Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by

Ujjwal Acharya

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Contributors: Bhuwan KC, Chetana Kunwar, Lekhanath Pandey, P. Kharel, Rishikesh Dahal, Tilak Pathak, Ujjwal Acharya, and Ujjwal Prajapati

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CHAPTER 3

Framing Misinformation: A Review of Literature and Media Discourse

Rishikesh Dahal

Abstract

This review article examines the landscape of misinformation in Nepal through discourses in media, tracing its roots from historical precedents to contemporary digital challenges. Nepal has a history of grappling with misinformation. In the digital age, with high internet penetration, social media has emerged as the primary platform for misinformation dissemination. The review identifies presence a diverse range of threat actors, who actively engage in information manipulation. The decline of traditional media's influence and the rise of unregulated platforms have created a conducive environment for the rapid spread of misinformation. While some institutional responses exist, they have proven inadequate in effectively addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by misinformation to Nepali society and politics. Combating misinformation in Nepal demands a comprehensive approach that encompasses media and information literacy programs, robust fact-checking initiatives, and a nuanced understanding of Nepal's unique socio-political context and digital landscape.

Keywords: *misinformation, information integrity, fact-checking*

Introduction

Historical evidence reveals that Nepal has long been plagued by sensational, unverified, and misleading information. This issue transcends time, with various influencers, including political and opinion leaders, individuals, and businesspersons, all contributing to the spread of misinformation. Nepali society is a fertile ground for the propagation of misinformation, whether it pertains to the Maoist people's war (1996-2006) or the Royal Massacre (2001), with numerous claims being made without evidence to back them up. Even during the time when social media did not have strong presence, emotional issues have driven public opinions and fueled the spread of misinformation.

Acharya (2023) outlines Nepal's experience with misinformation that "occurred in 2000, during an era when internet access was limited. A false claim surfaced, alleging that Indian film star Hrithik Roshan had stated in a TV interview that he hated Nepal and its people. Despite the absence of any evidence to support this claim, it sparked violent riots on the streets of Kathmandu. The riots persisted for several days, resulting in at least five deaths and hundreds of injuries. Businesses run by Indian nationals were vandalized, Indian tourists were attacked, and public transportation came to a standstill."

In 2009, Nepal witnessed another incident hightlighting violent impact of misinformation:

"The impact of misinformation on Nepali society resurfaced in 2009. In June of that year, 16 individuals suspected of being kidnappers were lynched or burned alive in the southern region near the border with India. Additionally, two more individuals were lynched in July in the Kathmandu Valley following the spread of rumors alleging their involvement in child abduction." (Acharya, 2023)

The advent of social media and digital platforms has dramatically amplified the dissemination of such misinformation. What was once confined to a limited audience has now gained widespread reach and influence.

Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) data show that the total number of internet subscribers in Nepal has reached an impressive 38 million in May 2023. To put this into perspective, a decade ago in 2013, there were merely 8.7 million internet subscribers in Nepal. The NTA's annual report for the fiscal year 2012/13 indicated that only 33.15 percent of the population had access to the internet. According to 2021 census of Nepal, 72.94 percent of households have smart mobile phones, 37.72 percent of households have internet facilities; and 15 percent of households have computers/laptops sets. 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%. These statistics underscore the remarkable growth in internet culture within Nepal. The advancement of technology has provided numerous communication options to the public. Online platforms, which have challenged traditional media like newspapers, radio, and television as the main source of information, have now been around for over three decades (See Al-Quran, 2022; Acharya, n.d.). Following the rise of online platforms, the influence and reach of social media as a new medium have grown exponentially.

This growth has been fueled by the accessibility of mobile technology and internet bandwidth to the public at lower costs. Traditional news media undergo editorial scrutiny, which entails some level of content processing. However, this does not imply that traditional media is entirely pure. There are valid reasons such as political and other biasness and strategic amplification to question the content published through traditional media, which goes through various gatekeeping stages. Strategic amplification—selecting what news to promote and what to bury—has historically been the role of news editors and is ideally done to promote the public good. Not all decisions made are good ones, but with transparency and public accountability, course corrections can be made (Stebbins, 2023).

