Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by

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Introduction

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has emerged as a crucial long-term intervention to develop public resilience against misinformation. MIL is defined as a set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, to create as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical, and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional, and societal activities (UNESCO, 2013). The Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy in 2012 is more encompassing:

> "MIL is defined as a combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices required to access, analyze, evaluate, use, produce, and communicate information and knowledge in creative, legal, and ethical ways that respect human rights. Media and information literate individuals can use diverse media, information sources, and channels in their private, professional, and public lives. They know when and what information they need and what for, and where and how to obtain it. They understand who has created that information and why, as well as the roles, responsibilities and functions of media, information providers and memory institutions. They can analyze information, messages, beliefs and values conveyed through the media and any kind of content producers, and can validate information they have found and produced against a range of generic, personal and context-based criteria. MIL competencies thus extend beyond information and communication technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking and interpretive skills across and beyond professional, educational and societal boundaries. MIL addresses all types of media (oral, print, analogue and digital) and all forms and formats of resources." (IFLA, 2012)

These skills have become significantly more important with the advent of the internet and mobile phones, which have enabled nearly everyone on the planet to access and consume information. Citizens can now access information on their phones anytime, anywhere, bypassing traditional information gatekeepers such as local media and opinion leaders. However, this increased accessibility and engagement

have also led to a rise in exposure to misleading information. By developing media literacy skills, individuals can become more informed and critical consumers of media, better able to navigate the complex media landscape, identify misinformation, and make informed decisions about the media they consume and create (Saidqodirova, 2024).

In recent years, misinformation has emerged as one of society's greatest challenges, adversely affecting individuals, communities, and political systems. Combating misinformation and building resilience against manipulated information among the public has become critically important in today's information ecosystem dominated by digital information sharing platforms. There are several types of interventions to combat misinformation. Blair et. al. (2023) classified interventions into four categories: informational interventions, which provide corrective information to counter specific pieces of misinformation, such as fact-checking; educational interventions, which seek to impart skills that will make consumers less susceptible to misinformation more generally such as MIL; sociopsychological interventions, which use priming or appeals to social identity and social costs to discourage the spread of misinformation, such as accuracy prompts; and institutional interventions, which seek to change the behavior of the producers and distributors of misinformation, including platforms, politicians, and journalists, such as media development and platform altercation.

Among many interventions, fact-checking as the reactive or corrective strategy and MIL as proactive or preventive strategy have gained much attention. Although those strageties are not complete, as Hoes et. al. (2024) showed that while all interventions successfully reduce belief in false information, they also negatively impact the credibility of factual information. However, research has established that 'MIL trainings can enhance individuals' ability to identify inauthentic information and reduce their likelihood of sharing it' (Adjin-Tettey, 2022) and 'media literacy is essential in today's digital age to help individuals engage with media content thoughtfully and responsibly' (Saidqodirova, 2024).

Media and Information Literacy in Nepal

MIL has only gained attention in Nepal in recent years. As digital media consumption increased, concerns regarding misinformation,

media influence, and the need for critical media engagement have surfaced. Scholars have explored different aspects of MIL in Nepal, highlighting gaps in media literacy and information skills across different groups, including educators, students, and the general public.

Dhital (2022), in a study on the level of media literacy among headteachers of community schools in the Kathmandu Valley, found that while headteachers play a crucial role in shaping students' media consumption, their awareness of media influence on their professional responsibilities remains limited. However, the research revealed a positive correlation between media literacy and effective communication behavior, suggesting that enhanced media literacy can improve leadership and decision-making in schools.

Gurung (2025) explored the broader interconnection between media, education, and governance in Nepal emphasizing that media literacy is fundamental to a functioning democracy, as it influences how media content is produced, distributed, and consumed. The study also indicated that current media trends in Nepal contribute to misinformation, propaganda, and political manipulation, ultimately posing risks to democratic stability.

Nyaichyai (2016) examined information literacy skills among postgraduate students at Khwopa College in Bhaktapur and pointed out that a lack of awareness regarding credible and authoritative information sources significantly hinders students' academic progress. The findings suggest that college libraries should enhance their services to support the development of information literacy skills.

Aryal (2023) discussed media literacy as a crucial factor in building trust in media and argued that despite ongoing discussions on media literacy for over a decade, public awareness and understanding of how to navigate different media platforms remain low. Aryal emphasized the need for educational initiatives to enhance media literacy, enabling users to engage with media content more critically and responsibly.

The studies collectively highlight the fragmented nature of MIL in Nepal, revealing significant deficiencies across different sectors. Dhital's research on headteachers underscores the necessity of media literacy for educators, yet it fails to propose systemic policy changes that could integrate MIL into Nepal's formal education system. Without such integration, any improvement in media literacy among headteachers

is likely to remain inconsistent and dependent on individual awareness rather than structural reform. Building on this, Gurung's study raises concerns about misinformation and political manipulation, illustrating Nepal's vulnerability due to the lack of systematic research and regulation. However, while Gurung effectively identifies media literacy as a crucial factor in democratic resilience, the study does not propose actionable solutions.

Nyaichyai's research highlights weaknesses in academic information literacy, but it is confined to postgraduate students and does not explore the broader implications of information illiteracy among the general public or professionals. Aryal's discussion focuses more on identifying the problem than providing concrete strategies for improving media literacy among media users. Comprehensive MIL programs, public awareness campaigns, and fact-checking initiatives are necessary to enhance trust and accountability in Nepal's media landscape.

Research Design

This chapter analyzes workshop participation data, highlighting demographic trends, regional involvement, and the program's effectiveness within the MIL framework. It is based on an analysis of a post-workshop survey with participants of MIL workshops, and focus group discussions with participating teachers and students.

The MIL orientation sessions held in Nepal from 2023 to 2024 are an effort to enhance critical thinking and information literacy among youths. Following a Training of Trainers (ToT), trained teachers organized subsequent orientation sessions for their students at their respective schools. This cascade training model ensures the dissemination of MIL concepts at a grassroots level through the established system of knowledge transfer. The participating students were handed over an optional survey form. The survey questions did not include personally identifiable information.

Out of 4,850 participants, 3,448 respondents submitted the filled-out survey form. The researchers, upon verification, validated 2,935 responses. The exclusion was based on the following criteria: incomplete form, contradictory answers, and age group outside study, below 10 and above 19.

Over the period of two years (2023-2024), six focus group discussions and six key informant interviews were conducted in. Madhes and Lumbini provinces. The FGDs included 23 teachers and 45 students – divided equally into three FGDs sessions each for teachers and students. All interviews and discussion was conducted after orientation session was concluded.

