sup>6</sup> As a result, media houses are spending less on ground reporting than studio debates. This has allowed vested interests and bad actors to take control of the narrative through disinformation and propaganda.

These factors pose unique challenges when it comes to disinformation and fake news in South Asia.

As with any other region, mal, dis, and mis-information have thrived in South Asia for centuries. Without proper communication facilities, these used to get much traction among the communities, particularly in the remotest parts of the region. The rapid development of digital technologies has played a vital role in disseminating this kind of content-by spreading faster and with greater reach. Again, the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified this problem. During the pandemic, there were several rumours and conspiracy theories about the coronavirus' origins and spread, disinformation about vaccines' effectiveness, and fake remedies or herbal cures. In a sense, this was the epidemic and infodemic the world was unprepared for.

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6 Uday Rana, "South Asia's media: Battling a crisis of rising proportions within a crisis," Asia Democracy Chronicles, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://adnchronicles.org/2021/01/29/south-asias-media-battling-a-crisis-of-rising-proportions-within-a-crisis/>.

In the context of South Asia, various bad actors with varied motives pushing disinformation exist. These include actors driven by political ideologies and religious motivations (including alt-right wing and far-leftist elements), geopolitical rivals interested in discrediting their adversaries, and actors driven by purely commercial considerations, such as the big tech platforms, that thrive on disinformation and propaganda. In some cases, ruling establishments have also extracted political benefits from disinformation. Each of these has chosen specific circumstances and contexts to push disinformation and propaganda. The trend, however, suggests that disinformation is particularly present around elections and political issues. The unique nature of democratic systems in South Asia makes them a perfect thriving environment for 'fake news' and 'rumour mongering'. However, disinformation is gradually spreading to an ever-increasing number of areas, such as health, the environment, public security and immigration. Two instances from India comprehensively explain the implications of disinformation and rumours in terms of fear, anxiety and law and order issues.

In August 2012, rumours about a series of text messages that threatened retribution for ethnic violence in the north-eastern state of Assam caused thousands of Assamese people to flee from several Indian cities, including Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Hyderabad.<sup>7</sup> Some

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7 Katie Hunt and Sumnima Udas, "India looks to Pakistan for answers after texts trigger mass panic," CNN, August 21, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/21/world/asia/india-panic-pakistan/index.html>.

unscrupulous social media users and bloggers based in Pakistan had reportedly sent these hate-filled text messages.<sup>8</sup> With their explicit threat of violence, these messages were enough to spark panic and the exodus of the Assamese people. Similarly, in 2018, a series of violent incidents - mob lynchings - occurred when rumours of or suspicion of child-lifting circulated on social media platforms. These incidents were reported mainly from Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. According to IndiaSpend analysis, which tracked these incidents, between 2017 and 2019, 77 incidents were reported in which 48 people across 18 states lost their lives.<sup>9</sup>

So this is the context in which disinformation, 'fake news', and propaganda have thrived in South Asia.

## **Emerging Technologies**

Rapidly advancing technologies are making the task of countering disinformation complicated. While the internet and cyberspace have played a critical role in spreading disinformation and propaganda, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled 'deepfake' technologies pose the most significant challenges. Deepfakes are synthetic or artificial media generated using deep learning algorithms. They can be used to

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8 PTI, "North-East exodus: India to share evidence of morphed pictures with Pakistan," India Today, August 28, 2012, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/north-east-exodus-india-to-share-evidence-with-pakistan-113759-2012-08-20>.

9 "Child Lifting Rumours: Mob Violence in India," IndiaSpend, accessed May 11, 2023, <http://bit.ly/attacks-childlifting>.

create realistic-looking images or videos. And since they are so realistic, deepfakes can obscure general internet users' understanding of truth in multiple ways.

This technology has progressed for a decade and is already becoming accessible to the tech community. Eventually, it will make its way to the hands of ordinary citizens and internet users. It is no wonder that threat actors have deployed the technology to generate disinformation and cause chaos. For instance, during the early phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, pro-Russia elements produced and circulated a deepfake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speech.<sup>10</sup> In the minute-long video, the president appeared to direct the Ukrainian military personnel to lay down their arms and surrender to the invading Russian military.<sup>11</sup> This deepfake was intended to spread confusion and uncertainties around military operations, giving an advantage to Russian forces.

However, such deepfakes have a utility not only during times of conflict, but they can also be a perfect instrument for hybrid warfare or grey zone tactics, where again, the aim is to push propaganda and 'fake news'. These threat actors can leverage deepfakes to wreak havoc in an already polarised society or a community. In the coming

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10 The Telegraph (@telegraph), "Deepfake video of Volodymyr Zelenskyy surrendering surfaces on social media," YouTube video, March 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X17yrEV5sl4>.

11 Bobby Allyn, "Deepfake video of Zelenskyy could be 'tip of the iceberg' in info war, experts warn," NPR, March 16, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/16/1087062648/deepfake-video-zelenskyy-experts-war-manipulation-ukraine-russia>.

times, threat actors will continue experimenting with machine learning and AI to create content that will be even more difficult to distinguish from genuine content.<sup>12</sup>

Another emerging technology that is already causing volatility is AI-generated text tools. Advances in natural language processing and machine learning have made it possible to generate coherent and convincing text that appears to be written by humans. This technology can be used to create fake news stories or manipulate online discussions. This has made disinformation cheaper and easier to produce for an even larger number of conspiracy theorists and spreaders of disinformation. ChatGPT is just one of the examples of such tools available. One of the most significant leaps of AI in recent times, the tool cannot do its own thinking but is trained to generate text in a conversational and convincing style in a matter of seconds, without disclosing its source unless specifically asked for.<sup>13</sup> Ordinary internet users have used it to generate content for innumerable purposes. However, mostly this content is unreliable and fake. Therefore, AI researchers have already warned that ChatGPT can become a major tool for disinformation.