Newsrooms are accountable to address those questions. However, questioning the content of social media, which operates without editorial processes, is not uncommon. As the presence of social media strengthens, there are questions around what kinds of

content are being disseminated, and what impact do they have on our society.

Stebbins (2023) states that misinformation amplified by platforms buries trustworthy content. At the same time, content from reliable sources that is promoted is stripped of its context and mixed with unverified content. This mixing together of news, opinion pieces, advertising, and misinformation has resulted in confusion among the people and a decline of public trust in reliable news outlets.

As the presence of traditional media diminishes, so does the volume of materials it produces. However, the increasing number of online media outlets intensified business competition. Despite the competition, the access to traditional media is diminishing and expansion remains relatively slow. With fewer content being produced and limited reach, the impact of traditional media was also constrained. As social media gained prominence, the quantity of messages and content being circulated became limitless. While concerns arise regarding the news content subjected to professional editing processes, the uncontrolled flow of content, especially misinformation, through social media poses various risks to the society (see Vese, 2022). Information technology has facilitated the rapid production and dissemination of misinformation. Given this context, this chapter focuses on the previous studies and literature on information manipulation in the context of Nepal.

Misinformation within the Media Landscape

The journalism industry is currently facing a severe crisis as newsrooms struggle with declining creativity and overwhelming pressure from social media content. Traditional media is being influenced by the social media influencers, who are increasingly setting traditional media's agenda, and this in turn weakens media's agenda-setting roles based on the understanding of people's needs. Stebbins (2023) explains new media gatekeepers—Facebook, Google, Twitter, Apple News—promote and amplify the story and as it goes viral, national news outlets pick it up.

Clickbait journalism prioritizes content sales, causing traditional media to lose ground in its roles of informing the public, setting

issues for public discourse, shaping public opinion, enhancing civic engagement, and promoting well informed society. Social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok are gaining popularity, leading to the production of junk information that weakens truth and promotes falsehood. Cover & Thompson (2022a) describes fake news can be described as "deceptive content circulated primarily through digital networks, created deliberately to shape a particular public viewpoint or perception of a topic."

In Nepal, the media's efforts to counter disinformation are not straightforward. The integration of fact-checking units into newsrooms is still lacking in Nepali journalism industry. Despite gatekeeping processes, errors can occur, and the media could provide more perspectives on the trustworthiness of rapidly spreading information. While some articles on disinformation have started to appear in the media, there is a lack of in-depth research on the presented material, which often includes a mix of international and Nepali references covering various topics.

Overall, there is a need for newsrooms to enhance their preparedness to combat the spread of misinformation and engage in more meaningful discussions on the topic. The inclusion of fact-checking units and rigorous research can contribute to the media's efforts to address the challenges posed by misinformation.

An Insecurity of Democracy

"What can social media do? It can 'kill' living ones, 'arrest' a prime minister, 'split' a political party," states Khatiwada (2022). Khatiwada's analysis of media headlines based on clickbait led him to this conclusion. He argues that such content spreads due to investments by interest groups or for the sake of generating clicks and there is lack of effective measures to monitor the spread of disinformation through social media (Khatiwada, 2022).

Ghimire (2021) opines that fake news not only affects ordinary citizens but also journalists and media organizations stating that as misinformation travels fast and sways large masses in a short time, it becomes a handy tool for various people and sectors, including political campaigners, activists, and conspirators.

Similarly, Adhikari (2022) warns that the failure to protect ourselves from disinformation in a timely manner will pose an increased challenge to national security. Adhikari (2022) adds a global perspective, stating that tools and actions of disinformation, deception, misinformation, and confirmation bias have been used for hybrid warfare and mentions instances where criminal or state-sponsored groups deliberately share false information that damages the state's reputation.

