

Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by
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Center for Media Research – Nepal
Kathmandu, Nepal

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CHAPTER 1

An Anatomy of Information Manipulation in Nepal

Rishikesh Dahal and Ujjwal Acharya

Abstract

This article examines the landscape of misinformation in Nepal through 29 key informant interviews across seven provinces and two discussions in Kathmandu. It identifies threat actors, contents, tactics and interventions to combat misinformation utilizing a qualitative research design based on ‘*Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond*’ (2021). The findings show that misinformation is prevalent particularly during critical periods such as elections, disasters and health crisis; and highlight political parties establishing organized cyber forces for information manipulation, and foreign governments, particularly China and India, influencing Nepal’s information ecosystem through strategic dissemination of false narratives. It suggests a multi-faceted approach to combat information manipulation, emphasizing the need for balanced regulations, enhanced media and information literacy, and proactive fact-checking mechanisms. The study concludes that addressing misinformation in Nepal requires collective efforts from all stakeholders, including government, media, social media, civil society, and citizens.

Keywords: *information integrity, information manipulation, misinformation, media and information literacy, fact-checking*

Introduction

The internet and internet-based platforms have emerged as powerful channels in Nepal's information ecosystem, even with the wide availability of newspapers, radio, and television. Many Nepali rely on social media as their primary source of information, with platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube becoming popular choices. Although these platforms are primarily used for entertainment, they are also becoming information channels.

There is also widespread convergence of traditional media and social media where traditional media utilizes social media to reach audience. For example, an FM radio station broadcasts news sourced from newspapers, streaming live video from the studio on video-sharing platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Such a phenomenon has redefined the information flow landscape, with news from newspapers being heard on the radio, watched on YouTube, and shared on social media. Similarly, the content circulating on social media has affected news, creating a cyclic process.

In Nepal, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube dominate as the most widely used social media platforms, while Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) being popular among niche demographics such as youth. Online news platforms also serve as significant sources of information dissemination, with over 4,000 online news sites in operation, as per the data of Press Council Nepal (PCN). Traditional mediums such as radio, television, and newspapers are still used for information consumption, but social media has become the primary medium for disseminating, receiving and discoursing information.

Social media usage is particularly prevalent in political communication and activities from parliament to political campaigns. For instance, the Nepali Congress party broadcasted its central committee meeting on Facebook Live in July 2023. Similarly, the Parliament Secretariat livestreams sessions of the House of Representatives through YouTube. Webcasting on different social media platforms was widely used during the 2022 election campaigns organized by different political parties. Both the collection and dissemination of messages have become daily activities on social media, and political parties extensively use it, especially during elections and political events.

Traditionally, content production on economic, social, or political activities was primarily the domain of mass media outlets. Newspapers, radio, television, and online platforms all contributed to producing content. However, the rise of YouTubers and social media influencers has significantly changed this landscape. YouTubers in some cases have more presence than journalists in press conferences. For example, Chairman of Rastriya Swatantra Party Rabi Lamichhane, and Mayor Balen Shah of Kathmandu Metropolitan City have a stronger presence on YouTube than in traditional media outlets. Lamichhane and Shah demonstrate a preference to YouTubers over journalists for disseminating information related to their activities.

The influence of social media on public issues and discourses has expanded significantly, while the influence of traditional media has weakened. The subject matter covered by both social media and traditional media exhibits less variation among the general population.

Some experts argue that traditional media is insufficient in serving public interests through news outlets, whereas social media has created a space for people's voices. Victor Poudel, the founder of Routine of Nepal Banda (RONB), believes that while traditional media lags in addressing public issues due to commercial considerations, social media has proven more effective. Research conducted by CMR-Nepal (2022) found that social media is an effective platform used by all political and social actors but also is a leading platform for manipulation of information.

In this context, this study aims to answer the following questions: What is the current state of misinformation in Nepal? Who are the key stakeholders involved in its propagation? And what strategies can be implemented to effectively address this issue?

Within this context, this chapter is the outcome of 29 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted in seven provinces of Nepal (see KII participants in Annex 2) and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) held in Kathmandu (see dates and list of participants in Annex 1). This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the framework of threat actors, types of contents, tactics and interventions presented in the book *Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond* (2021), published by National Democratic Institute, International Republic Institute, and Standard Internet Observatory.

The objectives of the study are:

- To understand the landscape of information manipulation in Nepal,
- To identify threat actors, contents, tactics, and vectors of information manipulation; and
- To assess efforts to combat information manipulation.