Social media has played a crucial enabling role in the spread of disinformation.

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12 Adam Satariano and Paul Mozur, "The People Onscreen Are Fake. The Disinformation Is Real.," The New York Times, February 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/technology/artificial-intelligence-training-deepfake.html>.

13 David Hickton, "ChatGPT could transform society — and its risks require quick regulation," The Hill, January 19, 2023, <https://the-hill.com/opinion/technology/3812597-chatgpt-could-transform-society-and-its-risks-require-quick-regulation/>.

Social media bots, for instance, are automated accounts designed to mimic human behaviour on social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> They are used to spread disinformation, amplify certain messages, and manipulate online discussions. Moreover, given that these bots are online 24/7, 365 days a year, they can share information at any time, significantly increasing the potential for misleading content to go viral. Coupled with their ability to communicate with one another over large geographical distances, bots have the potential to facilitate truly global disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

Then there are algorithms deployed for user engagement by tailoring news and social media content to align with their interests. These algorithms identify the type of content users usually engage with and ensure they see similar kinds of content moving forward. However, a flaw of these algorithms is that they often cannot differentiate between accurate information and something false. So, when a piece of misleading content proves popular, social media algorithms do not hesitate to promote them to their users, particularly if the 'story' or 'post' aligns with the type of content a user typically engages with. This is how social media algorithms have become 'echo chambers', reinforcing already established positions.

This breakneck speed of technological advancement combines with the inability of the governments in the region to respond to these changes. There have been

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14 "Social Media Bots Overview," Department of Homeland Security, accessed May 11, 2023, [https://niccs.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ncsam\\_socialmediabotsoverview\\_508.pdf](https://niccs.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ncsam_socialmediabotsoverview_508.pdf).

some initiatives, but most governments are playing catch-up with the technologies. Hence, in that sense, we are witnessing a perfect storm of technological advancement, a lax regulatory environment, a polarised society and vested interests or bad actors pushing their agenda and narrative.

This is getting complicated by the travails of the American 'Big Tech' and the broader tech industry itself. As the content uploaded on social media platforms multiplies in quantity, they have found it challenging to regulate and moderate. This problem is amplified by the series of job cuts in the tech and social media industry, undermining the guardrails against such content. This has direct implications for disinformation and propaganda. Threat actors have taken advantage of this to push their controversial narratives and alternative facts. For instance, Twitter has become a ripe platform for disinformation since billionaire Elon Musk's takeover in late 2022. Many experts have attributed this rise to Musk's decision to discard the platform's online safety division.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, people and tech companies are now relying on third-party fact-checkers, who, with whatever resources available, have tried to verify disinformation and 'fake news'. However, fact-checking itself is now

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15 Heather Dannyelle Thompson, "Since Elon Musk took over Twitter, hate and disinformation spiked," Euronews, April 25, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/24/hate-and-disinformation-spiked-after-musks-twitter-takeover-view>.

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being weaponised to push alternative propaganda.<sup>16</sup>

Admittedly in South Asia, the threat landscape is still somewhat less advanced than in other parts of the world since fake and morphed videos and false messages play a significant role in spreading disinformation compared to advanced technologies like deepfakes. Yet, the threat cannot be discounted, given its wide availability and the motivations of threat actors. Besides, one thing unique to South Asia, which poses a challenge in terms of disinformation, is that while the region has a thriving user base operating open social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, the real hub of activity is in the domain of encrypted private-messaging apps like WhatsApp. India, for instance, has 487 million WhatsApp users, the largest in the world.

Another factor is that much of the disinformation content in South Asia, especially in India, is in languages other than English. Tech companies and social media platforms have struggled to counter this non-English language propaganda. WhatsApp has taken specific steps, for instance, adding the 'forwarded' label on the received messages and minimising the number of groups or users a message can be forwarded to. But these steps have proved inadequate.

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16 María Díez-Garrido, Dafne Calvo, Lorena Cano-Orón, "The Mirage of Truth: The Instrumentalization of Fact-Checking to Spread an Ideological Discourse," in *Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy*, ed. Dolors Palau-Sampio, Guillermo López García, and Laura Iannelli (Hershey PA: IGI Global, 2022), 133-151, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch008>.



## **India's Experience in Tackling Disinformation**

Governments in the region have attempted to take on the challenge of disinformation. India, as the world's largest democracy, has addressed this in multiple dimensions. For any disinformation related to the central government, the Press Information Bureau, the principal body for government-related information-sharing, established a Fact Check Unit in November 2019.<sup>17</sup> This unit's sole task is to flag any instance of disinformation and false reporting related to the government's initiatives and set the record straight.

A key highlight of the government's effort is setting down rules for social media platforms. For instance, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 have classified these platforms as 'significant social media intermediaries'.<sup>18</sup> These guidelines mandate the social media platforms do additional due diligence, including publishing monthly compliance reports, identifying the "first originator of the information," and appointing a nodal officer for 24x7 coordination with law enforcement agencies. India has proposed to take this forward with the 'Digital India Act' whereby the government plans to

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17 "PIB Fact Check Unit," Press Information Bureau, Government of India, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/aboutfactcheck.aspx>.