Adhikari (2022) emphasizes the impact of disinformation on national politics, geopolitics, democratic recognition, economic and social recognition, as well as the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and systems. There is a call for regulations to protect society and state from misinformation. However, there is disagreement on whether the legal system alone can solve the problem. The case of Umesh Shrestha, a fact-checker, serves as an example. Nepal Police's Cyber Bureau harassed Shrestha, the editor of nepalfactcheck.org (see IFJ, 2022). Shrestha's fact-checking work published on his blog, Mysansar, was misunderstood by a police officer. Shrestha (2022) wrote:

> Next thing I know I am being threatened with detention and accused of spreading disinformation. What an irony: the writer of an article about fake news is being detained for propagating fake news. I tried telling him to at least read the article first before accusing me, and then determine if I was propagating falsehoods, or trying to make people aware of it. But it was like talking to a stone wall… It seems a top official at the Bureau had read my blog article and made a copy ordering his employees to investigate the people responsible for increasing fake news. But police officer misunderstood this to mean that it was the writer who needed to be investigated. (Shrestha, 2022)

Political scientists claim digital systems have weakened democracy by controlling information. Internet platforms cause political harm that is far more alarming than any economic damage they create… their real danger is not that they distort markets; it is that they threaten democracy (Fukuyama, Richman & Goel, 2021).

CK Lal, a political analyst, calls social media "anti-social platform" for its negative impact and claims social media has become the primary medium for the dissemination of populism in Nepal. Shrestha (2023) states that digital systems have emerged as powerful tools for the rise of new populism globally. However, it is crucial to recognize that the root cause lies in the alignment of both populism and digital systems:

> "Populism intentionally disregards or suppresses diverse viewpoints, and it is essential that the working style of digital systems does not mirror this approach. Failing to address this issue can lead to a one-sided and irrational discourse that hampers meaningful dialogue and understanding." (Shrestha, 2023)

The prevailing resentment towards the current leaders and governance system highlights the need for transformative change. This change should be brought about through a collective movement aimed at establishing constitutional democracy, upholding respect for plurality, and safeguarding freedom of speech to accommodate diverse perspectives.

A Chain of Challenges

The circulation today of fake news as online material – either as deliberate disinformation or accidentally believed and shared as misinformation – is widely recognized as having a serious and problematic impact on how we perceive politics and politicians (Cover & Thompson, 2022).

Deepak Adhikari (2023), a fact-checker, stresses the detrimental impact of monetization on social media platforms, exacerbating the problem of information disorder – a term used to collectively address misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. He believes that promoting fact-checking and digital literacy should go hand in hand, given the increasing difficulty of distinguishing fact from fiction.

He points out that these platforms are designed to capture and retain our attention for as long as possible. The algorithms, which prioritize engagement and amplification, often favor sensational and

emotionally charged content over accurate and factual journalism (Adhikari, 2023).

According to Adhikari, enhancing digital literacy is crucial in combating misinformation. He emphasizes the significance of critical thinking, source evaluation, and fact-checking skills to navigate the vast information landscape. Digital literacy empowers individuals to navigate the overwhelming flow of data and identify trustworthy sources of information.

The recurring theme in many authors is the confusion experienced by people when inundated with excessive information. Gairapipli (2023) argues that during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation proliferated, particularly concerning food and medicine and explains that the overburden of information leaves people uncertain about whom to trust, resulting in confusion and anxiety.

The Evolving Role of Journalists

The primary responsibility of journalists is to present news material in an objective manner, focusing on providing essential information rather than catering to people's preferences.

Mahaseth (2022) draws attention to the belief held by a significant portion of the Nepali population that all the information they receive is true. He argues that the media only offers partial information, leading to misinformation due to the lack of comprehensive reporting. Mahaseth (2022) suggests that journalists should prioritize investigative journalism and fact-checking to address this issue.

Gairapipli (2023) underscores the importance of increased fact-checking, particularly focusing on marginalized communities. He highlights that individual residing in rural areas, senior citizens, those with low literacy levels, children, people with disabilities, and those facing language barriers are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and rumors. By addressing the information needs of these vulnerable groups, journalists can contribute to combatting the spread of misinformation (see Gairapipli, 2023).