Misinformation in Nepal

Misinformation has a widespread prevalence in Nepal. During elections in 2017 and 2022; and the first couple of years of Covid Pandemic (2020-2021), information manipulation increased to a level that during all the KIIs and FGDs, participants from various sectors, including politicians, social activists, academicians, editors, fact checker and lawyers, agreed that misinformation is rising in an alarming rate:

“The prevalence of misinformation is alarming, with even minor issues exaggerated into significant problems. Various individuals, including political party leaders, activists, and those with expertise in information technology, are actively involved in spreading false information.”

- *Raju Shrestha, RTI activist (KII participant)*

Bishwa Prakash Sharma, a General Secretary of the Nepali Congress, expressed that misinformation is often propelled by political leadership and cannot be effectively controlled without their intervention.

Victor Paudel, the founder of widely popular social media-based information platform RONB, highlighted traditional media’s failure to properly verify information and counteract against misinformation, thereby contributing to its spread. He further argued that social media influencers in Nepal have gained prominence due to their ability to provide accurate information and counter false narratives. Poudel’s viewpoint highlights that misinformation isn’t solely a product of public beliefs; rather, it is methodically spread by both political and private entities.

Misinformation during elections is reported to be more prevalent than ever before, with participants highlighting the widespread use

of tactics to sabotage information during the electoral process. They expressed concerns that such practices may become even more pervasive in future elections:

“Misleading information is gaining alarming prominence in electoral contexts...Political parties have established cyber forces dedicated to information manipulation.”

- *BP Sah, politician (FGD participant)*

Although a study, conducted by CMR Nepal during the 2022 election, showed a relatively low level of flow of manipulated information through social media by established political party leadership, a significant level of circulation of false information by political cadres was observed:

“During elections, screenshots from mainstream media are used and manipulated to change public opinion. Additionally, the use of AI in misinformation campaigns is on the rise, posing new challenges to combating false information.”

- *Umesh Shrestha, fact-check editor (KII participant)*

Viral videos claiming misuse of funds for buying voters during the silent period for election campaigns had a substantial impact on voter sentiment. The influence of such misleading content during elections cannot be underestimated as it can influence voters' behavior.

The election code of conduct prohibits campaigning 48 hours prior to the day of voting. The Election Commission directed that during the silent period, individuals were not allowed to solicit votes, even on social media. However, the circulation of misinformation is high on such critical period:

“The number of misinformation is high during critical periods, and elections. Misinformation has a potential to mislead opinions and change voting behaviors of the public and any such impact is harmful to democracy.”

- *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

Threat Actors

This section analyzes various threat actors, their involvement in information manipulation, and the possible reasons behind manipulating information.

Political Parties and Campaigns

Most participants pointed out that political party leaders and workers are primarily responsible for spreading misinformation, especially on political issues. During election periods, political polarization of Nepali society becomes evident. Supported parties are known to propagate their agenda, while opposing parties make efforts to spread counter-materials.

It is not just political parties that engage in disseminating misleading content; university professors and former administrators among other professionals, who are politically affiliated, also play an active role. These individuals are willing to spread disinformation in support of the party they are associated with, driven by personal or political gains. Participants have acknowledged that disinformation is circulated to divert attention from certain topics.

“Political information is widely disseminated by political actors and individuals motivated by financial gains, who post misleading contents for profit.”

- *Umesh Shrestha, fact-check editor (KII participant)*

According to Bishwa Prakash Sharma of the Nepali Congress, ambitious plans by political leaders during elections that are unfulfillable have become a form of misinformation widely used during any election in Nepal. Many participants highlighted that during elections, exaggerating achievements and tarnishing opponents’ reputations has become a predominant practice. Political campaigns often focus on discrediting others rather than promoting their own merits. Social media platforms are commonly used for spreading misinformation, including character assassination of political leaders and candidates in the election:

“During 2022 elections, whereas most of the Facebook advertisements were publicity of advertising candidate’s campaigns, there

were some instances where there were direct attacks on opposing candidates with questionable information.”

- *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

Misinformation has become a common practice in the messages used by political parties to promote their side and criticize the opposition. This misinformation poses a significant risk to participants in the political process who seek accurate information to make informed decisions within the democratic system.

Social media plays a significant role in promoting the deeds, good or bad, of the supported political party. The practice of spreading agendas through groups formed by various fraternal organizations is on the rise. While political parties affiliated with these groups, as well as activists, actively participate, other unorganized groups aim to oppose the system and its values. These groups prioritize individual candidate promotion over democratic principles.

The focused promotion of individuals appears to be fueling populism even further. Populism has become a vital component in politics to attract voters during elections:

“Political parties have also shifted their focus from traditional channels to social media platforms, where they anticipate reaching a wider audience in a short period and conveying their message directly to the public.”

