

Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by
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Center for Media Research – Nepal
Kathmandu, Nepal

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FOREWORD

Misinformation: Shared Concern, Limited Interventions

Tilak Pathak and Bhuwan KC

Is misinformation a threat to Nepal’s society and democracy? Public perception surveys suggest it is, although the answer involves multiple complex factors. Two key elements make Nepal particularly vulnerable to threats of misinformation: diverse population groups and political instability.

Nepal’s demographic complexity is well-documented in the National Population and Housing Census, which reveals 142 distinct castes/ethnicities, with the largest ethnic group comprising only 16.5 percent of the population. The census also shows 125 mother tongues, with Nepali, the national language, being the mother tongue of 44.9 percent of the population. While predominantly Hindu, Nepal has significant populations of Buddhists, Muslims, Kirats, and Christians (see NSO, 2023). Historically, these ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities either coexisted harmoniously or were suppressed by what Hachhethu (2014) describes as “a homogeneous and monolithic way of nation-building, providing protection to one language (Nepali), one caste group (hill Bahun-Chhetri), and one religion (Hindu) while ignoring the reality of the diversified and pluralistic character of Nepali society.”

Francis Fukuyama (2018) argues that identity has become the defining factor in contemporary global politics. He observes that while

the political left has shifted its focus from broad economic equality to advocating for marginalized groups, the right has redefined itself through nationalism, often explicitly linking national identity to race, ethnicity, or religion. Nepal's journey toward federalism exemplifies this identity-driven politics, with movements like the Maoists and Madhesis fundamentally rooted in demands for dignity. This makes Nepal particularly susceptible to misinformation, as identity politics – centered on demands for dignity and respect, often seeking more than mere equality – can be easily inflamed by false or misleading information. There is also rise in the identity focused politics as well as demands for more state recognition of caste/ethnic groups.

Political instability in Nepal is long-standing. Its history is marked by constant upheaval since its founding. The modern era began in 1768 when King Prithvi Narayan Shah unified various small states to create the Kingdom of Nepal. From then until 1846, the Shah dynasty's direct rule was characterized by intense palace power struggles. This was followed by the 104-year Rana dynasty, whose reign was similarly characterized by violent power contests.

An armed uprising overthrew the Rana regime in 1951, but the resulting democracy proved short-lived. In 1960, King Mahendra Shah disbanded political parties and instituted the Panchayat system—a party-less autocratic monarchy. Though the 1990 People's Movement restored multiparty democracy, political instability continued. The following years brought more turmoil: the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), the royal massacre of 2001, King Gyanendra Shah's brief autocratic rule, and the 2006 People's Movement II. These events culminated in the abolishment of the 240-year-old monarchy and Nepal's declaration as a republic in 2008. However, Nepal continued to be in constant transition, marked by frequent government changes, constitutional crises, and ongoing struggles in and/or between political parties—all creating a fertile ground for conspiracy theories and rumors, and indicating serious challenges in establishing stable democratic governance.

The existing diversity in population and political instability make Nepal highly vulnerable to misinformation. There are other factors that contribute the spread and impacts of misinformation. The public trust in the relatively new media system is on the downward slide.

There is a general lack of media and information literacy among citizens. India and China, two big superpower nations as neighbors, have often competing interests in Nepal.

Nepal's media system is relatively new. Independent journalism only began in 1950s, and media is historically partisan to the level that Nepali citizens long perceived media to be political weapons rather than the public voice. And the arrival of the internet and social media led to media losing more credibility and public trust. Although highly trusted institution compared to other state institutions, media is also on the constant decline. Mobile and internet adaption is very high and social media reaches millions of people (Facebook alone has estimated 11.85 million users) who otherwise are not normally exposed to media.

Media and information literacy (MIL) represents a critical defense against misinformation, yet it remains notably absent from Nepal's academic curriculum. This gap has left the Nepali public particularly vulnerable to misinformation, as many take a "what you see (or read or hear) is what you believe" approach in information consumption. Adding to this vulnerability is the confusion between social media and traditional journalistic media. The term "media" appended to "social media" often leads people to equate these platforms with professional journalism.