Quantitative findings

Demographics of the Survey Respondents

The MIL workshops were conducted in schools, primarily targeting adolescent youth aged 10-19 years. Among the respondents the younger demographic (10–14 years) made up the majority of participation (52%), while (15-19) accounted of 48 percent.

Regionally, Lumbini Province (44.4%) and Madhes Province (29.6%) had the highest participation rates. This is attributed to the program being conducted twice in these regions during 2023 and 2024. Gandaki (9.4%), Koshi (7.6%), Bagmati (6.0%), and Karnali (3.0%) provinces had lower participation, as the initiative was implemented only once in those provinces. Sudurpaschim province was not included in the study.

The ethnic distribution of respondents shows that Brahmin/Kshetri (33.9%) represented the largest group, followed by Janajati (23.3%), Dalit (12.7%), Muslims (3.9%), Newars (2.6%), and others (23.4%). Public schools accounted for 64.4 percent of participation, due to the program's emphasis on reaching diverse respondent populations, particularly in areas with limited access to resources.

Table 5.1: Sex and Age Groups of Respondents

Sex	Age	Number	Percentage
Female	10 – 14 years	885	30.2%
	15 - 19 years	752	25.6%
	Total	1,637	55.8%
Male	10 – 14 years	646	22.0%
	15 - 19 years	652	22.2%
	Total	1,298	44.2%
	Total	2,935	100%

Finding 1: Information sources are primarily digital

Social media emerges as the most prominent source of news and information, with 36.1 percent of respondents indicating it as their primary media type. Online media follows representing 27.6 percent of responses suggesting that digital media is an important source for accessing journalistic news coverage and information of their interests. Interestingly, 12 percent of the respondents said they only use mobile phones for acquiring information, accessing both online media and social media, showing the trend that mobile is integral to news & information consumption.

As Table 5.2 shows, traditional media such as television (14.6%), radio (4.9%), and newspapers (3.5%) still have a presence but occupy much smaller segments, as less than one in four respondents use them as information sources.

Table 5.2: Primary Media Source for News and Information

What is your primary source for news and information? (select one)	Number	Percentage
Social media	1,060	36.1%
Online media	811	27.6%
Television	428	14.6%
Mobile phone for online news and social media	352	12.0%
Radio	144	4.9%
Newspapers	102	3.5%
Others	38	1.3%
Total	2,935	100.0%

The findings reveal distinct patterns regarding the preferred media for news and information among the respondents. This underlines the growing influence of social platforms, where news content is increasingly consumed through informal channels, such as user-generated posts and shared stories.

Moreover, a small percentage (1.3%) mentions using other unspecified media, indicating probably niche digital platforms or games or community-driven media that are gaining traction among the younger demographic.

Finding 2: Sharing information without verification was high before orientation

Table 5.3 reveals that before attending the MIL orientation session more than a half youths, almost 57%, share information online without verifying it. Among them a notable percentage of respondents, 36.9%, occasionally shared information on social media without verifying its accuracy. A further 19.7 percent admitted to frequently sharing unverified information, underlining the prevalent behavior of casual engagement with social media content. This indicates a common lack of awareness regarding the importance of verifying information before sharing it with others, which is concerning in the context of misinformation's potential spread on social platforms.

On the other hand, 35.2 percent reported that they always verify information before sharing. There were 8.1 percent of respondents who indicated that they do not share information on social media.

Table 5.3: Sharing information without verifying

Have you ever shared information on social media without verifying its accuracy?	Number	Percentage
Yes, occasionally	1,162	36.9%
Yes, frequently	738	19.7%
No, I always verify before sharing	405	35.2%
I don't share information on social media	333	8.1%
Total	2,935	100%

Finding 3: Exposure to misinformation is high, awareness is low

The study finds that there are varying levels of awareness surrounding the term 'misinformation' among the participants before attending the MIL orientation sessions. Notably, 59.6 percent of respondents reported having no prior understanding of the term 'misinformation' before the orientation session, with 42.2 percent stating they were not familiar with the meaning of the term and 17.4 percent stating they heard it for the first time during the orientation session. Remaining 40.3 percent had heard and understood the term before the orientation. Although not recognizing or hearing the term doesn't necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge among respondents about spread of incorrect information; however, it suggest a dearth of public awareness campaigns reaching them.

Table 5.4: Familiarity with 'misinformation' prior to the MIL orientation session

Were you familiar with term 'misinformation' and its meaning before the orientation session?	Number	Percentage
Yes	1,183	40.3%
No	1,240	42.2%
Heard it first time in the session	512	17.4%
Total	2,935	100.0%

The findings show that a significant majority (59.4%) of respondents have encountered misinformation at some point, reconginzing the widespread prevalence of false or misleading information in the media and digital platforms. This stresses the importance of addressing misinformation within educational frameworks, as respondents are not only familiar with the term but have also encountered it in their day-to-day interactions with various media.

The 40.6 percent of respondents who reported not having encountered misinformation could suggest a lack of awareness or perhaps limited exposure to certain types of media. However, this may also be an indicator of the subjective nature of recognizing misinformation, as individuals might not always perceive or critically assess the information they are exposed to. Given that more than half of the respondents have experienced misinformation, it is crucial for MIL programs to equip respondents with the necessary skills to identify, evaluate, and counteract misleading or false content.

In regions beyond the valley, the uptake of the program may be influenced by several factors, such as limited access to modern digital infrastructure, including widespread smartphone usage and internet connectivity. It is important to recognize that in rural or less-developed areas, respondents might rely more heavily on traditional forms of media such as television, radio, and newspapers due to their accessibility. The absence of a consistent internet connection or smartphones for every respondent might limit the extent to which respondents engage with newer digital platforms, like social media and online news. As such, this gap between traditional and digital media consumption patterns poses challenges for a fully integrated approach to MIL, where both older and newer media formats need to be addressed.

Table 5.5: Encountering misinformation

Have you encountered misinformation?	Number	Percentage
Yes	1,743	59.4%
No	1,192	40.6%
Total	2,935	100.0%

Finding 4: Social media is dominant source of misinformation

Table 5.6 reveals that social media is the leading source of misinformation, with 67.6 percent of respondents who have encountered misinformation identifying it as a platform for encountering misinformation. Online news (38.2%) follows as a significant source. Traditional media, such as television (19.1%), newspapers (12.6%) and Radio (9.8%) are less associated with misinformation. Word of mouth (24.9%) emerges as a notable source, suggesting that informal social networks also contribute to the spread of misinformation.