18 "Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021," Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India, accessed May 11, 2023, [https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/Intermediary\\_Guidelines\\_and\\_Digital\\_Media\\_Ethics\\_Code\\_Rules-2021.pdf](https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/Intermediary_Guidelines_and_Digital_Media_Ethics_Code_Rules-2021.pdf).

devise principles for content moderation that can lead to mal, dis or mis-information and let the social media platforms implement it whichever way they desire.<sup>19</sup> However, some social media platforms have opposed these steps. Twitter, for instance, resisted compliance. Instead, it argued that the social intermediary guidelines of 2021 undermined free speech.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Meta-owned WhatsApp sued the Indian government claiming that the new rules would violate the users' privacy.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the social media platforms, the government has also sought capacity building for internet users, especially young adults. For example, in 2014, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology approved the 'Information Security Education and Awareness Project Phase II'<sup>22</sup>. One of the objectives of this project

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19 "Proposed Digital India Act, 2023," Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India, accessed May 11, 2023, [https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/DIA\\_Presentation%2009.03.2023%20Final.pdf](https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/DIA_Presentation%2009.03.2023%20Final.pdf).

20 Twitter Global Government Affairs (@GlobalAffairs), "We plan to advocate for changes to elements of these regulations that inhibit free, open public conversation. We will continue our constructive dialogue with the Indian Government and believe it is critical to adopt a collaborative approach.," Twitter, May 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Policy/status/1397818581950222343>.

21 Roobina Mongia, "WhatsApp Sues Government, Says New Digital Rules Mean End To User Privacy," NDTV, March 26, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/whatsapp-goes-to-delhi-high-court-against-governments-new-digital-rules-that-it-says-will-undermine-users-privacy-2449263>.

22 "Information Security Education & Awareness (ISEA) Project Phase -II," Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.nielit.gov.in/content/information-security-education-awareness-isea-project-phase-%E2%80%93ii>.

was spreading mass awareness through direct and indirect means about information security. Under this project, the ministry developed a website and devised separate guidelines and e-books for all the stakeholders -academics, general users and government employees to focus on educating about hate crimes, cyberstalking, morphing, doxing, online trolling, cyber flashing, digital parenting, etc.

Similarly, in 2018, the Ministry of Home Affairs released a handbook for adolescents/ students on cyber safety.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in 2020, in collaboration with the Cyber Peace Foundation, the Central Board of Secondary Education developed a cyber safety manual for students in grades 9 to 12 to help them develop safe and healthy online habits.<sup>24</sup> These steps have helped increase awareness about the internet and cybersecurity, though much more needs to be done.

## **The Way Forward**

Besides the government-led initiatives, what the South Asian region needs is civil society engagement to develop societal resilience against 'fake news' and disinformation. In particular, what is required is a commitment to spreading digital literacy, including critical thinking skills

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23 "A Handbook for Adolescents/Students on Cyber Safety," Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed May 13, 2023, [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/CyberSafety\\_English\\_Web\\_03122018\\_0.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/CyberSafety_English_Web_03122018_0.pdf).

24 "Cyber Safety Booklet for Children for Adolescents," Cyber Peace Foundation, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.cbse.gov.in/cbsenew/documents/Cyber%20Safety.pdf>.

to scrutinise messages and information coming either from mainstream media or from social media. Civil society organisations can play a role here by working with academia and educational institutions to develop a curriculum on digital civics and literacy for students, to expose them to these critical issues.<sup>25</sup> As mentioned above, India's experience can be a template to follow for other countries in the region.

Another way that civil society can contribute is by building regional collaborations. Given South Asia's difficult circumstances surrounding inter-governmental efforts for regional cooperation, think-tanks and civil society organisations must take the lead by working with social media platforms and tech companies to increase awareness about disinformation. In addition, they should engage local actors to develop a shared understanding of the challenges posed by disinformation. Further, they can work to strengthen the fact-checking programmes run by other organisations.

Today's information landscape is transforming rapidly. Disinformation, malinformation, and misinformation are shaping narratives, making the task of distilling truth and facts a demanding one. Moreover, the proliferation of new actors on the scene, like digital platforms, vloggers and citizen journalists, complicates this task. It may

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25 Samantha Bradshaw and Lisa-Maria Neudert, "The Road Ahead: Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation," National Endowment for Democracy, January 2021, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Road-Ahead-Mapping-Civil-Society-Responses-to-Disinformation-Bradshaw-Neudert-Jan-2021-2.pdf>.

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appear daunting, but tackling disinformation is vital to ensure that it doesn't take a toll on the harmony and cordiality of South Asian community. By doing so, the governments of the region can guarantee their citizens a better and safer digital space.

# **Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda in the Context of Nepal**

Chandra Shekhar Adhikari<sup>1</sup>

This study explores the dissemination, impact, and underlying factors contributing to the spread of misinformation in the context of Nepal. It analyzes various case studies and instances of misinformation in Nepal, identifying the types of fake news, disinformation, and propaganda that is commonly encountered. It also tries to understand characteristics and dissemination patterns. By examining the case study, this research paper hopes to contribute to the broader understanding of the challenges posed by fake news, disinformation, and propaganda in the country.

## **Introduction**

The proliferation of fake news, disinformation, and propaganda has emerged as a global concern, significantly impacting societies, democracies, and individuals' information consumption. In recent years, the rapid proliferation of fake news, disinformation, and propaganda has emerged as a critical challenge in the global information landscape. And, South Asia cannot be

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the exception. Fake news is pervasive across South Asian countries too. Misleading information and fabricated stories are frequently shared through social media platforms, sometimes exacerbating social tensions and causing public unrest. Disinformation is prevalent in many South Asian countries, often driven by political interests to stir up communal tensions. Disinformation can range from spreading false information about political figures to exploiting religious or ethnic fissures to generate discord and dis-harmony. Posetti & Matthews (2018) argue that disinformation has increased at an alarming rate alongside the explosion of internet use across the world.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on fake news, disinformation, and propaganda, specifically within the Nepalese context. Hopefully, it will serve as a valuable resource for academics, policymakers, media professionals, and civil society organizations working towards promoting media literacy, enhancing digital literacy skills, and fostering a more informed and resilient society in Nepal as this topic is hardly discussed in our context.