- *Dr. Kundan Aryal, journalism associate professor (FGD participant)*

Hate and Other Extremist Groups

The participants of the study, representing the Terai region, have reported that extremist groups have been magnifying expressions of hatred. Former Federal Minister Mohammad Ishtiyaq Rai expressed concern over the extremist activities originating from both India and China, which are impacting Nepal’s religious landscape. The persistent occurrence of such activities poses a significant risk to triggering religious conflicts in the nation:

“Nepal has witnessed extremist activities originating from both India and China that exploit religious sentiments. Misinformation

is weaponized to incite religious conflicts.”

- *Mohammad Ishiyaq Rai, former minister (KII participants)*

In Nepal, certain political groups that revolve around ethnic issues are also active in spreading hatred and sabotaging information. Instances of such misleading content being spread by the media have been observed for a long time. For example, the Hrithik Roshan case in 2000 AD, which involved extremism, gained attention through media coverage. However, it's not always that Nepal's media play in extremism. For example, Nepal's media did not pointed fingers at Muslim community during Covid-19 although that was a prominent narrative in India.

A false claim that Indian film star Hrithik Roshan had said in a TV interview that he hated Nepal, and its people sparked riots in the streets of Kathmandu, despite there being no evidence to support the claim. The riots lasted several days, during which at least five people were killed, and hundreds were injured. Indian businesses were vandalized, Indian tourists attacked, and public transportation halted (Acharya, 2022). During the riots, citizens of Madhesi origin also faced mistreatment.

The study participants expressed concern about the favorable environment in which hate, and other extremist groups can operate. They have noticed an alarming increase in the promotion of religion with a violent undertone and the rapid spread of such content. The potential impact on democracy is also a significant cause for worry.

Foreign Governments

The circulation of false messages where a foreign government is involved is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. The study participants described the flow of misleading information originating from various countries. Two major issues discussed by the participants were the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the Pokhara airport.

The MCC compact is a \$500 million grant from the USA to Nepal that was first signed in 2017 after determining goals to modernize Nepal's energy and transportation sectors. The compact was ratified by the Federal Parliament on February 27, 2022. However, before ratification, the compact became a contentious topic in Nepal's

political and social arena with politicians as well as public divided on whether the grant was beneficial to Nepal. For weeks before Parliament's ratification, there were debates, and demonstrations on the streets.

Regarding the MCC, Chinese communication channels were identified as the platforms where systematic dissemination of misinformation took place. Chinese state media created video content in the Nepali language questioning the strength of Nepal's sovereignty when the American Army arrives, linking it to the MCC. These contents went viral in Nepal. In contrast, the American missions issued notifications countering the misinformation. This level of Chinese activism, particularly in the MCC episode, had a significant impact on public perception of crucial foreign policy issue and the Parliament's capacity to make independent decisions. In 2022, various political party leaders incorporated the issue of MCC into their election campaigns, demonstrating its public visibility.

“Recently, the MCC faced the circulation of false information, while earlier, the misinformation about the Arun III hydro project had disrupted our development process.”

- *Bimala Bhandari, journalist (KII participant)*

Due to the geopolitical situation, both China and India have shown interest in Nepal's democratic processes and development initiatives. Indian television channels have exaggerated the topic of the construction of Pokhara airport. Most of the KII participants cited it as an example of misinformation spread by Indian mainstream media. Indian media consistently took a negative stance on Chinese investment in the airport which was evident by its sensationalized news of an air crash near the airport immediately after its opening.

The influence of Indian television channels and the entertainment industry in Nepal is substantial, leading to controversial information flows. Following the 2015 earthquake, a “Go Back Indian Media” campaign was initiated in Nepal after the Indian media were perceived to be involved in propaganda around rescue and relief works. Over the years, whether it is the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane from

Kathmandu in 1999 or statements made by Bollywood actor, or the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian media has been involved in creating and spreading misinformation about Nepal. The coverage provided by Indian media has consistently been perceived with skepticism by Nepali people, leading to occasional bans on Indian news channels in Nepal.

“Strategically, the Indian media has been presenting false content.”
- *Bimala Bhandari, journalist (KII participant)*

Domestic Government

In Nepal, the flow of misleading information within the political landscape has become a prominent feature. Political leaders often take credit for the work they have not actively participated in, engage in propaganda, and share accomplishments to bolster their political power. The participants acknowledged a clear trend of information flow from the federal government to the provinces and local governments. There are also instances of individuals spreading misinformation through social media by creating fake documents falsely attributed to the government. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Dinesh Chandra Thapaliya admitted that the government has been actively involved in disseminating information, strategically to influence public opinion during elections.