Associate Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Tribhuvan University Dr. Kundan Aryal emphasizes the role of media literacy in addressing the issue. Aryal, in Budathoki (2020), explains:

"From the lens of freedom of speech, we do not look too much into the role of the government, rather we work for the role of media. It is their responsibility not to confuse the public or mislead them". (Budathoki, 2020)

Aryal believes that mainstream media should come forward to include controversial issues to clear doubts among the public and work fulfilling their responsibility in promoting media literacy.

Although book publishing became widespread with invention of Johannes Gutenberg's printing technology in the 1450s, newspapers emerged as the earliest form of mass communication, playing a significant role in shaping public opinion. However, along with their positive impact, newspapers also marked the beginning of widespread dissemination of misinformation to a large audience.

Even before the popular press era, newspapers themselves were guilty of spreading misinformation. For instance, in 1835, The Sun, a New York-based newspaper, published a series of articles known as the Great Moon Hoax, claiming the discovery of humanoid life on the moon (Greifeneder, Jaffé, Newman, & Schwarz, as cited in Thornton, 2002). The introduction of the radio further facilitated the dissemination of news, including the spread of disinformation campaigns in the lead-up to World War II (Kallis, 2005).

With the advent of the internet and the prevalence of social media, the ability to disseminate messages to the masses has become democratized, no longer limited to powerful traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television. Unlike the centuries-long process it took for printing press come to Nepal after Gutenberg's invention, internet-based technology emerged and quickly became the most influential and far-reaching medium. While information technology advancements have brought numerous advantages and facilitated globalization, they have also given rise to negative aspects such as the spread of misinformation.

Actors Spreading Misinformation

The role of independent media in countering information manipulation has been extensively analyzed, bringing attention to the state

of non-independent media. In Nepal, the press has historically been associated with political parties. Media outlets are often controlled by party leaders who hold positions as directors and editors. The majority of weekly newspapers remain fiercely partisan, supporting one or other political party, or even groups within a political party (Acharya, n.d.). It is also noteworthy that major political parties in Nepal have journalists' unions as fraternal associations, where affiliated journalists advocate for their respective parties and actively campaign against opposing parties.

While weekly newspapers aligned with political parties have experienced a decline after the emergence of privately owned independent broadsheets in mid-1990s. Political parties, party factions, or leaders have transitioned to disseminating news online, effectively replacing weekly newspapers that previously operated as fronts for political parties. As a result, These media sources have the potential to manipulate information, which can negatively impact both the public and the government. The control exerted by political parties over the media implies that threat actors include the parties themselves and their activists. Political party leaders exploit their cadres to discreetly spread misinformation, and activists weaponize social media to propagate their narratives. Video-sharing platforms, in particular, have become dominant in circulating such content.

Notably, individuals who hold prominence in social spheres also contribute to the dissemination of misinformation in Nepal. Individual includes former administrators and artists who act as social influencers. Their large pool of followers gives significant weight to the messages they convey. Nepal Fact Check's investigations have repeatedly identified former secretary Bhim Upadhyay as a frequent perpetrator of spreading misinformation through social media. Numerous individuals on social media, like him, possess the trust of the public.

Paudel (2023) has emphasized the detrimental effects of a lack of proactive disclosure in information dissemination. This deficit leads to confusion among the public and paves the way for misinformation. Paudel (2023) concludes that although governments at all levels express a commitment to providing information, they often fall

short in implementation. Consequently, there is an increased risk of conspiracies and the dissemination of misinformation. The tendency to overstate the achievements has become a prevalent tradition within all governments.

Misinformation has had significant consequences on Nepal's bilateral relations with foreign countries. Nepal, being geographically positioned between major countries like China and India, is particularly susceptible to the effects of misinformation and geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, the political landscape has witnessed the rise of nationalist sentiments being exploited for political gain. Gerrits (2018) explains that although disinformation becomes an increasingly salient aspect of global politics, its security impact should not be overstated. As in domestic politics, international disinformation parasites on existing divisions and concerns, which it exploits rather than creates… this should not be trivialized (Gerrits, 2018).