CMR-Nepal started studying misinformation in 2017. During the 2017 elections, it found that misinformation was becoming political tactics to insult, accuse and demean opponents, as well as to spread false information to impact the popularity of favorable candidates.

In 2019, Nepal Twitter Users Survey by CMR-Nepal (2020) with 542 Nepali citizens considered heavy internet users revealed significant concerns about online disinformation among Nepali Twitter users, with 86.5 percent expressing worry about misinformation. The study found that 95.5 percent of respondents had encountered disinformation online in the previous week, with YouTube emerging as the primary source (85.6%), followed by Facebook and Twitter.

The survey also highlighted that 96.5 percent of respondents believe disinformation either is currently or will become a problem for Nepal's society and politics, with 73.6 percent stating it's already

problematic. Regarding responsibility for tackling online disinformation, respondents in a multiple choice question identified multiple stakeholders: media (40%), government (38%), users (32%), platforms (30%), and civil society (22.5%). Approximately two-thirds of users considered all these entities on the “responsible spectrum,” with some also suggesting educational institutions, influencers, and fact-checkers should play a role in combating disinformation.

Two years later, the Social Media Users Survey 2021 by CMR-Nepal (2022) with 403 heavy internet users found similar results. Most Nepali social media users (86.8%) are concerned about misinformation on digital platforms. Over 91 percent of respondents reported encountering misinformation in the past week – slightly less than 2019 survey. When asked to identify platforms where respondents encountered misinformation, Facebook was identified by 79.8 percent respondents, followed by YouTube (48.1%), Twitter (36.3%), and other websites (30.3%). Many users encountered misinformation across multiple platforms, with only 25.8 percent reporting it on a single platform. The findings showed that 75.9 percent of respondents believe it is already a problem for society and politics, and a total of 97.8 percent agreeing that it is or will become a significant issue.

When it comes to addressing misinformation, respondents in 2022 survey identified multiple stakeholders as responsible. Media organizations were seen as the most responsible (49%), followed by the government (47%). Social media users themselves (44%) and social media platforms (44%) were also considered accountable, along with fact-checkers (42.1%) and civil society (40%). Some respondents (14.4%) mentioned other entities like the Press Council of Nepal, academic institutions, police, parents, businesses, and political parties as potential stakeholders in tackling misinformation.

During 2022 elections, despite policy efforts from the Election Commission of Nepal and the monitoring and public awareness initiatives from civil society and mainstream media, misinformation was rampant. Cheap fakes—content that easily identifiable as manipulated—were used by politicians during their campaigns. There were fake screenshots of established news media, old photos, morphed videos, and out of context contents used to degrade opponent candidates. Although CMR-Nepal’s monitoring study

concluded that misinformation didn't impact the elections to the level of altering results, there were instances of use of misinformation for own's benefits, especially during candidacy selection by the political parties. Such information manipulation tactics would have become substantially influential if they were coordinated and there were use of emerging AI tools leading to a conclusion that the upcoming elections could be a playground of information manipulation, which can alter results.

CMR-Nepal conducted offline survey in 2023, with 140 youths equally distributed in seven provinces actively engaged in politics, journalism, or civil society, considered non-heavy internet users. The survey found that 68 percent of respondents reported encountering misinformation in the week prior to the survey. Furthermore, when asked whether misinformation is a problem for society and politics, an overwhelming 71.43 percent of participants agreed that it is already a major concern, while 23.57 percent believed it would soon become a significant issue. Only a small minority (2.86%) felt that misinformation would not pose a serious threat.

The survey also explored the respondents' understanding of the impacts of misinformation and their level of concern. While 60 percent of participants stated they were "somewhat aware" of the effects of misinformation on individuals, society, and the nation, 23.57 percent admitted to having only "some knowledge," and 13.57 percent claimed to be "quite aware." Additionally, 80.72 percent of respondents expressed being "very concerned" about the negative impacts of misinformation, with 16.43 percent stating they were "somewhat concerned." When asked about responsibility for combating misinformation, the majority (79.29%) ranked the media as responsible, followed by the government (78.57%), users themselves (63.57%), social media platforms (51.43%), and civil society organizations (10.71%).