“Instances of misinformation from government sources have been uncovered, such as the Chief Minister of the Madhes Province using photos of Delhi to false promote development of his province.”
- *Umesh Shrestha, fact-check editor (KII participant)*

Both the federal and local governments face blame from KII participants regarding the dissemination of false information. Prime Ministers and Ministers are occasionally found making incorrect statements both in Parliament and outside. For instance, “Report of the Lal Commission,” as referred to by the Prime Minister was confirmed not to be in line with the facts, as NepalFactCheck.org has pointed out. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal on May 18 had told the House of Representatives that the government didn’t make the Commission

report public in respect of Supreme Court orders. Such instances highlight the prevalence of false information within the government system as well.

Some websites have subsequently been shut down for intentionally disseminating false content. The Telecommunications Authority of Nepal, based on recommendations from the Press Council Nepal, often blocks such websites. Closure of websites, based on the Press Council's code of conduct, occurs when the website fails to provide convincing answers to questions regarding their news content. The practice of blocking websites started in 2002 with the government move to shut down a website operated by the Maoists, who were underground at the time and used the platform to circulate their agenda and propaganda.

Commercial Actors

The practice of promoting exaggerated content through advertisements is not a new phenomenon. In the past, products like tobacco were advertised in Nepal as symbols of bravery. However, current regulations prohibit the advertisement of liquor and tobacco in mainstream media. Nowadays, many commercial actors in Nepal engage in exaggerating the qualities of various products, ranging from construction materials to food items. The study participants pointed out that advertisements, which claim that consuming certain cooking oil makes the heart stronger, are creating false perceptions among the people. Furthermore, the participants in the FGDs highlighted that these advertisements often target children, amplifying their impacts.

“The source of misinformation is not limited to the three levels of government; they also originate in the private sector.”

- *Raju Shrestha, RTI activist (KII participant)*

In addition to profit-oriented advertising, there is a growing trend of misinformation spread by those involved in communication for other products or services. Clickbait content, created for monetary gains, is prevalent, further exacerbating the dissemination of divisive narratives. This trend has been particularly noticeable on social media platforms where sensationalized information often takes precedence over balanced and accurate reporting. Sensational headlines

and exaggerated content are used to generate business based on misinformation.

“Information manipulation is done not only by journalists but also by others. The information providers are only giving information by weighing [benefits to themselves]. In a sense, there is cartelization in information that was not so widespread before.”

- *Rajendra Dahal, ex-chair of Press Council of Nepal (FGD participant)*

Non-Independent Media

In countries like Nepal, the growth of journalism often has roots in political mission. The concept of a partisan press was established in Nepal when the-then King Mahendra dismissed democratically elected government to establish the authoritarian Panchayat system in 1961 AD. Media were divided either to advocate for democracy or to support the Panchayat system, often presenting one side favorably while portraying the other side negatively. This environment laid the foundation for the spread of misinformation through journalism.

Following the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990 AD, privately owned media outlets emerged with a focus on commercial interests. However, many media organizations continued to be influenced by political parties or were closely associated with them. These media outlets, despite appearing to be commercially independent, often lack true independence. Misinformation tends to flow through such channels.

“The media itself contributes to the spread of false information. Certain individuals intentionally withhold accurate information, while others manipulate and disseminate incorrect content. Some media outlets engage in such practices with indirect financial backing from individuals close to those in power, including political leaders.”

- *Sarita Shreesh, politician (KII Participant)*

Party alignment is not a problem if such media stick to facts, opined Umesh Shrestha, editor of NepalFactCheck.org giving example of an attempted rape case of the-then House of Representative Speaker and

Maoist leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara. The details of the case were published by *Hamrokura* – an online news portal having clear affiliation with Nepali Congress, forcing him to resign. However, Shrestha also said such instances are rare in Nepali media.

Gokul Baskota, a former Minister of Communications, and Information Technology and a HoR member, highlighted the use of non-independent media to appease political leadership and serve vested interests. Baskota himself had previously served as a journalist for a mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) before entering active politics. He criticized the partisan press, referring to their relevance in the current context. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the work of Nepali media in recent days.

“Jumping to conclusions without facts is a disgrace. Nepali media often form opinions without verifying the facts, and this is disheartening.”