Foreign governments also emerge as significant threat actors, attempting to manipulate the flow of information on specific issues. Concerns have been raised about attempts to misinform in the realm of geopolitics, particularly regarding the implementation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) – a bilateral development agreement between the US and Nepal that became a highly contested issue. Basnet (2020) identifies at least 56 fake news pages that have created some 500 posts on MCC in a month.

> "There are numerous manipulated images, twisted facts, false claims, manipulated documents, shared fake content claiming part of the MCC agreement. Mostly such fake content is shared relatively among certain like-minded groups, through email and messages for amplifying it. A massive disinformation manipulation has generated the division in public opinion on MCC." (Basnet, 2020)

Such misleading information has been aimed at manipulating the public sentiment against the American assistance in Nepal by using fake names or identification. The consequences of the misinformation were visible in Nepal during the 2022 election campaigns when

it became a common political strategy for leaders, whether well-established or new to express opposition against the MCC to gain electoral support thereby to achieve political goals.

In some instances, it is difficult for leaders to deviate from the agendas they have raised using misinformation. A notable example is the case of Balen Shah, the mayor of Kathmandu, who banned Indian films on June 18, 2023, subsequently extended to other municipalities of the country. This decision was based on misinformation and received significant praise from the public. Such activities tend to attract more leaders as the public interest grows, leading to an increase in praises for actions rooted in misinformation. However, if this pattern continues in democratic practices, it could potentially undermine the integrity of democratic processes, as misinformation appears to gain prominence in shaping public opinion.

Shah took the decision to ban a film based on references that were not even present in the film itself. However, the court ruled against him and ordered the film's release. In response, Shah expressed further criticism against the court. Despite his controversial remarks, the number of people expressing support for him on social media remained substantial. Shah even referred to other political parties as Indian agents in his social media posts. Despite the use of misinformation and populist tactics, the level of support for Shah remained remarkably high. The case suggests that if this trend continues, misinformation and populism may have a significant impact on domestic politics in the coming days.

Similarly, commercial actors play a significant role in shaping people's preferences and have become influential figures in content production. The trend known as "when it bleeds it leads," which emerged in the mid-19th century, highlights the production of attention-grabbing content. In clickbait-based content, the producer's primary interest appears to be profit-oriented. From YouTube to TikTok, various commercial actors have emerged, exerting influence on content creation. Social media influencers are notable examples of such commercial actors.

Traditional forms of content generation often involve multiple gatekeeping processes, which can help mitigate the spread of misin-

formation to some extent. Additionally, limitations on the circulation of newspapers and the allocation of radio and television frequencies can restrict the dissemination of such material. However, with the rise of internet-based content and the lack of gatekeeping have resulted in an unrestricted flow of information to a vast audience.

In the absence of professional editing, the proliferation of content has created opportunities for misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. Some individuals unintentionally contribute to the spread of misinformation, while others deliberately plan and disseminate misleading content.

These circumstances have also contributed to the proliferation of expressions of hatred. The advancement of information technology has played a role in the escalation of hatred in various forms, eroding social harmony. Content that elicits strong emotions tends to gain viral traction on social media platforms.

Misinformation During Elections: A Growing Concern

The pervasive influence of social media as an electoral weapon poses a significant risk, with political parties resorting to any means necessary to secure victory. While social media monitoring in Nepal began during the Constituent Assembly elections in 2013, a legal framework was not established to address the issue effectively. However, in the 2022 election, the Election Commission Nepal (ECN) recognized the importance of tackling social media as a matter of policy.

In response to this pressing concern, the ECN introduced the 'Policy on the Use of Social Media in Election Management, 2077'. This policy acknowledges the specific challenges arising from the presence of social media in electoral matters, with a particular emphasis on the detrimental impact of misinformation on the outcomes of the elections. Problems identified by the ECN (2021) are as follows:

- Absence of necessary policy provisions for making the use of social media systematic to disseminate information regarding elections.
- Absence of necessary strategies to mitigate the potential attack, intervention, risk, negative influence, and miscommunication that may happen through social media.
- Lack of laws, policies, and institutional structures to control

misinformation, disinformation, distorted information, and hate speech during elections.

