Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by

Ujjwal Acharya

Center for Media Research – Nepal

Kathmandu, Nepal

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CHAPTER 1

An Anatomy of Information Manipulation in Nepal

Rishikesh Dahal and Ujjwal Acharya

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Misinformation in Nepal

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

"The prevalence of misinformation is alarming, with even minor issues exaggerated into significant problems. Various individuals, including political party leaders, activists, and those with expertise in information technology, are actively involved in spreading false information."
- Raju Shrestha, RTI activist (KII participant)

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

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

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

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

> "Misleading information is gaining alarming prominence in electoral contexts…Political parties have established cyber forces dedicated to information manipulation."
> - *BP Sah, politician (FGD participant)*

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

> "During elections, screenshots from mainstream media are used and manipulated to change public opinion. Additionally, the use of AI in misinformation campaigns is on the rise, posing new challenges to combating false information."
> - *Umesh Shrestha, fact-check editor (KII participant)*

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

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

> "The number of misinformation is high during critical periods, and elections. Misinformation has a potential to mislead opinions and change voting behaviors of the public and any such impact is harmful to democracy."
> - *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

Threat Actors

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

Political Parties and Campaigns

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

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

"Political information is widely disseminated by political actors and individuals motivated by financial gains, who post misleading contents for profit."
- Umesh Shrestha, fact-check editor (KII participant)

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

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

were some instances where there were direct attacks on opposing candidates with questionable information."
- *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

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

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

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

"Political parties have also shifted their focus from traditional channels to social media platforms, where they anticipate reaching a wider audience in a short period and conveying their message directly to the public."
- *Dr. Kundan Aryal, journalism associate professor (FGD participant)*

Hate and Other Extremist Groups

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

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

is weaponized to incite religious conflicts."
- Mohammad Ishtiyaq Rai, former minister (KII participants)

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

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

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

Foreign Governments

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

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

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

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

> "Recently, the MCC faced the circulation of false information, while earlier, the misinformation about the Arun III hydro project had disrupted our development process."
> - *Bimala Bhandari, journalist (KII participant)*

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

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

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

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

Domestic Government

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

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

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

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

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

Commercial Actors

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

> "The source of misinformation is not limited to the three levels of government; they also originate in the private sector."
> - *Raju Shrestha, RTI activist (KII participant)*

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

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

> "Information manipulation is done not only by journalists but also by others. The information providers are only giving information by weighing [benefits to themselves]. In a sense, there is cartelization in information that was not so widespread before."
> *- Rajendra Dahal, ex-chair of Press Council of Nepal (FGD participant)*

Non-Independent Media

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

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

> "The media itself contributes to the spread of false information. Certain individuals intentionally withhold accurate information, while others manipulate and disseminate incorrect content. Some media outlets engage in such practices with indirect financial backing from individuals close to those in power, including political leaders."
> *- Sarita Shreesh, politician (KII Participant)*

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

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

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

> "Jumping to conclusions without facts is a disgrace. Nepali media often form opinions without verifying the facts, and this is disheartening."
> - *Gokul Baskota, ex-minister (KII participant)*

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

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

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

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

Tactics

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

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

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

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

"The use of bots to propagate false information has become a noticeable trend, leading to a spread of misleading content across various platforms."
- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

"There is a trend of intentionally spreading false information and engaging in exaggerated behaviors to provoke trolling. Additionally, there is another trend of trolling by taking someone's statements out of context and misrepresenting their intentions."
- *Dinesh Thapaliya, Chief Election Commissioner (KII participant)*

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

Combating Information Manipulation

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

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

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

"While control through legislation can be effective, there is a potential risk of abuse associated with this approach. Careful consideration is necessary to strike a balance between regulations and protecting free speech."
- Santosh Sigdel, digital rights lawyer (FGD participant)

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

"Imposing control on the media could turn the state into a dictatorship. Instead, to combat the spread of fake content, strict enforcement of a robust code of conduct is necessary."
- Mohammad Ishtiyaq Rai, ex-minister (KII participant)

"Unfortunately, some media prioritize sensationalism over accuracy, resulting in the dissemination of false information. If media outlets strictly adhere to their ethical codes, it would significantly improve the information landscape."
- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