- Gokul Baskota, ex-minister (*KII participant*)

Contents

The research participants have observed intentional or unintentional dissemination of false information to cause harm in Nepal. Propaganda and hate speech have also made their way into circulation to some extent, especially through social media. Disinformation poses greater risks compared to unknowingly spread false information. It is widely acknowledged that a significant amount of disinformation was deliberately spread during a specific political event such as the elections, aiming to harm or to benefit certain individuals or groups. During elections, comments, and expressions of hatred regarding specific political issues were prevalent.

Hate speech is particularly prominent in the realm of social media. Organized political groups actively engage in spreading such hurtful content. The tendency to aggressively attack individuals with differing opinions or views is not limited to election periods but persists throughout other times as well. For example, those who supported Mayor Balen Shah during the Kathmandu metropolitan elections in 2022 organized an online campaign against the news outlet, onlinekhabar.

com, aiming to diminish their social media followers. These activities not only aim to discredit others but also involve the use of abusive languages. There has been an alarming increase in organized attacks and a growing intolerance towards differing opinions.

In this context, KP Sharma Oli, during his tenure as the Prime Minister, set a precedence of discrediting traditional media and making hateful expressions against journalist and columnists. The trend continued with leaders and workers of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) following a similar path, especially after their party Chairperson Rabi Lamichhane's invalid citizenship case came to the surface, resulting in the loss of his parliament membership. Legally, holding citizenship of two countries is not allowed in Nepal. After Ravi Lamichhane obtained American citizenship, his Nepali citizenship was automatically revoked. Although he later returned to Nepal, he did not reactivate his citizenship in accordance with the provisions. Consequently, he not only lost the position of Home Minister but also his seat as a member of the House of Representatives. After completing the legal process of citizenship, he was once again eligible to run as a candidate and was elected accordingly. Lamichhane criticized traditional media and referred to them as "12 Bhai (Brothers)," a term that is now used to insult or attack journalists working in any form of journalism.

Tactics

Political parties have established organized groups to manipulate the flow of information. These groups create an environment of support or opposition, strategically disseminating information through various channels. One common tactic employed is the use of fake social media accounts to amplify the spread of information. During the 2022 election, there was a notable presence of groups supporting or opposing the election campaign posts of political party leaders. It was evident that these groups were engaged in propaganda, as they appeared on social media simultaneously, using fake accounts for mass dissemination. These accounts were mostly managed by a limited number of individuals, lacking proper bios and any previous personal posts. There have been instances where even political leaders have been misled by false accounts of some celebrities. Former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's criticism of former Princess Himani Shah

was based on the contents of a fake X (formerly Twitter) account belonging to Shah.

Although the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as part of fake accounts is not prevalent, most KII and FGD participants expressed possibilities about its potential use in spreading misinformation in Nepal anytime soon. Their concerns primarily focused on the organized operation of fake accounts, which many of the KII participants believe has reached alarming levels, facilitating the spread of false information.

Manipulation of videos and audio has also increased in Nepal. False content is circulated by altering expressions and contexts. The trend of trolling -deliberate attempt to silence or upset someone or start an argument with especially by posting offensive or unkind things as comments or replies on social media for his/her opinions is widespread, and use of bots, although not widespread, is present.

“The use of bots to propagate false information has become a noticeable trend, leading to a spread of misleading content across various platforms.”

- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

“There is a trend of intentionally spreading false information and engaging in exaggerated behaviors to provoke trolling. Additionally, there is another trend of trolling by taking someone’s statements out of context and misrepresenting their intentions.”

- *Dinesh Thapaliya, Chief Election Commissioner (KII participant)*

Another tactic commonly employed to propagate misleading narratives in Nepal is photo montages. Linking photos from different contexts to other unrelated events has become a major trend and contributed to effective spread of misinformation through visual means.

Combating Information Manipulation

Information manipulation does not solely concern only a small segment of society, its impact is profound and widespread. After analyzing the KIIs and FGDs, it is clear that information manipula-

tion is omnipresent in Nepal in all platforms – including mainstream media – and that there is various threat actors involved in spreading misinformation. Misinformation flowing through mass media and social media is influenced by various threat actors, including the government, opposition, parliament, courts, and administration in general. Participants of KIIs and FGDs suggested that addressing the challenge of information manipulation requires collective efforts and organized actions from all parties involved including social media companies.

Regulations: Many participants emphasized the importance of implementing legal measures to curb the impact of misinformation. However, some legal experts caution that laws made to address misinformation run the risk of being misused, potentially infringing on freedom of expression. Therefore, careful consideration and caution are necessary while formulating such laws, particularly when it comes to legislation regarding social media. Digital rights activists state that careful consideration is necessary to strike a balance between regulation and protecting free speech.