- In addition to addressing the problem at hand, the Commission identified several challenges that need to be considered. These challenges include: To make social media users responsible and accountable for the materials they produce, publish, and disseminate.
- To control and regulate cybercrime that may increase with the growth in the number of social media users regarding the election and to avert potential internal and external influence.
- To ensure the credibility and, impartiality; of elections by controlling and regulating misinformation; disinformation; distorted information; hate speech; and dissemination of baseless, wrong, misleading, and hypothetical information against the election code of conduct, that may occur at the national or international level; through social media.
- To mitigate risks that may arise from wrong information about the validity of electoral processes and the credibility of the ECN through social media.
- To develop institutional systems and competent human resources to verify the authenticity of information sources and to regulate and immediately respond to the wrong information disseminated through social media.
- To establish coordinating relations between the political parties, stakeholders, civil society, media houses, social media forums, and regulating bodies on the use of social media.

Combating information manipulation

Media scholars emphasize the need for strategic amplification by journalists and platform companies to effectively address misinformation. Stebbins (2023a) argues that careful decision-making is crucial in determining when to cover a story involving misinformation and how to prioritize reliable content over false information. Best practices are emerging to guide journalists in deciding whether to report on a story that is already spreading virally or likely to spread soon (Stebbins, 2023a).

Recognizing the significance of reliable news and information in a democratic society, Pickard (2020) emphasizes that the journalism crisis should be treated as a major social problem and a public policy concern. From an ethical perspective, Cover & Thompson (2022b) suggest viewing fake news, disinformation, and misleading content as acts of violence. They advocate for an ethical obligation not to perpetrate harm through the dissemination of such content.

Regarding fact-checking, there is disagreement on the direct role of news media. While journalists should verify the facts of a story they report on, Stebbins (2023b) suggests that independent fact-checking organizations like FactCheck.org or PolitiFact may be preferable to in-house fact-checking by news media.

To address the issue of unreliable content, Stebbins (2023) proposes the use of new ethical algorithms that pre-filter content and are then reviewed by curators following transparent standards set by professional bodies. These curators, such as librarians, editors, and news reporters, need to be nonpartisan, accountable to public oversight, and adhere to a code of ethics.

Journalist codes of conduct implemented worldwide prioritize factual, objective, and verified content. These ethical standards play a crucial role in reducing the likelihood of misinformation. In the field of journalism, it is expected to promptly correct and apologize for unintentional errors. Nepal has also implemented a journalist code of conduct that addresses these principles. However, the existing journalistic code of ethics primarily focuses on information disseminated through traditional media channels and does not adequately address content circulated on social media platforms.

The Press Council Nepal has the authority to act against media outlets that violate the code of conduct in relation to mainstream news. However, when it comes to social media, the role of such regulatory bodies is not clearly defined. Social media platforms have their own policies to tackle misinformation, but only a limited number of individuals possess the knowledge to comprehend these policies and adjust their content accordingly. In contrast, those intentionally spreading misinformation directly or indirectly violate the code of conduct.

The code of conduct issued by the Press Council Nepal prohibits the publication of misleading content, encompassing not only written material but also audio and video content. Specific guidelines are established for television broadcasts. However, the prevalence of live social media platforms has surpassed the influence and the coverage that of television. It appears that neither the National Broadcasting Act nor the Press Council Nepal's code of conduct adequately addresses the content disseminated by non-traditional and unestablished media sources.

Conclusion

The spread of misinformation in Nepal has a long history, with various influencers, including political leaders, individuals, and businesspersons, contributing to the dissemination of unverified and misleading information. The advent of social media and digital platforms has amplified the reach and influence of misinformation, with platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter being identified as primary sources of false information. The unrestricted flow of information through internet-based platforms has created opportunities for misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. The increasing number of internet users in Nepal, which has reached over 38.8 million, highlights the remarkable growth of internet culture in the country. The absence of gatekeeping in social media raises concerns about the type of content being disseminated and its impact on society.