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

"A more effective approach involves civil society scrutinizing information critically based on facts and engaging in meaningful discussions. By doing so, they can influence people positively and ensure the dissemination of reliable information."
- *Pashupati Ray, Nepal Police (KII participant)*

"There is no better alternative to media and information literacy as a long-term approach since the impact of information manipulation could only be minimized to the lowest level possible by the consumers of information who are aware and have skills to analyze information critically."
- *Tilak Pathak, researcher (FGD participant)*

"The government should establish a comprehensive policy and enact laws specifically addressing false information. Simultaneously, the media should enhance its internal control system to improve accountability and accuracy in reporting."
- *Dinesh Thapaliya, Chief Election Commissioner (KII participant)*

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

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

> "In urban areas, experts scrutinize the source of information to determine its credibility. However, this level of verification is often lacking in rural regions, leaving residents unsure of whom to trust."
> *- Tula Narayan Shah, activist (FGD participant)*

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

> "It is crucial to define the specific target audience for whom digital literacy is essential."
> *- Santosh Sigdel, digital rights lawyer (FGD participant)*

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

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

> "The public trust in the media as a whole is on a steady decline… there is a noticeable decrease in people's interest in mainstream media, with a rise in reliance on information on social media platforms and increasing amount of misinformation."
> *- Urbasi Basnyat, Radio Sagarmatha station manager (FGD participant)*

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

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

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

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

"The strength of the communication medium plays a crucial role in determining the impact of misinformation. A robust communication platform will weaken the influence of those spreading false information, emphasizing the importance of promoting reliable and responsible sources of information."
- *Kundan Aryal, journalism associate professor (FGD participant)*

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

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

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

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

"With mainstream media seemingly overlooking content that

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Appendix 1

Focus Group Discussion Participants

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

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

Appendix 2

Key Informant Interview participants

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

CHAPTER 2

Public Perceptions of Misinformation: Sources, Impacts, and Societal Implications

Ujjwal Prajapati and Lekhanath Pandey

Abstract

This study delves into the influence of misinformation in Nepal. The widespread increasing access to social media platforms has significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation and impacted vulnerable groups such as youth, women, and those who primarily rely on social media for news and information. Social media emerges as the primary medium for misinformation, with Facebook identified as the most prevalent platform in Nepal. Political groups, celebrities, and social media influencers are the primary sources of misleading information, often spread for political propaganda or personal gain. The impacts of misinformation are far-reaching as it has the potential to fuel social tensions, lead to violence, and impede progress in areas like justice and infrastructure development; to increase patriarchal perspectives, gender-based violence, and hate speech; and to erode trust in the media. The public is concerned about the spread of misinformation and there is a need to bring forth legal mechanism to control spread of misinformation, to promote digital literacy among public and to support fact-checking to counter misinformation.

Keywords: *misinformation, social media, misinformation intervention*

Introduction

In recent decades, the proliferation of misinformation, especially after the rise of social media platforms have become an issue of global concern. It gained prominence, particularly after the 2016 US Presidential Elections, when the problem of misinformation was raised as a public agenda leading to an investigation into alleged Russia-sanctioned interference in the electoral process. Further concerns arose when the World Health Organization called information ecosystem during the Covid-19 pandemic an "infodemic" to indicate public confusion created due to huge mixture of correct, misleading and false information (see Boulianne et al, 2022).

Studies have pointed out that misinformation poses a threat to the foundations of the modern nation-state, including national security, sovereignty, and electoral integrity (Moir, 2019). Others consider it a reemergence of the age-old issue of propaganda (Samples, 2019). However, it is generally agreed that misinformation could have serious impacts and consequences for individuals, societies, and democratic processes.

The discourse on misinformation has evolved from focusing solely on national security threats and political problems to encompassing wider societal issues. In this regard, Neo (2021) identified three discourses on misinformation: (1) a security challenge that could pose an existential threat, warranting strict security measures; (2) a political issue needing political attention rather than severe security policies, with an emphasis on restoring public trust and protecting free expression; and (3) a minor societal issue, often favored by tech firms, which calls for private self-regulation efforts like fact-checking, codes of conduct, and community education, rejecting state intervention.