“While control through legislation can be effective, there is a potential risk of abuse associated with this approach. Careful consideration is necessary to strike a balance between regulations and protecting free speech.”

- *Santosh Sigdel, digital rights lawyer (FGD participant)*

Former minister Gokul Baskota suggested that although it may be too late to introduce a new law, doing so should not impede the free flow of information and freedom of expression. Some participants suggested that regulations should come in the form of code of conduct rather than the laws.

“Imposing control on the media could turn the state into a dictatorship. Instead, to combat the spread of fake content, strict enforcement of a robust code of conduct is necessary.”

- *Mohammad Ishtiyaq Rai, ex-minister (KII participant)*

“Unfortunately, some media prioritize sensationalism over accuracy, resulting in the dissemination of false information. If media outlets strictly adhere to their ethical codes, it would significantly improve the information landscape.”

- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

Media and Information Literacy: Creating awareness among the creators, spreaders, and the consumers about information manipulation is seen as a crucial response by most of the participants. Given the society’s increasing reliance on social media for any sort of information, it is essential to differentiate between the contents disseminated through traditional media channels and those coming from social media platforms. Therefore, it is crucial to educate the public about the differences in content quality and reliability.

“A more effective approach involves civil society scrutinizing information critically based on facts and engaging in meaningful discussions. By doing so, they can influence people positively and ensure the dissemination of reliable information.”

- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

“There is no better alternative to media and information literacy as a long-term approach since the impact of information manipulation could only be minimized to the lowest level possible by the consumers of information who are aware and have skills to analyze information critically.”

- *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

“The government should establish a comprehensive policy and enact laws specifically addressing false information. Simultaneously, the media should enhance its internal control system to improve accountability and accuracy in reporting.”

- *Dinesh Thapaliya, Chief Election Commissioner (KII participant)*

Promoting media and information literacy has become imperative, whether through the collective efforts of civil society or individual

initiatives or traditional media. Participants suggest that media and information literacy should be tailored for different classes and age groups separately.

“In urban areas, experts scrutinize the source of information to determine its credibility. However, this level of verification is often lacking in rural regions, leaving residents unsure of whom to trust.”

- *Tula Narayan Shah, activist (FGD participant)*

It is essential to tailor the style of public awareness according to different levels of understanding, as misinformation can impact various layers or classes of society differently.

“It is crucial to define the specific target audience for whom digital literacy is essential.”

- *Santosh Sigdel, digital rights lawyer (FGD participant)*

The influence of digital media has spread across all age groups and communities, regardless of economic, social, or educational backgrounds. Therefore, assessing the media literacy status and implementing expert recommendations to inform each class about false information is necessary.

Media’s Proactiveness: With the growing influence of social media in Nepal, the impact of edited content shared on platforms like YouTube and TikTok is becoming as powerful as television footages. The alarming rise of false content being circulated must be taken seriously and addressed effectively by operators of mass media because the spread of misinformation has a direct impact on public trust towards them and their business.

“The public trust in the media as a whole is on a steady decline... there is a noticeable decrease in people’s interest in mainstream media, with a rise in reliance on information on social media platforms and increasing amount of misinformation.”

- *Urbasi Basnyat, Radio Sagarmatha station manager (FGD participant)*

Currently, Nepal lacks a dedicated fact-checking unit within the media industry itself. Tika Ram Pradhan of The Kathmandu Post said that “reliable fact-checking mechanism is conspicuously absent in the media”. Independent fact-checking initiatives are also relatively scarce, with limited positive feedback. Newsrooms are often hesitant to acknowledge their errors or wrongdoing. In some instances, rather than rectifying the news, journalists seem to be making statements against the fact-check.

The culture of conducting thorough assessments and fact-checking is yet to fully develop. The topic of journalistic accountability, particularly concerning fact-checking, needs to be extensively debated within media organizations, including established newsrooms. Most study participants expressed the view that the media should take the initiative to curb the dissemination of false content by increasing their credibility among the people.

Shiv Gaunle, Editor-in-Chief of *onlinekhabar.com*, acknowledges the importance of maintaining objectivity in the newsroom as the first step towards countering spread of false information. He emphasizes the need to proactively halt the spread of false content within the newsroom, even if it requires significant efforts. Gaunle admits that a substantial political influence can penetrate newsrooms, as reporters often come with their own biases and assumptions. The tendency to rely on secondary sources has distanced many from seeking information directly from primary sources.

The media industry must prioritize measures to establish fact-checking units, encourage a culture of accountability, and promote objectivity within newsrooms to effectively combat the flow of false information.