The journalism industry in Nepal is facing an existential crisis, as newsrooms struggle with declining creativity and pressure from social media content. Traditional media is being influenced by the social media contents, compromising its role in providing comprehensive and objective reporting. Fact-checking units are lacking in Nepali newsrooms, and there is a need for newsrooms to enhance their preparedness to combat misinformation. Fake news not only affects ordinary citizens but also journalists and media organizations, making it a handy tool for various interest groups. The impact of misinformation on national politics, democratic cognition, and erosion of trust in democratic institutions is significant, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to address the issue.

The challenges posed by misinformation are multifaceted, with the evolving role of journalists and the importance of media literacy being key considerations. Journalists should prioritize investigative journalism, fact-checking, and addressing the information needs of marginalized communities. Enhancing media literacy, critical thinking, and fact-checking skills can empower individuals to navigate the overwhelming flow of information and identify trustworthy sources. The proliferation of misinformation on social media platforms is exacerbated by algorithms that prioritize engagement and amplification, favoring sensational and emotionally charged content over accurate journalism. To combat misinformation effectively, promoting fact-checking and digital literacy should go hand in hand.

Threat actors in information manipulation include political parties, party activists, social media influencers, former administrators, artists, and foreign governments. The control exerted by political parties over the media, the lack of proactive disclosure in information dissemination, and the influence of commercial actors in content production contribute to the spread of misinformation. Addressing the challenges posed by information manipulation requires a comprehensive approach involving media literacy, fact-checking, and the active involvement of journalists and newsrooms.

Based on the desk analysis of the landscape of information manipulation in Nepal, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Nepal is experiencing a surge in the dissemination of misinformation like developed nations. Individuals and groups actively contribute to the proliferation of unorganized misinformation.

2. With the widespread availability of internet access, social media has become the primary medium for circulating misinformation. As the gatekeeping role of traditional media reduces, their involvement in disseminating misinformation increases, often resulting in a wider reach compared to individual sources.

3. Traditional news outlets, which have historically shaped public agendas, are losing influence, with social media taking center stage. Traditional media platforms have not made

sufficient efforts to adapt to the changing landscape, which has resulted in them struggling to keep pace, thereby allowing social media to gain dominance. Moreover, political parties have also shifted their focus towards social media, reducing their reliance on traditional news media for public engagement and propagating their agendas.

4. Although established political parties and leaders may not be directly responsible for spreading misinformation during elections, misinformation flows freely among their supporters and workers.

5. Social media has been frequently used to promote political influence and demean opponent party leaders.

6. The lack of substantial efforts in media literacy at the public level has led to acceptance of information as it is received without critical evaluation. Media-literate individuals, on the other hand, exhibit skepticism towards content shared on social media and express dissatisfaction with traditional news outlets.

7. The popularity-driven nature of social media has contributed to an upsurge in misinformation, as social media influencers hold increasing sway over public opinion. This focus on populism, rather than democratic ideals, fuels the spread of misinformation and fosters an aversion towards democratic practices.

Nepal is not immune to the rising tide of misinformation that is spreading globally. The production of information through both organized and unorganized channels has become increasingly prevalent in the country. Emerging social media platforms have gained popularity as alternative sources of information, while the traditional media's gatekeeping function appears to be weakening. Consequently, a mix of accurate information and misinformation inundates various content streams, making it challenging to discern truth from fabrication. This phenomenon has had a negative impact on the democratic system.

Nepal faces a significant challenge in combating misinformation due to the widespread circulation of false information through

social media and the weakening influence of traditional news media. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that includes media literacy and social media literacy programs, strengthening gatekeeping processes in traditional media, promoting responsible use of social media, and fostering a culture of open and respectful discussions. Only through these efforts can Nepal mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and safeguard its democratic foundations.

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