Public perception surveys have also provided baseline understanding on prevalence of misinformation in the social media; and the role of social media to spread misinformation. In 2021, Pew Research Center study found that 64 percent of American adults believe that social media has a mostly negative effect on the way news is reported (Auxier, 2021). Similarly, a 2020 Reuters Institute survey found that 40 percent of respondents identified social media as a source of false or misleading information about COVID-19 (Newman, 2020). The steady growth of internet users and social media platforms has created opportunities for

the rapid spread of information making it easier for false or misleading information to accelerate in an unprecedented speed.

Misinformation is also a problem in Nepal, with the growth of internet users and access to digital platforms. Approximately 63 percent of Nepali or roughly 12.2 million Nepalis had access to internet in 2022 and 41 percent have access to social media (Acharya, 2022). Acharya (2022) also found that 62.6 percent of adult population use internet as primary source of news, whereas 49 percent of social media users consider Facebook as primary source of national and international news and information. However, 80 percent of Nepalis have 'little trust' on social media (Acharya, 2022).

A 2021 survey by the Center for Media Research - Nepal found that 91.8 percent of social media users reported seeing misinformation in the preceding week, with 78.8 percent of those cases occurring on Facebook (CMR-Nepal, 2021).

In this context, this study was conducted with the following objectives:

- To identify the source and channels of misinformation,
- To understand the impact of misinformation in different sectors, and
- To identify effective intervention measure.

Methods

This study uses mixed-method approach analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data.

Qualitative Data

In January 2023, seven half-day discussions were held with stakeholders in seven province of Nepal. A total of 183 participants, including 70 females, from diverse backgrounds—including politicians, elected representatives, civil society organizations, journalists, writers, educators, public health professionals, sportspersons, social media influencers, farmers, and students—participated in these discussions.

The researchers led the discussions using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questions explored key aspects of misinformation, specifically: its nature, reasons for its spread, impacts on individuals

and society, and potential strategies to mitigate its harmful effects. For each question, at least two responses were recorded. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with 19 individuals, including news editors and managers, elected representatives, attorneys, bureaucrats, and opinion makers. The interviews aimed to gather expert insights on the actors and motives behind misinformation spread, methods of misinformation exposure, and existing interventions to combat misinformation.

Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in Janakpur, Madhes province, involving 11 representatives from local women's groups, youth clubs, and marginalized communities.

Quantitative data

A survey was conducted with the 183 participants from the earlier discussions, but only 167 responses were validated and used for analysis.

All discussions, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and the survey were conducted in Nepali. The researchers immediately digitally transcribed the data and translated it into English for categorization, cross-tabulation, and subsequent analysis.

Respondent Demographics

The following table shows the demographic information about 167 respondents of the survey.

Table 2.1. Demographics of the Respondents

Demography	Variables	Responses	Percentage
Age	18-29	77	46%
	30-49	82	49%
	50-64	7	4%
	65+	1	1%
Gender	Women	94	56%
	Men	73	44%
Education	High School	22	13%
	Bachelor's Level	88	53%
	Master's Level and above	57	34%

	Business	13	8%
	Education	22	13%
	Government	11	7%
Working Sector	Household work	3	2%
	Media	35	21%
	Students	46	27%
	Agriculture	3	2%
	Others	34	20%

Regarding educational background, most respondents (53%) held a bachelor's degree, with 34 percent having a master's degree or higher, and 13 percent possessing a high school diploma or less.

In terms of occupation, the participants were diverse: 27 percent were students, 21 percent worked in media, 13 percent in education, 8 percent in business, and 20 percent were political party members, civil society activists, or lawyers.

Findings

This section presents findings based on survey responses from 167 participants across seven provinces and qualitative discussions.

Finding 1: Sources of Misinformation

The study revealed the prevalence of misinformation across various communication channels, with social media, word of mouth, and online news portals emerging as the most significant sources.

Specifically, 98 percent of respondents encountered misinformation on social media, 79 percent encountered misinformation via word of mouth, and 55 percent encountered misinformation on online news portals.