Although a new issue, disinformation campaign have been observed in Nepal, particularly during political crises and election time. False narratives, manipulated images, and misleading information have been used to shape public opinion, divide communities, and influence political outcomes. Adhikari (2022) argues that technology allows people to be rightly informed; however, the incentives of online and social media have deprived people of receiving true and reliable information.

Propaganda has been historically used in South Asian countries for various purposes, including political, nationalist, and religious motives. Governments, political parties, and extremist organizations have all utilized propaganda to influence public sentiment, garner support, and promote specific ideologies.

While propaganda campaigns in Nepal may not be as prominent as in some other countries, political parties and interest groups have been known to employ same techniques to shape public opinion and advance their agendas.

Generally, journalists around the globe are often under pressure for breaking news. Consequently, they fail in verifying the accuracy of information. And, it can happen due to time constraints, limited resources, and many other factors. This can sometimes lead to the inadvertent spread of inaccurate or unverified information, further contributing to disinformation.

Media literacy levels among the general public can impact the spread and impact of disinformation. Limited media literacy can make individuals more susceptible to false information, as they may lack the skills to critically evaluate sources, identify misinformation, or verify claims. Enhancing media literacy is crucial to empowering individuals to navigate the complex media landscape and distinguish reliable journalism from disinformation.

Various stakeholders in Nepal, including journalists, media organizations, and civil society, have taken initiatives to combat disinformation. Fact-checking



organizations have emerged to verify claims and debunk false information. Some media outlets have implemented rigorous fact-checking processes to ensure the accuracy of their reporting. Additionally, media literacy programs and awareness campaigns have been conducted to educate the public about the risks of disinformation.

Addressing the issue of disinformation in Nepal requires continued efforts from journalists, media organizations, government bodies, and society as a whole. Promoting professional ethics, investing in media literacy, insisting on transparency, and encouraging responsible reporting practices can contribute to combating disinformation and strengthening the credibility of Nepali journalism.

Fake news, disinformation, and propaganda are prevalent not only in Nepal but also in various countries across South Asia. While there may be similarities in the nature and impact of these issues, it's important to note that each country has its own unique context and dynamics. Here are some key aspects related to Nepali journalism and disinformation:

**Spread of Disinformation:** Disinformation can be found in various forms within Nepali journalism. It can be driven by a range of factors, including political interests, commercial pressures, sensationalism, and lack of fact-checking. False or misleading information, rumors, and fabricated stories may circulate, particularly during political crises, election campaigns, or civic protests and disturbances. Media Action Nepal (2020) states that the pandemic is connected with an "infodemic" that

requires reporters and other media workers to be more responsible in disseminating news and information. In this respect, there was also a rumor that Nepalese Army spraying disinfectants from helicopters to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The spokesperson later dismissed the rumors as false (The Himalayan Times, 2020).

**Digital Media Landscape:** The emergence of digital media and social media platforms has significantly impacted the dissemination of news and information in Nepal. While these platforms provide opportunities for diverse voices and alternative sources of information, they have also facilitated the rapid spread of disinformation. The speed and ease of sharing content on social media can amplify the reach of false information.

**Case Studies of MCC and SPP:** Fake news has been a growing concern in Nepal, particularly with the rise of social media platforms. False information, rumors have been circulated, often leading to confusion and misinformation among the public.

Recently, Nepal saw massive disinformation and propaganda floating around not just on social media but also on online news portals regarding the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact (MCC) signed between the Government of Nepal and the US.

Nepal became eligible to receive a \$500 million grant from MCC, a US grant program, in 2017. Although Nepal itself had applied to be a part of MCC, many leaders

of different parties, along with a section of political influencers, ran an agenda against it. Their claim was that the US convinced Nepal to take the grant in order to keep the country under its strategic influence. They further claimed that such influence would be used against China.

Using social media platform like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and even news portals, an organized movement operated to spread disinformation. It was said that MCC was a part of the US defense strategy for the Indo-Pacific region and ratifying it from parliament would make Nepal a part of the US military alliance.

Different leaders especially from the various factions of the communist party were the biggest critics of MCC who claimed that MCC was a part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US government, and Indo-Pacific strategy itself was a military strategy to encircle China.

But the US Embassy in Kathmandu kept denying these claims. The Embassy clarified that MCC wasn't a military agreement, and the funds cannot be used for military assistance or training. The embassy further mentioned that the MCC-Nepal Compact would help to strengthen Nepal's economic growth by expanding the energy sector, improving road quality, and creating business opportunities for the people of Nepal.

After MCC, the State Partnership Program (SPP) also stirred up controversy in Nepal. According to the US government, SPP is an exchange program, between its

National Guard and a partner foreign country. Under the SPP, it provides a variety of training, education and related activities to the partner's agencies.

The US Embassy had to clarify that SPP was not a security or military alliance after the news broke that Nepal was signing it. When political leaders and activists claimed that the US was planning to make Nepal a defense alliance partner through SPP, the Embassy had to clarify that it was Nepal that requested to join the program in 2015 and 2017. Nepal's proposal to join the program, which has been executed in 90 countries, was accepted in 2019. But the government had already faced the public pressure. Ultimately, in June 2022 the then Home Minister Bal Krishna Khand told parliament that Nepal was not part of SPP and has no intention of joining it.

MCC and SPP were probably the two most discussed topics among the common people, both in cities and in villages. Disinformation and propaganda about MCC and SPP were spread through every possible social media tool. The overload of disinformation on social media caused a negative perception about MCC, which was actually signed to bring in money for the construction of road and electricity transmission lines.

### **Recommendations:**

South Asian countries have implemented various measures to tackle fake news, disinformation, and propaganda. These measures range from establishing fact-checking organizations and conducting awareness

campaigns to enacting legislation to curb the spread of false information. But more needs to be done.