Table 5.6: Sources of Misinformation

Where you encountered misinformation?*	Number	Percentage
Social media	1,178	67.6%
Online news sites	666	38.2%
Word of mouth	434	24.9%
Television	333	19.1%
Newspaper	219	12.6%
Radio	170	9.8%
Others	159	9.1%

**Multiple Choice Question (n=1,743)*

A notable insight from the data is that 59.5 percent respondents say they encountered misinformation in only one medium, while the remaining 40.5 percent encountered them in multiple sources. For 35.9 percent of youth encoutering misinformation, the sole source of misinformation is social media while 14.1 percent encouter misinformation in online news sites only. Television (3.1%), radio (1.3%) and newspaper (1.1%), on their own, is only minor platform of misinformation. This could also mean that the youths have less access to these traditional media compared to platforms available on the internet.

The data shows respondents' perceptions of the prevalence of potentially false or misleading content on social media. A significant proportion, 48.7%, reported encountering such information occasionally on social media, while 30.5 percent stated they encounter it very frequently.

Finding 5: Creators and journalists perceived responsible for spreading misinformation

The findings reveal that most respondents perceive social media influencers and users as most responsible for spreading misinformation. Social media influencers emerged as the most frequently cited group, with 39.6 percent respondents considering them spreaders of misinformation, followed by social media users to whom 25.1 percent consider responsible. This finding is in consistent with where the youths encouter misinformation and reflect the common perception that misinformation spreads rapidly through social media platforms, driven by individual actions.

Interestingly, journalists and media persons were identified by 13.8 percent of respondents, which highlights a concern about the responsibility of traditional media in verifying facts and providing accurate information as well as how journalists are perceived by youth in contemporary society. Journalists are put ahead of politicians, whom 11.3 percent of respondents hold responsible for spreading misinformation.

Table 5.7: Perceived Responsibility for Spreading Misinformation

Who is responible for spreading misinformation?	Number	Percentage
Social media influencers like celebrities	1,162	39.6
Social media users	738	25.1
Journalists and media persons	405	13.8
Politicians	333	11.3
Friends	97	3.3
Teachers	52	1.8
Parents/ Family members	42	1.4
Others	41	1.4
Doctors	33	1.1
Government employees	32	1.1
Total	2,935	100%

Other groups, such as friends (3.3%), teachers (1.8%), parents (1.4%), government employees (1.1%), and doctors (1.1%), are also seen as contributing to misinformation, albeit to a very less extent. This may reflect perceptions of biased or uninformed opinions being shared within personal networks or by trusted figures.

Finding 6: Misinformation has high impact on youths' perspectives and opinions

The responses in Table 5.8 show the significant impact that misinformation is perceived to have on shaping young people's perspectives and opinions. A notable 47.0 percent identified misinformation as extremely influential, while 30.4 percent considered it moderately influential. These figures collectively represent a strong acknowledgment of the persuasive power of false or misleading information among this demographic. Only 11.3 percent viewed the influence of misinformation as minimal, and an additional 11.2 percent were uncertain about its impact.

Table 5.8: Perceived impact of misinformation on youths' perspectives and opinions

How influential do you think misinformation and disinformation are in shaping respondents' perspectives and opinions?	Number	Percentage
Extremely influential	1,380	47.0%
Moderately influential	892	30.4%
Minimally influential	333	11.3%
Not sure	330	11.2%
Total	2935	100.0%

Finding 7: Media and Information Literacy perceived as important

The respondents' feedback regarding the MIL orientation indicates a strong affirmation of their value and relevance. As shown in Table 5.9, an overwhelming majority of respondents (89.1%) reported that the orientation was significantly important to them. Additionally, 9.3 percent of participants acknowledged the orientation's relevance

to some extent, highlighting the program's broad acceptability and impact among respondents.

Notably, only a marginal percentage of respondents expressed uncertainty (0.9%) or skepticism (0.7%) regarding the importance of the orientation.

Table 5.9: Importance of MIL Orientation as Perceived by Respondents

Was the orientation on MIL important to you?	Number	Percentage
Yes, significantly	2,615	89.1%
Yes, to some extent	274	9.3%
I am not sure	25	0.9%
No, not really	21	0.7%
Total	2,935	100.0%

Furthermore, the overwhelmingly positive response regarding the willingness to recommend the MIL orientation session to their friends and peers, indicates approval of the program among respondents. A significant 83.5 percent of respondents expressed their intention to recommend the session "absolutely" to their peers, reflecting high satisfaction with the content of the workshop. Additionally, 12.7 percent of respondents indicated that they would recommend the session "if they are interested," implying that while they found value in the session, they may recognize that some of their peers may not find the content relevant.

The low percentage of respondents who expressed reluctance in recommending the session (2.0%) or those who were unsure (1.8%) further highlights the overall success of the MIL orientation.

The feedback on the clarity and comprehensibility of the concepts presented in the MIL orientation sessions shows a positive response from participants. A substantial majority of respondents (72.5%) found the concepts of MIL topics "very clear," and an additional 23.2 percent described the content as "mostly clear". Nevertheless, a small percentage of respondents (3.6%) reported experiencing some confusion, while 0.7 percent found the material "very confusing."

Finding 8: Increased understanding on information sources after orientation

To evaluate participants' learning from the orientation, they were asked: "What do you do when you receive information from the media?" The responses revealed that nearly two-thirds (73.19%) said they would "question the sources of the information." This highlights that MIL orientations can effectively emphasize the importance of critically evaluating media content, even at the school level or among youth, by teaching them to assess the credibility and reliability of information sources.

Meanwhile, 5% of respondents said they would "disagree with the source of the information,"and another 5% said they would "believe the media information as it is." Additionally, 17%indicated they would "agree with the source of information."

A small portion of respondents showed mixed reactions in their acceptance or rejection of information: 17% explicitly agreed with the source, and 5% accepted the information without scrutiny. This suggests a need to strengthen MIL skills among some participants even after the orientation.

Overall, the data indicates that while a significant majority (73.19%) understand the importance of critically evaluating media sources, there remains a gap (22 percent combined) among those who accept or reject information without questioning its source. This underscores the necessity for continued MIL education to ensure all participants develop consistent critical thinking skills for media consumption.

Table 5.10: Reaction to media information

What should you do when you get information in the media?	Number	Percentage
Question the sources of the information for credibility	2148	73.19 %
Agree to the source of information	497	16.93%
Believe the media information as it is	135	4.60%
Disagree to the the source of information	155	5.28%
Total	2,935	100.0%

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis is based on Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and personal interviews with participating teachers and students in Madhes and Lumbini provinces. These discussions and interviews took place at different intervals throughout 2023-2024. FGDs were conducted with teachers and students in Madhes and Lumbini provinces, and key informant interviews were conducted with teachers in Madhes province after two months of orientation sessions.