Table 2.2. Sources of Misinformation

Variable	Respondents	Variable Subset	Percentage
Social Media	164	Facebook	149 (91%)
		Twitter	12 (7%)
		TikTok	61 (37%)
		Instagram	10 (6%)
		YouTube	72 (44%)
		Others	9 (5%)
Word of Mouth Communi-cation	132	Family	17 (13%)
		Friends	77 (58%)
		Teashop	58 (44%)
		Phone	22 (17%)
		Offices	17 (13%)
		Others	15 (11%)
Online Media	92	Online media based in Kathmandu	31 (34%)
		Online media based in province	53 (58%)
		Nepali online media based outside Nepal	20 (22%)
		International online media	11 (12%)
		Others	3 (3%)
Newspapers	64	National newspapers	13 (20%)
		Weekly newspapers	13 (20%)
		Local newspapers	44 (69%)
		Magazines	9 (14%)
Television	62	Public TV	10 (16%)
		Private TV	25 (40%)
		Cable and Local TV	38 (61%)
		International TV	8 (13%)
Radio	47	Public Radio (Radio Nepal)	8 (17%)
		Commercial FM Radio	36 (77%)
		Community FM Radio	11 (23%)

*Multiple choice questions.

Traditional media sources were less frequently cited as channels of misinformation. Specifically, 37 percent encountered misinformation on television, 28 percent on radio, and 38 percent on newspapers.

Among those who encountered misinformation on social media (n=164), 91 percent saw it on Facebook, 44 percent on YouTube, and 37 percent on TikTok. For word-of-mouth interactions (n=132), 58 percent encountered misinformation through friends, and 44 percent encountered it at tea shops or community gathering spots.

Among those encountering misinformation on online news platforms (n=92), 58 percent saw it in provincial outlets and 34 percent in Kathmandu-based media. On television (n=62), 61 percent encountered misinformation on local channels. Among radio listeners (n=47), 77 percent cited commercial FM stations, while 23 percent noted community FM stations. In print media (n=64), 69 percent reported encountering misinformation in local newspapers.

Finding 2: Topics of Misinformation

Misinformation related to politics, political parties, and celebrities was notably higher (Table 2.3) than the rest of the topics such as women, media, health, economy and international relations.

Table 2.3. Topic of Misinformation

Topics	Respondents	Percentage
Politics	116	69.5
Celebrities	91	54.5
Political parties	74	44.3
Women	31	18.6
Media	25	15.0
Health	23	13.8
Economy	17	10.2
Diplomacy/International relations	17	10.2
Youth	12	7.2
Others	12	7.2
Marginalized communities	11	6.6
I/NGOs	8	4.8

*Multiple Choice Question

Survey respondents encountered misinformation on a variety of topics beyond politics and celebrities. These included women, media, and health, as well as issues spanning the economy, youth, marginalized communities, NGOs, diplomacy, and international relations.

Finding 3: Actors of Misinformation

Social media users, influencers, and political cadres were identified as the primary sources of misinformation in Nepal. Among respondents, 68.3 percent believed social media users were "a great deal" responsible, 22.8 percent felt they were "quite a bit" responsible, and 7.2 percent saw them as "moderately" responsible. Social media influencers were also implicated, with 37.1 percent of respondents attributing "a great deal" of responsibility, 33.9 percent saying "quite a bit," and 15.6 percent reporting "a moderate amount."

Table 2.4. Actors of Spreading Misinformation

Actor	How responsible are those actors in spreading misleading information? (%)				
	A great deal	Quite a bit	A moderate amount	Only a little	Not at all
Social media users	68.3	22.8	7.2	0.6	1.1
Social media influencers	37.1	33.5	15.6	6.6	7.2
Political parties and wings	23.4	34.1	18.0	16.8	7.7
Politicians	18.0	35.9	26.9	16.2	3.0
Journalists and media professionals	16.8	27.5	22.2	27.5	6.0
Government of Nepal	6.0	11.4	24.6	29.3	28.7
Civil servants including retired	6.0	10.2	22.2	41.3	20.3
NGOs and activists	5.4	13.2	27.5	37.7	16.2
Professionals (doctors, teachers et al)	5.4	5.4	22.2	46.7	20.3