While there are similarities in the challenges posed by fake news, disinformation, and propaganda in Nepal and rest of South Asia, it is important to recognize the specific nuances and dynamics within each country. Efforts to combat these issues require a multi-stakeholder approach involving government, media organizations, civil society, and individuals to promote media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible information consumption.

Nepal has taken steps to address the issue of fake news and disinformation. The government has introduced legislation to regulate social media and has established mechanisms to monitor and combat misinformation.

The findings and recommendations presented herein can serve as valuable insights for policymakers, media professionals, civil society organizations, and researchers engaged in addressing this pressing issue.

## **Conclusion:**

Social media platforms have been widely used to spread disinformation in Nepal. During political crises or election campaigns, false information, modified images, and misleading narratives get circulated to influence public opinion and promote certain political agendas.

Like many other countries around the globe, Southeast Asian governments have also dealt with false information

and disinformation during COVID-19 pandemic (Jalli, 2020). Nepal also faced challenges with health-related disinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nepal's rich religious and cultural heritage has also been targeted by disinformation campaigns. False claims, misinterpretations, and sensationalized stories about religious practices, cultural traditions, and historical events have been spread to fuel tensions, provoke conflicts, or generate schism in society.

While not always intentional disinformation, some news outlets in Nepal have been criticized for sensationalizing news stories, exaggerating facts, or failing to verify information thoroughly before reporting. This can contribute to the spread of misinformation and confusion among the public.

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# **Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda in Nepal**

Samar SJB Rana<sup>1</sup>

The advent of the internet has enabled people to connect and receive information instantly. Social media platforms like Meta (Facebook/Instagram), Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and encrypted messaging apps like Whatsapp, Viber, Signal have permitted citizenry to not only express themselves and engage with a wider audience in a short span but also organize protests against governments. The Jasmine revolution in Tunisia which some people have dubbed as the Facebook Revolution can be taken as one example.<sup>2</sup> However, what started with a good intent has simultaneously created a vicious 21<sup>st</sup> century public policy challenge - information disorder. Given the ubiquitous nature of the various social media platforms and online news portals, Nepali netizens are also susceptible to the polluted information permeating in the mentioned social and digital platforms.

## **Facts from Fabrications**

Disinformation and propaganda are not novel terms but that have a legacy attached to them (the former

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- 1 Author is at present Senior Research Assistant, Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), Kathmandu.
  - 2 Mike Giglio, "Tunisia Protests: The Facebook revolution," *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2017 <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/tunisia-protests-the-facebook-revolution>>



being newer than the latter).<sup>3</sup> However, in this digital age, social media has become a fecund for information disorder to spread rapidly. All information on social media are not false but it can be manipulated for socio-political disruption during a major event.<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum: The Global Risk Report 2023 has ranked misinformation and disinformation 16<sup>th</sup> in the global severity index in a timeframe of the next two years.<sup>5</sup> In the long run, which is a period of ten years, the report has ranked misinformation and disinformation even higher at number 11.<sup>6</sup> This does not augur well for any country whose population have a limited level of media and digital literacy. According to the Nepal Media Survey Report 2022,<sup>7</sup> 90% of the Nepali internet users have regular access to Facebook and YouTube. Information disorder will further be compounded as the usage of social media will inevitably increase in the near

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- 3 Dean Jackson, *"Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation and "Fake News"* (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017) <<https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>>
  - 4 Kristina Hook and Ernesto Verdeja, "Social Media Misinformation and the Prevention of Political Instability and Mass Atrocities" (Stimson, 2022) <<https://www.stimson.org/2022/social-media-misinformation-and-the-prevention-of-political-instability-and-mass-atrocities/>>
  - 5 World Economic Forum, "The Global Risks Report 2023 18th Edition" (World Economic Forum, 2023) <[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Risks\\_Report\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf)>
  - 6 Ibid
  - 7 Sharecast Initiative Nepal, "Nepal Media Survey 2022" (Lalitpur: Sharecast Initiative Nepal, 2022) <[https://radionepal.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/Nepal-Media-Survey-NMS2022-Radio-Nepal\\_opt.pdf](https://radionepal.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/Nepal-Media-Survey-NMS2022-Radio-Nepal_opt.pdf)>

future. Therefore, it becomes a necessity for the Nepali population to understand and act accordingly against information disorder.

Information disorder is a term developed by Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan that categorizes the nuances of misinformation (inadvertently sharing false information), disinformation (deliberately sharing false information) and mal-information (sharing true but private information to inflict harm).<sup>8</sup> They have also underscored the use of 'fake news' as it is inadequate in explaining the comprehensive and differing nature of information pollution and manipulation. Furthermore, there have been cases where people in position of power castigate a dissenter's opinion under the pretext of fake news,<sup>9</sup> thus, undermining their expression and democracy altogether. However, actors or cyber troops instigating social media campaigns are not confined to politicians or political parties.<sup>10</sup> Other actors can be private firms, civil society organizations, hackers, youth groups and social media influencers, among others.

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8 Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making" (Council of Europe, 2017) <<https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>>

9 Nepali Times, "Lockdown Crackdown" Nepali times, April 29, 2020, <<https://www.nepalitimes.com/editorial/lockdown-crackdown>>

10 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order: Cyber Troops Report" (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2019) <<https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>>

Actors propagating information disorder are generally motivated by political reasons, psychological factors and financial requirements (by maximizing profits through clickbaits). Additionally, the issue of echo chamber created by social media algorithms further reinforce confirmation bias as consumers perennially encounter information that resonates with their opinions on these social media platforms.<sup>11</sup> Algorithms differ in each social media platform. Nepal's digital ecosystem has been plagued with information disorder during significant political events like the recent three-tier Nepali elections in 2022 or tabling of the Millennial Challenge Cooperation (MCC).<sup>12</sup> During both these major events Nepal witnessed partisan news, disinformation and misinformation spreading through social media platforms. This polluted information can further be amplified through sophisticated social media disinformation and computational propaganda campaigns by fake accounts – bots, human and cyborg.<sup>13</sup>