“The strength of the communication medium plays a crucial role in determining the impact of misinformation. A robust communication platform will weaken the influence of those spreading false information, emphasizing the importance of promoting reliable and responsible sources of information.”

- *Kundan Aryal, journalism associate professor (FGD participant)*

All participating journalists in the study have highlighted the newsroom's weaknesses and emphasized the need to improve the newsroom culture and structure to reduce misinformation. They strongly advocate for the strict observance of the code of ethics as a key solution to many problems. By prioritizing investigative content for the public, newsrooms can regain public trust. Tilak Pathak expressed that "if mainstream media commit to rigorous journalism, their influence and credibility are likely to soar."

Social media has emerged as the primary gateway for accessing information, even those contents published in mainstream media, said Lekhanath Pandey, a media teacher at the Tribhuvan University. And social media remains the biggest platform, where citizens are exposed to misinformation, according to CMR-Nepal's surveys. In the context, most of the participants emphasized needs of actions from the social media while acknowledging they have not done anything or done too little to combat information manipulation in Nepal.

Nepal Police express concerns over the challenges of controlling cybercrime. They acknowledge facing difficulties in communicating with popular social media platforms regarding misinformation and related offenses. Although there is a significant number of social media users, these platforms lack an official presence in Nepal. In the 2022 elections, Meta collaborated with the Election Commission of Nepal, marking the first institutional step in this direction. However, outside of this collaboration, Nepal Police has not received sufficient support from social media operators in dealing with criminal activities. To address this issue, it is crucial for these social media operators to establish offices in Nepal. The government needs to take policy initiatives to facilitate such partnerships.

Many social media platforms have a facility to report misinformation and harmful content, but users often lack awareness about such reporting mechanisms. Establishing an office by social media operators in Nepal would enable them to receive suggestions or instructions for implementing awareness measures. Social media literacy necessitates that these platforms share equal responsibility in promoting awareness and combating misinformation.

"With mainstream media seemingly overlooking content that

resonates with the public, social media groups have stepped in to fill this void. However, the primary challenge lies in promoting ethics among people in this ever-evolving social media landscape.”
- *Shreeram Paudel, journalism assistant professor (FGD participant)*

A more effective approach involves civil society scrutinizing information critically, based on facts, and engaging in meaningful discussion. By doing so they can influence people positively and ensure the dissemination of reliable information.

The participants argue that by spreading awareness through civil society and gaining acceptance from citizens, the impact of misinformation from any level can gradually weaken. It is crucial to foster a tradition of questioning political leadership and the media, which are often considered the sources of misinformation. When citizens begin to raise questions, it fosters accountability, ultimately strengthening democracy.

Conclusions

In Nepal, misinformation has emerged as a significant and pervasive issue, impacting various aspects of society, especially during critical events like elections and the Covid-19 pandemic. This study involving key stakeholders from diverse sectors have underscored the active propagation and manipulation of misinformation by multiple entities, including political parties, hate groups, foreign governments, commercial actors, non-independent media, and individuals with vested interests. The prevalence of misinformation during elections has become increasingly a major concern, with political parties resorting to information manipulation to gain a competitive edge over their opponents. Through the dissemination of misleading content, such as fake content, doctored images, and viral videos, they seek to sway public opinion and influence voter behavior, ultimately impacting electoral outcomes.

Hate and extremist groups are also contributing to the dissemination of misinformation, particularly in the Tarai region. By exploiting religious sentiments and engaging in divisive activities, these groups pose a significant threat to the nation’s stability and democratic fabric.

Foreign governments, notably China and India, have actively engaged in spreading misinformation within Nepal. Utilizing social media platforms and state-sponsored media outlets, they propagate false narratives to influence public perception and influence crucial decision-making processes, as observed in cases like the MCC and Pokhara airport.

Furthermore, domestic governments have been found involved in spreading misinformation, with political leaders often exaggerating achievements and manipulating information to consolidate their hold on power and garner public support. The lack of media independence exacerbates this problem, as media outlets often align themselves with specific political affiliations, leading to biased reporting and the spread of false information.

Commercial actors, too, play a role in promoting exaggerated content, particularly through advertisements that create false perceptions among the public. Clickbait content and misinformation for financial gains, coupled with sensationalized headlines, have become common tactics employed by these entities.

Various tactics are employed to spread misinformation, ranging from the use of fake social media accounts and manipulated videos to photo montages and linking unrelated events to fabricate false narratives. Political parties have also tried to establish units to manipulate information, shaping an environment of support or opposition based on their agendas.