Political parties and their wings were also identified as significant sources of misinformation, with 23.4 percent of respondents attrib-

uting "a great deal" of responsibility, 34.1 percent assigning "quite a bit," and 18 percent noting "a moderate amount." Other groups were also implicated for either a great deal or quite a bit responsible, including politicians (53.9%), and journalists/media personnel (44.3%)

In contrast, respondents viewed the government, government employees (current or retired), I/NGOs, and professionals (for example, teachers, lawyers, doctors) as having limited or no role in spreading misinformation. Specifically, 28.7 percent believed the government does not spread misinformation, while 20.4 percent each said the same for government employees and professionals, and 16.2 percent for I/NGOs. Nevertheless, these groups were perceived to have some involvement in misinformation about current events.

The data indicates that while misinformation in Nepal stems from various sectors, its extent varies. Social media users, political parties and affiliates, political cadres, and politicians are seen as the primary drivers. Conversely, the government, government employees, I/NGOs, and professionals are perceived to play a lesser role. The motivations for spreading misinformation appear closely tied to political factors.

Finding 4: Reasons for spreading misinformation

Many respondents believed that misinformation is spread primarily for "political propaganda and publicity," with 53.3 percent respondents citing political motives. Additionally, 43.1 percent respondents stated that misinformation often involves a "wishful distortion of factual information to achieve a specific outcome." Other reasons cited included spreading rumors, personal gain, and purposes such as satire.

Table 2.5. Reasons for spreading misinformation

Reasons	Percentage of respondents
Political propaganda and publicity	53.3
Wishful distortion of factual information to produce a specific end result	43.1
Spreading rumor	38.9
Personal benefits	25.7
Parody, humor and satire	17.4

* Multiple choice question

The respondents expressed significant concern about the spread and exposure to misinformation. At a personal level, more than half stated they were "extremely concerned," while 26 percent reported being "very concerned" about the issue. The respondents' concerns about the spread of misinformation extend beyond themselves to include concerns for their family, friends, colleagues, community, society, and the nation.

Finding 5: Interventions to Combat Misinformation

The respondents expressed strong support for legal mechanisms to control misinformation, with 97 percent indicating the need for such laws. Those against such laws were only 0.5 percent and the remaining chose not the answer. However, they also acknowledged the potential risks, noting that such laws could curtail freedom of expression and press. Among those who favored regulations, 57 percent believed that formulating laws to control misinformation could limit freedom of expression and the press, while 35 percent thought such laws would not have that effect and rest choosing to remain neutral.

During the survey, respondents were also asked about how they approach information available both online and offline, as well as the methods they use to combat misinformation and verify the information they receive. A majority (65%) expressed being skeptical about publicly available information. Among the respondents, 38 percent stated they "often" doubt information they receive, while 27 percent said they "mostly" doubt it. In contrast, 35 percent said they accept publicly available information without skepticism.

The tendency to being skeptical about public information also influences how people verify information. Many respondents (55%) reported verifying websites or social media platforms to ensure the accuracy of what they read or watch. In contrast, the remaining 45 percent indicated that they verify information less frequently. Thirty-five percent of respondents stated they "occasionally" verify information, 6 percent said they rarely verify it, and 8 percent admitted they never verify such information.

A majority (52.7%) of respondents believed that "media and information literacy" is crucial for addressing the issue, followed using technology to contain spread of misinformation (46.1%). Many

respondents also believed that fostering critical thinking, along with maintaining a sense of doubt and suspicion toward information, are effective ways to help thwart the spread of misinformation in society.

Findings from Qualitative Analysis

This section is based on the focus group discussions, and the statements here reflect the dominant understanding shared by a majority of participants. Some statements, which are not dominant and pertain to personal experiences, are noted accordingly.

Information access and misinformation exposure

People rely on various sources, such as personal communication, books, news media, and social media, for news and information. Reliance on offline and online platforms varies across demographic groups. Most participants above the age of 40 prefer traditional news media such as newspapers, radio, and television, while teenagers, youth, students, and homemakers largely rely on social media platforms.