### **Nepal's dance with Information Disorder**

It is pertinent to understand that polluted information also intensifies during non-political crisis situations like the pandemic and other calamities. After the

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11 Megan A. Brown, Jonathan Nagler, James Bisbee, Angela Lai, and Joshua A. Tucker, "Echo chambers, rabbit holes, and ideological bias: How YouTube recommends content to real users" (Brookings, 2022) <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/echo-chambers-rabbit-holes-and-ideological-bias-how-youtube-recommends-content-to-real-users/>>

12 Deepak Adhikari, "Doctored images and out-of-context videos spread misinformation during Nepal elections", Online Khabar, December 13, 2022, <<https://english.onlinekhabar.com/misinformation-elections-nepal.html>>

13 Ibid

major earthquake in Nepal in 2015, misleading videos regarding the earthquake were shared through various social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> More recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) coined the word 'infodemic' which means false and misleading information spreading during a pandemic in both digital and physical spheres.<sup>15</sup> Just as the pervasive SARs-CoV-2 started plaguing Nepal in 2020 so did misinformation and disinformation. Former Prime Minister, KP Sharma Oli conjured his own ill-found claims of recovering from the virus and downplayed the virus a common flu.<sup>16</sup> Vaccine infodemic was another hurdle in combatting the virus.<sup>17</sup> Misinformation and disinformation did not even spare the anti-covid vaccines that were rolled out in Nepal in early 2021.<sup>18</sup>

Another information disorder that goes beyond the political realm and is pervasive in Nepal are financial frauds and revenge porn. Both the mentioned information

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14 BBC, "Fake quakes: rumours spread after Nepal tragedy", BBC, April 28, 2015, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32493556>>

15 World Health Organization, "Infodemic" (World Health Organization) <[https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1)>

16 Pawan Pandey, "Oli continues to downplay Covid-19 and propagate home remedies, earning ridicule on social media" The Kathmandu Post, June 19, 2020, <<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/19/oli-continues-to-downplay-covid-19-and-propagate-home-remedies-earning-ridicule-on-social-media>>

17 Sonia Awale, "Nepal fights infodemic to push vaccine", Nepali Times, February 25, 2021, <<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/nepal-fights-infodemic-to-push-vaccine>>

18 Plan International, "The Nepalese youth dispelling misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine" (Plan International, 2020) <<https://plan-international.org/nepal/case-studies/the-nepalese-youth-dispelling-misinformation-about-the-covid-19-vaccine/>>

disorder are classified as mal-information. A news report published in April 2023 by a Nepali daily states that in a time span of eight months, a total of 4937 cyber-crime cases were registered in Nepal's cyber bureau.<sup>19</sup> Financial crime featured first followed by revenge porn with 955 and 901 cases respectively. There is no specified law that posits on revenge porn but perpetrators committing the mentioned crime are prosecuted under section 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act 2063 (2006).<sup>20</sup> This act serves as a regulation for content published on online mediums. However, the mentioned online regulation is not free from controversy and public censure.

In 2016, a case was filed in the Supreme Court (SC) against section 47 of the act.<sup>21</sup> Section 47 is loosely defined where online published content – “which may be contrary to the public morality or decent behavior or any types of materials which may spread hate or jealousy against anyone or which may jeopardize the harmonious relations subsisting among the peoples of various castes, tribes and communities.” The vagueness of the language can be interpreted wrongly which in turn

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19 Anup Ojha, “Cybercrime-related cases see an alarming rise”, The Kathmandu Post, April 16, 2023, <<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/04/16/cybercrime-related-cases-see-an-alarming-rise>>

20 Electronic transaction Act 2063, sec 47. <<http://www.tepc.gov.np/uploads/files/12the-electronic-transaction-act55.pdf>>

21 The Kathmandu Post, “Nepal’s government is aggressively pursuing journalists and it could get worse under a new legislation” The Kathmandu Post, April 17, 2019, <<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/04/17/nepals-government-is-aggressively-pursuing-journalists-and-it-could-get-worse-under-a-new-legislation>>

can curb freedom of expression. This alludes to the fact that government officials can use the vague language to clampdown on dissenters critical of the government.<sup>22</sup> An IT bill was tabled in the parliament in 2018 to replace the existing Electronic Transaction Act. Given the ambiguous, unclear and strict provisions, the drafted IT bill has not been ratified by the parliament as it showed proclivity to curtail freedom of speech online. As the preference to adopt digital social technologies to avail information is steadily increasing in Nepal, a matter as serious as the IT bill cannot be taken lightly as it bears consequences on online publications and free expression.

According to the recently published National Population and Housing Census 2021,<sup>23</sup> 73% of the Nepali households have smartphones and only 37% of households have internet facility. As of mid-January 2023, total broadband penetration stands at 130.64% with a total subscriber of 38,137,655.<sup>24</sup> The Media Survey Report 2022 mentioned that respondents received their information from Facebook rose from 21% to 41% for local news and 24% to 49% for national and international news when comparing their 2020 report and 2022 report.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that Nepali citizenry have become more

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22 Human Rights Watch, "Nepal: End Attacks on Free Expression", (New York: Human Rights Watch, 18 April, 2019, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/18/nepal-end-attacks-free-expression>>

23 Government of Nepal, "National Population and Housing Census 2021 (National Report)", (Nepal: National Statistics Office, 2023) <<https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/national>>

24 Government of Nepal, "MIS Report", (Nepal: Nepal Telecommunication Authority, 2023) <<https://www.nta.gov.np/uploads/contents/MIS%20poush%202079.pdf>>