Finding 9: MIL orientation timely intervention

Participants consistently indicated that the course was timely and important for both teachers and students. It has proven to be a valuable tool for identifying the use of new media and understanding the need to identify trustworthy sources of information across various domains. The training emphasized topics such as misinformation, digital wellbeing, and cyber security, which resonated strongly with the participants.

The MIL orientation covered five key areas: understanding media, the internet, misinformation/disinformation, fact-checking, and cybersecurity. Teachers noted consistently that students in different grade levels had varying interests in these topics.

According to their observations, junior students in grades 6 to 10 were particularly interested in learning about cybersecurity issues. However, as students progressed to higher grade levels, their interest shifted towards fact-checking and understanding misinformation.

The effectiveness of the program was demonstrated through multiple examples. Indira Aryal, a schoolteacher from Lumbini province, emphasized the necessity of the MIL orientation and recommended its implementation in different schools. She noted that in today's world, everyone is exposed to various sources of information, making it essential to address the challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

One of the key benefits observed was the increased awareness of misinformation and its verification. Teachers observed that students became more cautious in accepting information at face value and started fact-checking content. Pradeep Shree Adhikari from Nepalgunj shared such feedback, highlighting the program's practical impact on students' ability to critically evaluate digital content.

Finding 10: School management positively accepts MIL orientation

The school management demonstrated enthusiasm about introducing innovative and emerging topics to school students. Teachers believe that the school management has recognized the impact of new technology on students but has found solutions through the MIL orientation.

Durga Sapkota, a school principal from Lumbini Province who participated in the training course, expressed the need for additional support in the form of resources such as books or further orientation to expand the MIL orientation in her school. This sentiment was echoed by other teachers.

Educators highlighted the importance of integrating MIL into the school-level curriculum, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts in policy formulation at both local and federal levels. Shabaz Ansari from Nepalgunj stressed the importance of integrating the course in collaboration with the local government.

Yubaraj Kandel, who is actively involved in launching an MIL campaign at Kalika School in Lumbini province, emphasized that the support from the school management was instrumental in initiating the campaign.

Finding 11: Students demonstrate significant behavior changes

Teachers highlighted that the MIL orientation facilitated a closer connection with their students and a better understanding of their concerns and technology usage. Students demonstrated significant behavioral changes, as observed by both teachers and guardians. For instance, Yubaraj Kandel mentioned that a guardian of a grade 12 student was surprised to see her daughter using her mobile phone less and explained that it was due to the orientation class. Similar observations were made by Poonam Jha, a teacher from Janakpur, who noted decreased mobile phone usage among students.

> "Once I started using my mother's phone at Grade 9, I learned about Facebook, and became interested in technology. I slowly got acquainted with it, started using my phone, and began neglecting homeworks. In the first terminal exam, I failed in a subject. But this course has helped me identify the problem with using technol-

ogy excessively and ways to distance myself from it."
- A student participant in FGD (female, 15)

Teachers also observed that students started adopting better digital habits, such as limiting unnecessary social media posts and reducing screen time. Gaurab K.C. from Janakpur rated cybersecurity as most important part of the orientation stating that 'awareness is crucial' to protect students from going into troubles.

"I have stopped replying to unknown numbers, clicking on advertisements, or sharing my personal details online. This awareness has made me feel safer on the internet."
- A student participant in FGD (female, 14)

Even the students themselves acknowledged the impact of the orientation class on their use of the internet and mobile phones, as well as their approach to online information. A consistent theme was students' shift from sharing information based solely on headlines to verifying sources and reliability.

"I used to read just the headlines and never bothered with the text, thinking it was a waste of time. I believed and shared it. But since the orientation program, I realize it's essential to read the entire text, not trust just the headlines, identify the information source, and make informed decisions. I used to share information casually, but I'm much more aware of these issues now."
- A student participant in FGD (male, 15)

Finding 12: Lack of resources and local examples challenges in teaching MIL

Despite efforts to raise awareness through MIL, several challenges were identified by the teachers conducting the orientations. Many teachers found it challenging to manage time effectively during the orientation. The teachers were in opinion that one or two hours allocated for the orientation was not enough as there are many issues to be covered. This limitation often resulted in incomplete discussions.

"Managing time during orientation was not easy. I had to be selective and could not cover overall course in detail."
- Deepika Karki, teacher, Madhes Province

Another major weakness was the lack of sufficient resources to make the training more engaging and interactive. Teachers struggled to find materials that could hold students' attention and simplify complex topics. Without adequate teaching aids, the sessions often relied on lecture-style presentations, which were less impactful. Teachers consistently faced difficulty in providing local examples because such cases were scarce in the local context.

"The time was very short, and the target group was too small. To make it more effective, I lacked resources and could not make it more attractive."
- Sushmita Sharma, teacher, Lumbini province

"Given that this is a new topic for both students and me, particularly in the context of misinformation and disinformation, I felt a lack of detailed examples to clarify these issues. Practical examples are essential. While I managed to address this at the time, I am not entirely satisfied."
- Dinesh Khadka, teacher, Lumbini Province

Conclusion and implication

The study shows that Nepali youths have embraced internet-based media as primary sources of information but are critically low in media and information literacy skills, therefore vulnerable to the negative impacts of misinformation. The findings indicate several patterns in youth media consumption and information behavior. The dominance of digital platforms, particularly social media (36.1%) and online media (27.6%), as primary news sources shows that youths have significantly shifted away from traditional media consumption patterns. However, this digital transition has also created new challenges in information verification and critical consumption. This preference for digital and mobile-based news underscores the critical need for MIL programs to emphasize the skills required to navigate online and social media landscapes effectively.

A concerning finding is the high prevalence of sharing unverified information before the orientation sessions, with 56.6 percent of respondents admitting to sharing content without verification either occasionally or frequently. This behavior, added with the fact that 59.6 percent of participants were unfamiliar with the term 'misinformation' before the orientation, suggests a critical gap in digital literacy education among Nepali youth. Nepali youths are also routinely exposed to misinformation and the negative impacts of the misinformation is perceived high. However, the survey results also shows that after a MIL orientation, 73.19 percent of participants said they would question information sources, while the remaining participants were split between uncritically agreeing (17%), disagreeing (5%), or believing information as presented (5%). The high percentage of critical respondents suggests the orientation was largely successful, though the remaining 22 percent who didn't indicate critical evaluation skills highlights the need for continued media literacy education. As misinformation continues to spread across various media platforms, it is essential for youths to not only recognize and disengage with misinformation but also to understand their impact on society.