The results of those surveys conducted every two years from 2019 to 2023 show that misinformation is omnipresent on the internet, reaching almost all heavy internet users and 7 persons among 10 non-heavy internet users. The awareness level among the people is rising, and the public is also pushing for more multistakeholder responsibility to combat misinformation.

Social media has become a preferred tool for political communication with all political parties and politicians finding it easier to communicate with the public directly. Though the experience is not always positive, as they are also subjected of harassment, trolls, and memes, many uses social media to promote own party – especially sharing positive news about the party such as election projection favoring the party (many of such news were influenced contents published in online news portals known for affiliation with the party).

The social media was also widely used to demean or belittle opposing parties or candidates. Contents were shared to create unfavorable condition of the opposing candidates and even to slander them by using unverified or misleading information.

The negative experiences with misinformation are more targeted toward women active in politics. They are targeted by misinformation questioning both their character and ability. Female parliamentarians who participated in the roundtable discussions organized by CMR-Nepal shared many instances of misinformation making their lives difficult. One of them said: “There were attempts to target me through misinformation. Had my family not been supportive, it would have been difficult for me to come out clean... misinformation makes it difficult for female politicians to continue in politics.”

Much misinformation is aimed at creating negative images of opposing parties and politicians. Many social media groups and pages with huge numbers of participants are sharing unverified and, in many cases, misleading information to the public. As social media platforms and content creators become more popular and impactful, it’s notable that the people creating and posting content are not always aware of journalistic processes and principles; therefore, they are more prone to being used in misinformation campaigns.

The most effective antidote to misinformation is credibility. Social media platforms can be utilized to promote and differentiate between credible and misleading information. Big tech companies with social media platforms and messaging applications have the technology, resources, and capabilities to help. They can contribute to preventing misinformation by providing technology (tools, techniques), capabili-

ties, and resources to local organizations to enhance capacity building. They can also prevent such mis/disinformation by flagging or removing it.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be effective in curbing the spread of misinformation in the English language. However, its use is not effective in preventing misinformation spreading through local languages. In this situation, it would be useful if big tech companies developed AI to be compatible with local languages as well. Due to the lack of authentic information, using AI to prevent misinformation is a complex issue. Instead, fact-checkers and fact-checking institutions need to be better equipped to work in and with AI.

Using AI alone to address misinformation can be dangerous in the current digital ecosystem. Authentic information can be labeled as misinformation, and misinformation can be labeled as correct. Beyond the Internet, there is accurate information that is not accessible to AI. AI alone cannot handle such sensitive work because of limitations in language, content, etc. AI assisting humans and humans using AI in ethical ways may be the best approach to address mis/disinformation. If we use AI correctly and ethically, it can provide great assistance.

It is not possible to conduct fact-checking at the same speed at which misinformation spreads. The spread of misinformation has already had its effect by the time fact-checks are published because verification takes time. Furthermore, the reach of published fact-checks may not be as widespread as the original misinformation. This is the current challenge of the Fact-Checking Initiative. In this context, fact-checkers and fact-checking organizations can speed up their work by using AI. Fact-checking can be faster and more impactful if AI does the initial work followed by human intervention.

Authentic information is the best antidote to misinformation, which is possible only in the presence of authentic media. However, there is a disturbing trend of discrediting and humiliating the media using misinformation. Political leaders, especially those using populist tactics and having a significant presence on social media, are at the forefront of such trends.

Concerns about the spread of misinformation are high among the public, and there are calls for legal mechanisms to control it, although there are concerns about potential misuse of such mecha-

nisms and their impact on freedom of expression and the press. In this context, legal mechanisms are not the solution to combat misinformation. As pointed out in a chapter of this book, the best way to tackle misinformation threats in developing societies like Nepal could be promoting information and digital literacy and fact-checking, as well as exercising self-restraint in engaging with viral content on social media.

Media and information literacy components should be integrated into the curriculum of schools and universities and backed by public awareness campaigns. In Nepal, where voter education is inefficient, such campaigns by state and civil society institutions are extremely rare. The government, civil society organizations, political parties, private sector, and media must collaborate to bring about effective short-term and long-term interventions to fight misinformation.

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