25 Ibid

dependent on social media platforms for local, national and international news. We can suggest that social media scrolling has increased and in parallel, the chances of consumers encountering polluted information also grows. Social media has become a double-edged sword, as it instantly connects people but also permits unhinged information to flood these platforms through social media misinformation campaigns. Furthermore, social media platforms are under limited or no editorial and factual scrutiny. But information manipulation can also occur on traditional media – radio, newspaper and television. In a study conducted in 2021, of 49,051 news reports published by Nepali newspapers and online portals, 1817 contained misleading information.<sup>26</sup>

Polluted information influences citizens to react and frame opinions on both domestic and international issues. Involvement of international actors along with domestic actors on a particular geopolitical issue through social media can strain bilateral relations. While tabling the MCC, a \$500 million compact provided by the US to build roads and electricity transmission lines in Nepal, an array of disinformation campaigns with misleading news were shared online against the compact.<sup>27</sup> A US State Department spokesperson mentioned that Washington would be forced to review bilateral relations with Nepal

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26 Laxman Datt Pant, "Misleading News in Media: A Study of Newspapers and Online News Portals of Nepal" (Nepal: Media Action Nepal, 2021) <<https://mediaactionnepal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/misleading-news-in-media.pdf>>

27 Gajendra Basnet, "Fact Check: How fake news on MCC Compact is creating a sensation in Nepal?" Khabarhub, February 3, 2020, <<https://english.khabarhub.com/2020/03/73042/>>

if the MCC compact was not ratified.<sup>28</sup> The American Ambassador to Nepal accused China of spreading disinformation by stating “torrid PRC [People’s Republic of China] disinformation campaign”.<sup>29</sup> The spokesperson of PRC’s foreign minister responded by calling it ‘coercive diplomacy’.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, some Nepali politicians and intellectuals added fuel to the fire by spreading misinformation against MCC.<sup>31</sup> This resulted in violent protests in the streets of Kathmandu while MCC was being tabled in the parliament. Finally, MCC was ratified but at the cost of somewhat straining of bilateral relations with both the US and China, allowing Nepal to become a geopolitical boxing arena and increasing mistrust and skepticism among the Nepali populace.

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28 Anil Giri, “Top American official says US will review Nepal ties if MCC compact is not ratified”, The Kathmandu Post, February 10, 2022, <<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/02/10/top-american-official-says-us-will-review-nepal-ties-if-mcc-compact-is-not-ratified>>

29 My Republica, “Nepal ratified MCC Compact in the face of China’s ‘disinformation campaign’: US Envoy Nominee”, My Republica, July 15, 2023, <<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-ratified-mcc-compact-in-the-face-of-china-s-disinformation-campaign-us-envoy-nominee/>>

30 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Regular Press Conference by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying”, February 23, 2022, <[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202202/t20220223\\_10644886.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220223_10644886.html)>

31 Pranaya Rana, “Off the Record 042: The MCC, yet again”, Off the Record, February 25, 2022, <[https://recordnepal.substack.com/p/off-the-record-042-the-mcc-yet-again?utm\\_source=%2Fsearch%2Fmcc&utm\\_medium=reader2](https://recordnepal.substack.com/p/off-the-record-042-the-mcc-yet-again?utm_source=%2Fsearch%2Fmcc&utm_medium=reader2)>



During elections, information manipulation has become a common phenomenon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Social media serves as an electoral tool during election campaigns. During the recent federal and provincial elections in Nepal, there were numerous cases of manipulative and misleading information polluting social media.<sup>32</sup> On a positive note, Nepal based fact-checking organization, namely - Nepal Check and NepalFactCheck.org/नेपाल:तथ्यजाँच have made concerted efforts to debunk information disorder during the three-tier elections in Nepal and recently held by-elections in three constituencies.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, social media platforms like Meta have been receptive to the Election Commission's (EC) calls to cooperate in combatting information disorder prior to the federal and provincial elections 2022.<sup>34</sup> At a global level, Meta and Twitter have taken steps to tackle information disorder. Meta with "Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour"<sup>35</sup> and Twitter's "Twitter Moderation Research Consortium",<sup>36</sup> release data on information manipulations. These are also measures against fake accounts (bots, human and cyborgs) and information campaigns on their respective platforms.

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32 Ibid

33 Nepal Check <<https://nepalcheck.org/>>

34 Mina Aryal, "Election Commission Nepal Cooperate With Meta to Fair Conduct of Upcoming Election", ICT Frame Magazine, October 21, 2022, <<https://ictframe.com/election-commission-nepal-cooperate-with-meta/>>

35 Meta, "Inauthentic Behavior", Transparency Center: Facebook Community Standard <<https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/>>

36 Twitter, "Twitter Moderation Research Consortium", Transparency Twitter, <<https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/moderation-research.html>>

## **Measures against Information Disorder**

Limited ability to discern facts from fabrication online can pose a serious threat at an individual and national level. As countries and social media platforms adopt novel regulatory measures to contain information disorder, illegitimate actors also evolve their strategies and tactics to spread polluted information on social media. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can further exacerbate online manipulation by exploiting 'deepfakes', creating fake pictures of humans through generative adversarial networks (GANs) and automated bot accounts using GPT-3 to sound more humanlike.<sup>37</sup> Countries and social tech-companies have to work in tandem to monitor such threat activities while maintaining free expression through their respective jurisdictions. There are couple of measures that the Government of Nepal (GoN) can undertake to make Nepali citizens adept against the online risks of information disorder. However, such measures have to be country specific as each country will have its own set of challenges.