To combat the challenge of information manipulation, collective efforts and organized actions are required from all parties involved, including social media companies. Implementing regulations to curb misinformation is essential, but careful consideration must be taken to strike a balance between regulation and preserving freedom of expression. Rather than rigid laws, a robust code of conduct may be more effective in addressing the spread of fake content.

Promoting media and information literacy emerges as a crucial response to combat misinformation. Creating awareness among creators, spreaders, and consumers about information manipulation can help differentiate between content from traditional media channels and social media platforms. Tailoring public awareness messages to

suit the people with different levels of understanding is crucial, as misinformation can impact various layers of society differently.

Media's proactiveness is crucial in countering misinformation, and establishing dedicated fact-checking units within the media industry is necessary. Promoting objectivity and accountability within newsrooms can reduce the spread of false information and rebuild public trust.

Social media's role in misinformation is significant, and social media companies need to take more action to combat information manipulation in Nepal. Establishing official presence and offices in Nepal can improve communication with the government and law enforcement agencies to address criminal activities related to misinformation.

Civil society and citizens play a vital role in combating misinformation. By critically scrutinizing information and engaging in meaningful discussions, civil society can positively influence people and promote the dissemination of reliable information.

Addressing information manipulation in Nepal requires a multi-pronged approach, involving regulations, media and information literacy, media proactiveness, social media responsibility, and active participation from civil society and citizens. Only through collective and concerted efforts can Nepal effectively combat information manipulation and foster an informed and accountable society.

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* *The KII questionnaire was developed by the authors and interviews were conducted by various field researchers who also transcribed interviews that were analyzed by the authors.*

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Appendix 1

Focus Group Discussion Participants

FGD 1

1. Rajendra Dahal, Ex-Chair, Press Council Nepal;
2. Rewati Prasad Sapkota, Communication Registrar, Bagmati Province;
3. Urbashi Basnet, Station Manager, Radio Sagarmatha;
4. Tula Narayan Shah, Political Analyst;
5. Dr. Kundan Aryal, Associate Professor, Tribhuvan University;
6. BP Shah, Politician; and
7. Tilak Pathak, Executive Director, CMR Nepal.

FGD 2:

1. Shiva Gaunle, Editor in Chief, Online Khabar;
2. Dr. Shree Ram Paudel, Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University;
3. Santosh Sigdel, Advocate and digital rights activist;
4. Tikaram Pradhan, journalist, The Kathmandu Post;
5. Lekhanath Pandey, Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University;
6. Bhuwan KC, communication expert, and
7. Tilak Pathak, Executive Director, CMR Nepal

Appendix 2

Key Informant Interview participants

1. Ajit Tiwari, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Madhes
2. Babita Basnet, Editor, Ghatanara Bichar, Bagmati
3. Baburam Bhandari, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Koshi
4. Bimala Bhandari, Journalist, President, FNJ Kaski, Gandaki
5. Bishwo Prakash Sharma, General Secretary, Nepali Congress
6. CP Khanal, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Lumbini
7. Dharma Raj Panthi, Chairman, TAAN Gandaki, Gandaki
8. Dinesh Gautam, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Karnali
9. Dinesh Thapaliya, Chief Election Commissioner, Bagmati
10. Dineshraj Bhandari, Former President, Kailali Chamber of Commerce, Sudur Pashchim
11. Gokul Baskota, Former Minister, Bagmati
12. Govinda Khanal, Human Right worker, Lumbini
13. Jagdish Sharma, Intellectual, Madhes
14. Kamal Raj Lamsal, Assistant Professor, Midwest University, Karnali
15. Madhav Sapkota, Member of Parliament, Bagmati
16. Mohammad Ishtiyah Rai, Politician, Lumbini
17. Om Prakash Sharaf, Politician, Madhes
18. Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police, Cyber Bureau, Bagmati
19. Rajesh Man Singh, Mayor, Birgunj, Madhes
20. Rajiv Subba, IT expert (former) Nepal Police, Bagmati
21. Raju Shrestha, RTI Activist, Koshi
22. Rambharos Kapadi, Vice-Chancellor, Madhes Academy, Madhes
23. Santosh Pokharel, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Gandaki
24. Saraswoti Gurung, Member, Gandaki Province, Gandaki
25. Sarita Shreesh, Politician, Lumbini
26. Sitaram Bhatta, Academician, Kailali Multiple Campus, Sudur Pashchim
27. Tekraj Joshi, Fact Check Monitor, CMR Nepal, Sudur Pashchim
28. Umesh Shrestha, Editor, NepalFactCheck.org, Nepal, Bagmati
29. Victor Paudel, Founder, Routine of Nepal Banda, (RONB), Bagmati