Qualitative study in Lumbini and Madhes provinces further emphasised MIL as an effective educational tool for addressing digital age challenges. Through focus group discussions with participating students and educators, the research demonstrated MIL's success in combating misinformation and promoting responsible digital platform usage. Students showed impressive retention of key concepts even months after their orientation, particularly in areas of misinformation detection, safe internet use, cybercrime awareness, and digital detoxification. The program fostered critical thinking skills and fact-checking habits, with participants actively questioning information sources and seeking verification.

The impact extended beyond classrooms, reaching families and communities, highlighting MIL's potential as a cross-generational educational tool. Notable outcomes included improved digital habits, enhanced critical thinking, and responsible online behavior among participants. The findings strongly suggest the need for incorporating MIL into Nepal's formal education system. The MIL curriculum should focus on practical skills in verifying digital information, given

that social media and online platforms are the primary sources of both information and misinformation for youth. The high rate of unverified information sharing (56.6%) shows that short-term interventions, such as training and orientation sessions, focusing on developing critical thinking skills among youths are also needed.

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CHAPTER 6

Fact Checking: Examining How Misinformation Challenges Mass Media Authenticity

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Abstract

The public trust of mass media communication is declining. Many factors impact the public trust of media. Consuming misinformation is associated with a general decrease in media trust (Ognyanova et al, 2020) and the transformation into high-choice media environments has brought with it a host of new and exacerbated challenges threatening to undermine news media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). This study examines the misinformation as a challenge to the authenticity of mass media communication. By employing mixed methods - four case studies and a quantitative analysis of 407 fact-checked misinformation, this study finds that mainstream media are almost equally responsible for spreading misinformation as any other platform; and mass media either helped the spread the misinformation or put no effort to combat misinformation even in the highly debated issues. Such practice by mass media degraded the public trust on their contents and communication creating a situation where the public were unable to look upon the mass media as the source of authentic information.

Keywords: *public trust, mass media authenticity, misinformation, fact-checking*

Introduction

Public opinion surveys conducted worldwide demonstrate a rapid decline in public trust towards mass media. This decline can be attributed to several factors, such as the emergence of internet-based information sources, including social media platforms. Newspapers are central to the news institution and the business of news, but print has been in structural decline in many countries for decades as more and more different forms of media compete for attention and advertising (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020). The prevalence of misinformation and the challenges faced by traditional mass media institutions in adapting to technological advancements are also significant contributors to the erosion of trust in mass media. In the contemporary information environment, "like never before, news media today face competition for people's attention from a myriad of other sources of information" (Strömbäck et al., 2020). The new information universe in which digital media combined with legacy media began to overwhelm everyone with more information than they have ever had access to previously or could make sense of (Gurri, 2018 quoted in Fukuyama, 2022). The Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual assessment of public trust in government, NGOs, businesses, and media conducted across 28 countries, including China and India, has revealed a continued decline in public trust in the media in 2023. Out of the four institutions mentioned, the media remains the least trusted by the public.

Erosion of the public trust in the press "is not happening everywhere in the world" (Hanitzsch et al., 2017) in the same pace. The decline in the public trust is at the higher pace in developed society and at the slower pace in the developing world. In Nepal, although the public trust in media is eroding slowly, "evidence has shown that media is among the most trusted public institution" (SCIN, 2022; Gupta, 2022; Kathmandu University et al., 2019). However, public trust on media depends upon various factors. Media trust is complex and based on both experience and future expectations… public trust in media is generally determined by the performance of journalists, their fairness, honesty, and professionalism (Splendore & Curini, 2020). The level of trust in the media also directly impacts the business of mass media products. When the public trusts a media

product, they are more likely to invest their money in it. Likewise, advertisers are more inclined to invest in mass media platforms that are trusted and have a significant consumer base. Trust plays a crucial role in shaping both the financial viability and sustainability of the media industry. Overall previous research suggests that media trust is associated with greater use of news media while media distrust is associated with greater use of non-mainstream news sources, but that the relationship between media trust and media use is quite modest (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Media trust is also integral to credibility… information provided by the media should be accurate, fair, balanced, and bias-free in principle, but sometimes the media delivers imprecision, biases, fake news, and misinterprets for cheap popularity (Gupta, 2021). Media credibility encapsulates the criteria that people use to evaluate their trust in media (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Until the end of the last century, mass media communication was widely perceived as a representation of truth, with content believed to be produced through rigorous journalistic procedures. However, the arrival of the internet provided platforms of all types of communication creating an 'information explosion' that "undermine the authority of existing hierarchies – governments, political parties, media, corporations and the like – that had previously been narrow channels through which information as purveyed" (Gurri, 2018 quoted in Fukuyama, 2022).

The emergence and widespread use of one-to-many communication channels on the internet have not only challenged the authority of mass media in representing the truth but have also given rise to an authenticity crisis in mass communication. This authenticity crisis is primarily a result of the abundance of unverified and anecdotal content that may or may not have broader implications. In today's world, "a partisan blogger asserting the opinion that a particular politician is highly corrupt should not have the same weight as an investigative journalist who had spent six months carefully going through that politician's financial records… the internet makes these alternative views appear to be equally credible" (Fukuyama, 2022).

Furthermore, the proliferation of misinformation has significantly contributed to the authenticity crisis. Studies have revealed that the

perception of misinformation is strongly associated with a decline in trust towards the news media. Consuming misinformation is associated with a general decrease in media trust (Ognyanova et al, 2020) and the transformation into high-choice media environments has brought with it a host of new and exacerbated challenges threatening to undermine news media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). The internet has provided an unlimited number of channels for disinformation to spread (Fukuyama, 2022) further deepening the crisis around authenticity of mass media communication. Authenticity was always a valued trait, but the surge of misinformation and its presumed influence on the public elevated our craving for authenticity to a new level (Lee, 2019).

Defining Authenticity in Communication

Scholars may differ on the fundamental question of what is authenticity and what encapsulate authenticity in communication? Most scholars agree that authenticity is not an absolute or intrinsic characteristic of a text or exchange, it is dependent on subjective evaluation by participants or observers (Giplin et al, 2010). Extending prior scholarships that centers on the communicator's identity or message content, authenticity of communication, Lee (2019) refers to the extent to which a given communication act, as a whole, is perceived to be real and true.