Firstly, all polluted information surging in social media platforms cannot be monitored as it is near impossible. Human fact-checking has its limitations as it cannot keep pace with the speed misinformation spreads

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37 Daniel Arnaudo, Samantha Bradshaw, Hui Hui Ooi, Kaleigh Schwalbe, Amy Studdart, Vera Zakem and Amanda Zink, "Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond" (National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute and Stanford International Observatory, 2021) <<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/InfoManip%20Playbook%20updated%20FINAL.pdf>>

online. The growing number of internet users are not well-equipped against information disorder. As screen time and social media scrolling is increasing amongst teens and adolescents, they become more susceptible to information disorder.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, proactive steps like prioritizing digital and media literacy in academic school syllabus for students from kindergarten to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade can be a measure to critically analyze and fact-check information before engaging and disseminating such news. Media Literacy Now (MLN) is a political neutral not-profit in the United States that advocates for media literacy from an early age for school students.<sup>39</sup> MLN has advised two dozen states in media literacy and assisted in passing more than 20 successful pieces of legislation in 10 states.<sup>40</sup> MLN can be an example to emulate for not-profits and local governments in Nepal to work together. According to schedule 8 of the constitution of Nepal, basic and secondary education falls under the jurisdiction of the local government. Therefore, the local governments of Nepal can make efforts on incorporate media and digital literacy as part of the school's curriculum. This will help in preparing the future generation against information disorder.

Secondly, although social media platforms have regulations to counter fake accounts, hate speech and information manipulation campaigns as mentioned

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38 The New York Times, "Kids as Young as 8 Are Using Social Media More Than Ever, Study Finds" The New York Times, March 24, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/well/family/child-social-media-use.html>>

39 Media Literacy Now <<https://medialiteracynow.org/>>

40 Media Literacy Now <<https://medialiteracynow.org/about-us-2/>>

above, there is an urgency to measure its efficacy in Nepal. Nepali users and consumers of social media either publish videos, audios, memes and posts in Nepali and English scripts. Social media platforms' taken measures to monitor information disorder can render ineffective if they do not have a complete understanding of the mentioned Nepali and local languages or a Nepal based local team to monitor malign posts. Additionally, the un-moderated comment section on Facebook has also been a source of misinformation according to case study conducted by First Draft.<sup>41</sup> In the recently held by-elections, there were numerous comments on any individual's post who were critical of candidates from Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) with words like - jhole (brainless) and patrukar (yellow journalists).<sup>42</sup> In the same vein, a RSP candidate was victim to social media operation targeting his family and citizenship. Nepali women politicians are habitually victim to misogynistic comments (undermining their ability, hate speech, sexualized distortions among others) on their social media platforms.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Meta and Twitter do not have a base in Nepal which compounds

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41 Esther Chan, Lucinda Beaman and Stevie Zhang, "Vaccine misinformation in Facebook comment sections: a case study" (First draft, 2021) <<https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/vaccine-misinformation-in-facebook-comment-sections-a-case-study/>>

42 Nishan Khatriwada, "Swatantra Party cadres under public scrutiny" The Kathmandu Post, April 21, 2023 <<https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2023/04/21/swatantra-party-cadres-under-public-scrutiny>>

43 South Asia Check, "Analysis of Gendered Violence In Social Media against Women in Politics in Nepal", (South Asia Check, 2021) <<https://southasiacheck.org/in-public-interest/panos-releases-second-media-monitoring-report-on-online-gendered-violence-against-women/>>

the problem of detecting polluted information in Nepal's digital ecosystem. Therefore, GoN can reach out to social media giants to set up their offices in Nepal for a better coordination.

Next, there is an urgency to develop robust laws to regulate information posted on online content without creating a barrier for free speech and democracy. The proposed IT Bill and the draft of the Cyber Security Policy 2080 which was released at the time of writing this paper requires serious deliberation as it has implications on the country's national security and individual security.<sup>44</sup> Hence, to pre-empt prospective censure, lawmakers have to take relevant stakeholders like journalists, social media experts, civil society members into confidence before tabling a challenging bill. Other countries are taking steps to regulate information disorder - Online Safety Bill is currently being discussed in the UK Parliament, Australia has released an Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (ACPDm) and European Union (EU) has also revamped its EU code.<sup>45</sup> Stakeholders of Nepal should also monitor international best practices with democracy friendly regulations to give more clarity on the issue for developing a Nepal oriented law.

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44 Government of Nepal, "National Cyber Security Policy 2080" (Nepal: Ministry of Communication, Information and Technology, Government of Nepal, 2023) <[https://api.giwms.gov.np/storage/22/posts/1681716970\\_37.pdf](https://api.giwms.gov.np/storage/22/posts/1681716970_37.pdf)>

45 Anne Kruger, Esther Chan, Stevie Zhang and Michael Davis, "Information Disorder: Lessons from Australia" (Center for Media Transition, 2023)<[https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/2Feb2023%20\\_Information%20Disorder%20-%20Lessons%20from%20Australia.pdf](https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/2Feb2023%20_Information%20Disorder%20-%20Lessons%20from%20Australia.pdf)>

Other interventions like inoculation method, using AI and NGO based fact-checking platforms can also be considered in addressing information disorder. Nepal has to prepare not only the future generation against information disorder but also vulnerable groups, minority groups, women, the elderly and disabled as they are more susceptible to online attacks. There was a telling incident in Nepal, where a police officer wrongly reprimanded an independent fact-checker for debunking a misleading news.<sup>46</sup> Government officials and politicians have to be trained and sensitized to information disorder before they provide their services and disseminate information to fellow Nepalese. As technologies advance at a rapid pace, governments and their citizens also have to adapt themselves to these new technologies to accrue benefits from it and also learn to protect themselves from its perpetual threats. For a fledging democracy like Nepal, information disorder should not be seen as an unorthodox public policy challenge but a constant threat to democracy, national security and individual privacy of its citizen.

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46 Nepali Times, "Punished for fact-checking in Nepal", Nepali Times, March 4, 2022, <<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/punished-for-fact-checking-in-nepal>>