Participants shared that they are exposed to both accurate and inaccurate information. Exposure to misinformation is higher on social media than on traditional media, as anyone with a smartphone can create and distribute content without proper gatekeeping. While many trust national news media, doubts about local media and social media content persist.

People from all backgrounds report exposure to misinformation. Even educated individuals and professionals have been affected. For example, a bureaucrat in Pokhara of Gandaki province wasted resources for treatment due to misleading healthcare advertisements, and a woman agro-entrepreneur in Hetauda of Bagmati province faced losses due to false claims about government support. Participants observed that misinformation is spread either intentionally or unintentionally by various individuals and groups. Politicians and political cadres are frequently blamed, but social media users, influencers, and news media also contribute to the problem.

Local news media, including online portals and radios, are accused of partisan reporting, particularly during elections. Unregistered portals have been used to influence voters with fabricated news. Social

media influencers spread misinformation by sharing viral content without verification. For instance, a participant in Surkhet shared that a false claim about the cost of a tiger statue went viral bringing in unfounded criticism and corruption accusations.

The root causes of misinformation lie with individuals and their motives. Participants believed politicians are the main propagators, using falsehoods to promote their agendas or denounce opponents. Misinformation is prevalent in everyday politics and socio-political discussions, participants noted, adding that senior leaders' false statements often influence their supporters significantly.

Participants expressed concern about society's reliance on social media for news. The temptation to engage with viral posts contributes to the proliferation of misinformation. Politically biased opinion makers and media personnel also manipulate narratives to serve their agendas, which some participants termed "politics in disguise."

A government attorney from the Madhesi community suggested that misunderstandings about the constitution and citizenship laws, perceived as discriminatory towards the Madhesi community, illustrate the consequences of misinformation. The attorney shared unavailability of the constitution in Maithali language help spread to misconceptions. Similarly, participants recalled spikes in misinformation during events like the 2015 earthquakes, India's border blockade, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic saw a surge in conspiracy theories and misinformation, leading to public anxiety and vaccine hesitancy.

Participants described their experiences and mental states when exposed to waves of misinformation, particularly about politics and politicians, which they encounter daily.

Politics and politicians as major topic and actor

All elected representatives and politicians participating in the discussions unanimously identified politics as the main domain for misinformation at all levels—federal, provincial, and local. They noted its negative impact on Nepali society, fueled by conspiracy theories and distorted agendas. A UML leader from Biratnagar Sagar Thapa said misinformation misguides politicians during elections and beyond.

Laxmi Jimba, Ward Chair of Bakaiya Rural Municipality-5, blamed "dirty politics" for the spread of misleading information,

restricting her ability to express herself freely due to party affiliations:

> "We can't speak the truth. We only speak what we are asked or allowed to say. The epicenter of misinformation lies in dirty politics, arrogance, pressure, and influence. Unless we clear the dirt in politics, nothing will change."
>
> *- Laxmi Jimba, Ward Chair of Bakaiya Rural Municipality-5, Makawanpur*

Misinformation in politics has far-reaching consequences in other sectors, including health, education, and the economy, as well as personal interactions. An educator from Sudur Pashchim province noted that politics, detached from ethics and principles, has corrupted societal norms and values.

While many participants blamed social media for spreading misinformation, others pointed to local news outlets, which they said try to copy social media to attract audiences. For example:

> "Nowadays, many things in journalism are being decided by social media. Even journalists are running behind it. Many journalists are operating YouTube channels."
>
> *- Sher Bahadur KC, Editor of Dainik Lumbini Daily in Butwal*

During the last election campaigns, some local outlets prematurely declared "winners," who when the results were officially declared received only a few dozen votes.

Role of news media, social media and journalists

Participants expressed concerns about journalists breaching ethical codes by spreading misleading information and fabricated news. However, many journalists argued that media and journalists are often made scapegoat because the public struggles to differentiate between social media and news media. They noted that people frequently equate all digital content with news and anyone with a camera is a journalist. This confusion has worsened as local journalists have started launching YouTube channels. While social media groups have occasionally debunked misinformation, they also serve as a significant source of information. Some platforms, such as Mottey Gang Nepal, a Facebook page in Surkhet, have gained trust for sharing only

verified information. However, many social media influencers and YouTube operators admitted to spreading misinformation to be first and quick. A TV journalist and YouTuber of Pokhara shared that he once spread misleading news after trusting an unverified report from a reputed news site.