According to Lee (2019), authenticity of communication consists of three subcomponents: authority of source ("Is the communicator really who he/she/it claims to be?"), authenticity of message ("Is what's being said true?"), and authenticity of interaction ("Is this real interaction?"). However, the assessment of authenticity is subjective to the receiver of the message and there are several factors - ranging from social constructs to personal beliefs - contributing the authenticity perception. People would not automatically doubt the authenticity of a message, including the commutator's professed intent, unless it somehow violates their expectancy (Lee, 2019).

This study aims to examine the impact of misinformation on the authenticity of mass media communication in Nepal. It utilizes a mixed methods approach, including four case studies and a quantitative analysis of 407 fact-checked instances of misinformation since

2020. The study seeks to investigate the role of social media platforms and mainstream media as sources of misinformation, and it aims to understand how mass media institutions compare to social media in the misinformation landscape of Nepal.

In the context of authenticity, as a part of the larger work to look into misinformation in Nepal, this study aims to look into the authenticity of messages based on their platforms to find out whether mass media stand as the authentic source to answer if mass media in today's context is the platform of the representation of the truth.

Misinformation Landscape of Nepal

The spread of false or misleading information—whether by word-of-mouth, media or otherwise—is an age-old phenomenon in the [South Asian] region [as] there are a few examples of how fake news spreads in South Asia, often instigating hate speech, mob lynching and killing (Bhattarai, 2023). Nepal, a South Asian country sandwiched between India and China, is not therefore new to the misinformation. Even before the misinformation became widespread around the world, Nepal had experienced violent incidents due to spreading of misinformation when the internet was not very popular among its population. Into the new millennium, Nepal witnessed two violent incidents creating public chaos due to misinformation. Nepal's worst experience with misinformation occurred in 2000, in the pre-internet era, when internet access was limited (Acharya, 2023). Bhattarai (2023) recalls it as a horrific incident:

> It was a chilly Kathmandu morning of December 25, 2000… Rumors started spreading in Kathmandu that the popular Indian actor Hrithik Roshan had insulted Nepali… The day earlier, some local youth staged a protest in Chitwan district against the alleged slur by the Indian actor. They even vandalized shops run by Indian nationals, or even Indian-looking nationals. When a local newspaper published a news article about the rally, more protests broke out in other parts of the country. (Bhattarai, 2023)

The riots lasted a few days, during which at least five people were killed, and hundreds were injured, [and] the riots were eventually

quelled when Roshan repeatedly denied making the statement and expressed his love for Nepal. (Acharya, 2023)

Another instance of the violent incident happened in 2009 in Nepal. In June 2009, 16 people suspected of being kidnappers were lynched or burned alive in the southern belt near the border with India and two more were lynched in July in the Kathmandu Valley after rumors spread that they were child kidnappers (Acharya, 2023).

According to Nepal's census 2021, 72.94 percent of households have smart mobile phones, 37.72 percent households have internet facility; and 15 percent households have computer/laptop as a household asset. The internet penetration is a contested data in Nepal as National Telecommunications Authority (2023) puts it at 133.1 percent whereas other studies, such as DataReportal (2023), puts it at 51.6%. Data published in Meta's advertising resources indicates that Facebook had 11.85 million users in Nepal in early 2023 (DataReportal, 2023). This is equivalent to 38.6 percent of the total population.

A study in 2020 by Media Action Nepal found that Nepali media tend to disseminate misleading information and that nearly 4 percent of the news contains misleading information (Media Action Nepal, 2020). The study's definition of misleading information is overreaching including incomplete information as misleading information but nevertheless the study showed that the mainstream media were also involved in spreading some misinformation.

The Nepal Social Media Users Survey 2021, published in June 2022, found that 9 in 10 social media users in Nepal receive misinformation online and that Facebook – the popular social networking site – being the primary platform where they saw misinformation:

> Of 403 respondents, 91.8 percent said they had seen misinformation online in the previous seven days, the dominant location for misinformation was the social networking site Facebook, with 79.8 percent of respondents who saw misinformation saying they saw it there. Among them, 23.3 percent said they saw misinformation only on Facebook and not on any other platforms. Of other respondents, 48.1 percent said they saw misinformation on the video streaming site YouTube, 36.3 percent saw it on Twitter and 30.3 percent saw it on other websites. (CMR Nepal, 2022)

Data analysis and discussion

This study analyzed 414 fact-checks published on three fact-checking websites in Nepal from March 2020 to August 2024. These fact-checks include 62 from SouthAsiaCheck.org, 297 from NepalFactCheck.org, and 42 from NepalCheck.org. The analysis encompasses all fact-checks published during the study period, excluding seven that were classified as true information by the fact-checkers.

Out of all the misinformation identified, 54 percent were classified as misinformation (false information), 41.5 percent were classified as misleading (where some correct information was used to mislead through false logic, false connection, or false conclusion), and the remaining cases were categorized as unverified (lacking sufficient evidence to determine falseness or truthfulness).

Topic of misinformation

According to Table 6.1, political and social issues emerge as the primary subject of misinformation in Nepal, followed by health. Political topics account for over one-third of the misinformation. It is important to note that the data collection period included the Covid pandemic, resulting in a higher prevalence of Covid-related misinformation. Otherwise, the number of health-related misinformation might have been lower. A significant majority of the health-related misinformation pertains to Covid.

Table 6.1: Topic of misinformation in Nepal

Topic	Percentage
Economic issues	2.21%
Health issues	23.34%
Political issues	37.10%
Social issues	37.35%

In Nepal, news media coverage and priorities often focus on political activities and politicians rather than being driven by the concerns of the public (Acharya & Chapagain, 2020). The mainstream newspapers and televisions are not party press [in Nepal], however the political parallelism is clearly visible… and their contents are dominated

by politics (Acharya, n.d.). As the volume of content related to political issues is high, the likelihood of political misinformation naturally increases. However, it is important to recognize that this may or may not imply that mainstream media will necessarily continue to spread misinformation in the future.

Case Study 1: USA-Nepal MCC Compact and Chinese disinformation

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, a $500 million grant from the United States to Nepal for modernizing the energy and transportation sectors, sparked controversy before its ratification by the Federal Parliament in February 2022. The contentious issue revolved around concerns that certain clauses of the compact compromised Nepal's sovereignty. China, seemingly opposed to the ratification, expressed diplomatic concerns about political strings attached to development assistance while attempting to influence public opinion through social media.

China Radio International (CRI), a state-controlled media outlet, used its Nepali service page @crinepali on Facebook to publish six videos related to the MCC between February 25 and March 2, 2022. These videos included biased interpretations, anti-US messages, and pro-China sentiments, aiming to undermine the MCC and promote anti-MCC:

- "Why $500 million US dollars can't buy Nepal's sovereignty and people's self-respect": A reporter-led opinion video showcasing protests on the streets and at the Parliament.
- "Unequal conditions for Nepal in the USA's MCC": Biased interpretation of debated clauses with anti-US messages, highlighting perceived inequality.
- "Who is Nepal's true friend? Why is the USA pressuring Nepal to ratify the MCC": Contains anti-US and pro-China messages, linking the MCC to the USA's Indo Pacific Strategy.
- "MCC-related example — Warning": Presents anti-US messages with examples of problems caused by the MCC in other countries.
- "MCC in Chinese eyes": A reporter-led opinion video presenting Chinese diplomatic views on the MCC.

- "What Chinese netizens say about MCC": Shows scenes of protests, anti-US social media posts by Chinese individuals, and concludes with a pro-China message.

This case demonstrates an influence operation by a foreign state actor using CRI's Nepali service page to disseminate inflammatory and unverified claims. The videos garnered significant views, engagements, and comments, successfully inciting anti-MCC sentiments among Nepali citizens. The violent protests and controversy subsided after the MCC compact's ratification, and the content related to the MCC on the CRI Nepali Service page ceased soon after. Although the precise impact is difficult to ascertain, the campaign's reach and the reactions it generated suggest its influence on public opinion.

Source of misinformation

Source authenticity plays a crucial role in assessing the credibility of information. When it comes to mass media, determining the source of information becomes a complex issue as receivers of communication evaluate authenticity based on different factors. They question whether the source of the message is the medium itself (such as the mass media or platform), the person providing the information (the claimant), or the individual writing or vetting the information (the journalist or editor), all of which contribute to their perception of authenticity. Therefore, this study aims to identify the claimants of misinformation. In the case of mass media, the claimants are not the journalists if they have quoted someone else as their source. On social media, the claimant refers to the person who has written the post.

Table 6.2 reveals that most of the time, the claimant is the content creator, whether it be a journalist or a social media post writer. In cases of media content, when a journalist present statement without attributing it to others, it is considered that the journalist is the claimant but when the content is attributed, in direct quote or reported speech, the attributed person is considered to be the claimant. less than one-fifth of misinformation cases, the claimant is a politician. Additionally, there are instances where irrelevant experts, who lack education or training in the topic of information, spread misinformation alongside actual experts.

Table 6.2: Source (claimants) of misinformation

Source of misinformation (Claimant)	Percentage
Creator (media or social media author)	76.17%
Other	0.49%
Politician	17.69%
Relevant Expert	1.72%
Irrelevant Expert	3.93%

Further analysis of claimants cross-tabulated with the source (media or platform) of misinformation reveals some interesting patterns. In cases where the claimant is the producer of content, nearly two-thirds of the time it is a social media post writer. However, the data shows that in 38 percent of such cases, journalists themselves are the claimants of misinformation, indicating that they have written and disseminated the misinformation without attributing it to anyone else.

Politicians also utilize social media as a platform to spread misinformation in 43 percent of cases. On the other hand, in 57 percent of misinformation cases where politicians are the sources, they are quoted in mass media, be it print, electronic, or online media. Additionally, when experts, whether relevant or irrelevant, are the claimants of misinformation, they are more likely (three out of every five cases) to be quoted in mass media rather than publishing the misinformation themselves.

Table 6.3 highlights that while more than half of the misinformation appears on social media, more than one-third of it is found in mass media, including both online and print/electronic media.

Table 6.3: Source (media) of misinformation

Source of misinformation (media)	Percentage
Mainstream Media	18.67%
Online Media	16.95%
Other	7.87%
Social Media	56.51%

Table 6.2 and Table 6.3 provide insights into the spread of misinformation, indicating that while social media plays a prominent role in disseminating misinformation, mainstream media is not far behind. This finding is concerning considering that mainstream media is expected to adhere to verification processes and uphold journalistic standards compared to the immediate and personal nature of social media content. The presence of misinformation in mainstream media suggests a potential decline in its credibility, which can have significant implications on the authenticity of mass media communication.

Case Study 2: Covid Misinformation in Viral Videos

In early 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to unfold, Nepal reported its first case of infection in South Asia. Despite having a relatively low number of cases at that time, the fear of the pandemic led the government and citizens to impose a nationwide lockdown and suspend international flights. During this period, there was a significant amount of misinformation circulating, particularly in the early days of the pandemic. This case study focuses on four viral videos: two published on YouTube channels and two broadcasted on television channels.

The first video, titled "Detailed revelation for the first time, know the hidden game & the reality," featured an interview with Nabin Joshi, who claimed to be a psychologist from Tribhuvan University. Published on the YouTube channel 'Himal Online TV' with 273K subscribers, the video garnered 180K views in its first week. In the interview, Joshi made false claims about the coronavirus, including stating that the PCR test was not used until the pandemic, and that masks offer no protection against the virus. He also misinterpreted the mortality rate of the virus compared to other diseases.

The second video, also published on 'Himal Online TV,' featured an interview with Surajeet Dutta, who claimed to be a social activist. Dutta made several false claims, such as downplaying the mortality rate of Covid, alleging that Bill Gates had patented a Covid vaccine, and suggesting that wearing masks is dangerous.

The third video was broadcasted on AP1 Television, a national channel, as part of a talk show called "AP Center." During the program, Jagreet Rayamajhi, a former student leader claiming to be

an activist, made false claims, including stating that most Italians who died from Covid had other complications, and that the US agency CDC did not classify it as a pandemic.

The fourth video was broadcasted on Suryodaya Television, a regional channel. In this interview, Dhurva Kumar Shiwakoti, the Mayor of Birtamode Municipality, made false claims suggesting alternative remedies for Covid, claiming that wearing masks is a crime, and asserting that gold jewelry attracts the virus.

These videos presented false information as if it were verifiable and supported by evidence, often misinterpreting data or statements from credible institutions. The intent was to make the misinformation appear authentic and trustworthy, despite its inaccuracies.

At the time of the videos' publication, the understanding of the pandemic was still evolving. However, basic public safety measures such as wearing masks were clear and necessary. These videos promoted messages that went against public safety measures and disseminated false claims that could have put people at risk, jeopardizing public health and safety. While the exact impact of these videos is challenging to quantify empirically, they had the potential to influence viewers to adopt riskier behavior or develop hazardous perceptions of the risks posed by Covid.

Case Study 3: Indian TVs disinformation on Covid

On April 10, 2020, two Indian TV channels, TV9 Bharatvarsh and TV24, broadcasted a report claiming that Jalim Mukhiya, a Nepali citizen, was involved in a conspiracy to spread the Covid pandemic in India. The report alleged that Mukhiya, acting on the direction of Pakistan's ISI, was planning to send more than 200 infected individuals across the border from Nepal to India. The TV channels based their report on an unverified letter from the Indian armed border force SSB.

Despite the refutation of the letter by DGP Gupteshwor Pandaya of Bihar, India, stating that it was unverified and that the border was sealed, the Indian TV channels continued to broadcast news reports making the same claims about Mukhiya. They even labeled him as the primary conspirator behind the spread of the coronavirus. Jalim Mukhiya, also known as Jalim Miya, was a 61-year-old elected repre-

sentative and a central advisor to the Maoist party. He had previously assisted the Nepal Police in relocating 15 Nepali Muslims to a quarantine facility, where all of them tested negative for Covid.

The news reports from the Indian TV channels were sensational and accusatory in nature, repeatedly using terms like "conspiracy," "expose," and "biggest criminal" without verifying the facts. TV24, a national Hindi news television channel with a significant online presence, continued to spread this misinformation despite being unable to authenticate it from reliable sources. The tone and language of the reports were aggressive and one-sided, falsely portraying Mukhiya as a criminal.

These reports caused a significant stir in the Nepali public sphere, with many individuals questioning Jalim Miya's involvement and some social media users unfairly blaming Muslims for the alleged conspiracy. Similar sentiments were expressed in India, with people expressing hatred towards Muslims based on religious grounds. As a result, Mukhiya faced repeated challenges to his reputation, and the Muslim individuals from his village mosque were subjected to insults and baseless allegations.

Nepal Police questioned Mukhiya and quarantined the individuals from the mosque, who were eventually found to be Covid negative. However, the psychological impact on Mukhiya and the Muslim community in his village was significant. They had to endure the consequences of false accusations and misinformation spread by the Indian TV channels.

This case highlights the detrimental effects of spreading unverified information and the responsibility of media outlets to verify facts before broadcasting them. The aggressive and sensational reporting not only caused harm to individuals' reputations but also fueled hatred and discrimination against a particular religious group. It emphasizes the need for responsible journalism and media literacy to prevent the harmful impact of misinformation in society.

Proofs offered by fact-checkers

The study also examines the evidence presented by fact-checkers to debunk misinformation, shedding light on whether this evidence was accessible to the claimant of the misinformation or the media

outlets before publishing the information. Understanding the availability of such evidence is crucial in assessing the responsibility of disseminating misinformation.

Table 6.4 reveals that fact-checkers primarily relied on existing documents as evidence to debunk misinformation. These documents could include official reports, research papers, or verified data sources. Expert statements were also commonly used as evidence to counter misinformation, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of professionals in the relevant field. Additionally, available data, such as statistics or research findings, played a significant role in debunking false claims.

Table 6.4: Proofs offered by the fact-checkers on misinformation

Type of proofs	Percentage
Document as evidence	43.06%
Expert statement as evidence	24.50%
Available data as evidence	20.90%
Video evidence	7.57%
Other evidence	3.60%
Audio evidence	0.36%

The evidence presented by fact-checkers to debunk misinformation, except for cases where they provide video, audio, or other forms of evidence, suggests that accessing such proofs would not have been difficult for the content producers or claimants if they had tried to verify the information before publishing it. The fact that documents and data were readily available as evidence implies that the content producers may not have exerted sufficient effort to ensure the accuracy of the information.

Case Study 4: Spectacular Fake Photos of Snow Leopard

On November 7, 2022, the US Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal shared four photos and a link on their social media channels, attributing them to Kittiya Pawlowski, a US photographer and storyteller. The post claimed that the breathtaking photos depicted snow leopards in the Mt. Everest region at altitudes above 5000m. This announcement received significant attention, with many citizens of Nepal and

numerous online news portals both domestically and internationally sharing the images and the accompanying post. The link shared by the embassy directed users to Pawlowski's blog, which featured a visually captivating narrative about her arduous efforts to capture the images. This narrative further contributed to the virality of the story on the web and social media platforms.

However, on November 25, 2022, Alpine Mag, a publication specializing in mountaineering and outdoor activities, conducted a comprehensive fact-checking analysis on these images. Their investigation revealed that the photos were fake, as they identified instances of manipulation where parts of the mountain were used to create the backgrounds in at least three of the images.

This case exemplifies a scenario where misinformation involves multiple layers of sources. The misinformation originated from the photographer herself, who published the manipulated images on her blog. The US Embassy in Kathmandu, seemingly trusting the credibility of the photographer, shared the misinformation without verifying its authenticity. As a result, mass media outlets quickly picked up the story and republished the images without critically examining their contents or questioning their veracity.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis conducted in this study, which involved case studies and a quantitative analysis of fact-checked instances of misinformation, several important findings have emerged. First, it was found that social media platforms, along with mainstream media, are the primary sources of misinformation. Mainstream media outlets were found to be responsible for spreading misinformation in many cases. This is significant because "when journalism becomes a vector for disinformation, this further reduces public trust" (Ireton, C. & Posetti, J., 2018).

The case studies provided valuable insights into the behavior of mainstream media. It was observed that in many instances, mass media outlets played a predominantly reactive role in relation to misinformation. Rather than actively working to combat false information or providing accurate context, they often contributed to the spread of misinformation either through their reporting or by failing to take proactive measures to address it. This passivity and lack of effort on the

part of mainstream media in tackling misinformation have had detrimental effects on public trust in their content and communication.

It was also evident that mass media on many occasions failed to adhere to fundamental journalistic procedure of verification of the information that it published. In some cases, the sources such as US Embassy had high perceived authenticity, yet mass media lacked even context and further expansion of the story other than what they found on the social media.

The consequence of such practices by mass media is a decline in public trust. When media outlets fail to fulfill their role as purveyors of accurate and reliable information, it erodes the credibility of their content and undermines the public's ability to perceive them as authentic sources of information. This erosion of trust creates a problematic situation where the public is left unable to rely on mainstream media as a trustworthy and dependable source of information.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for media organizations to prioritize responsible reporting and take proactive measures to combat misinformation. It is crucial for mainstream media outlets to thoroughly verify information before dissemination, actively correct false or questionable information, and adhere to the fundamental journalism practices rather than playing role in further spreading misinformation. Rebuilding public trust requires a concerted effort from media organizations to prioritize accuracy, impartiality, and the promotion of verified information.

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Note: ** Case Study 1, 2 and 3 are the summarized version of the case studies conducted for and published first on Disinformation.Asia and are included in detail in Chapter 5 of this book.*

** The authors are associated with NepalFactCheck.org and the first author was associated with SouthAsiaCheck.org in its early stage in 2016 and 2017.*

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