Unregistered news portals, which proliferate during elections, exacerbate the problem by spreading misinformation, political propaganda, and conspiracy theories. Politicians and political parties often exploit media and journalists for their gain, fueling misinformation. Participants observed that all political parties use both traditional and digital media to influence public sentiment. Laxmi Jimba of Bakaiya Rural Municipality criticized journalists' failure to counter misinformation due to their political affiliations but ultimately held politicians responsible. She argued that if journalists are given the freedom to work independently, politically driven misinformation will be largely controlled.

The state and authorities also contribute to misinformation. Journalists highlighted instances where officials withheld information or misled the media. For example, a public educator from Biratnagar recalled a minister falsely claiming in an interview that school textbooks had been distributed nationwide, even though his school had yet to receive them.

Misinformation fuels stereotypes and biases

Although politics is the primary domain of misinformation in Nepal, the problem extends across society. Digital platforms have amplified the spread of misinformation, reflecting societal stereotypes and biases about women, Dalits, and disabled individuals, often perpetuated through insensitive language and proverbs.

Participants highlighted the use of derogatory language, proverbs, and stereotypes targeting women, marginalized communities, and people with disabilities. A victim-blaming culture was noted in cases of sexual violence, domestic violence, divorce, and suicide, where women are often held responsible. Women participants from Karnali and Sudur Pashchim provinces shared societal perception that restrict their behavior, such as avoiding late hours, refraining from laughing loudly, or meeting male friends. While not directly misinformation,

these societal judgments confine women to domestic roles, eroding their confidence and ambitions.

Women participants criticized the "insensitive" media coverage and social media discourse around sexual violence cases involving celebrities, which they believe promote victim-blaming. Saraswoti Gurung, a Legislative Assembly member from Gandaki province, observed that such stereotypes diminish the image of women, Dalits, and minorities, hindering their empowerment. These tendencies are particularly severe in Karnali, Sudur Pashchim , and Madhes provinces, with local media in Madhes often perceived as unsupportive in cases like child marriage, dowry disputes, and sexual violence. In Sudur Pashchim , misinformation persists around traditional practices like Chhaupadi.

In Madhes province, narratives discourage women from competing in elections suggesting they cannot compete with wealthier or male candidates. Such claims aim to confine women to proportional representation roles. Women politicians noted that misinformation is used to defame or discourage women and minorities from running for office, with narratives asserting they cannot succeed due to their backgrounds. Additionally, a divisive narrative about Madhesis versus Pahadis in Madhes, often amplified by social media, was traced back to political figures seeking electoral gains.

Participants also observed that youth, while victims of misinformation, contribute to its spread by sharing unverified content on social media. This is alarming given their influence on public opinion and elections. To address this, participants recommended integrating media literacy into school and college curricula to help youth identify credible information. They also urged social media platforms to actively combat misinformation by removing false content and amplifying credible sources.

Misinformation in health, agriculture and other topics

Participants observed that misinformation is rampant in all aspects of Nepali life, including health, education, agriculture, sports, and cross-border relations. Many youths engaged in sports often encounter misinformation about games and players, as politics in the sports sector promotes false perceptions and rumors about the selection of players and their relationships with managers and coaches. In

the health sector, it is common for people to give personal advice to patients about medicines, treatments, and doctors, leading to negative effects on both patients and healthcare providers. A public health official based in Pokhara stated: "We have all become doctors, and this has negatively affected both patients and doctors."

The circulation of misleading information and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant fear and anxiety among the public. Participants noted that the media and social media played a substantial role in spreading misinformation and creating panic. Furthermore, misleading advertisements have led to wasted time and money for patients seeking treatment, and in some cases, have even resulted in the loss of lives. Language barriers have also contributed to miscommunication between public health volunteers and patients, particularly in Sudur Pashchim province. A public health volunteer from the eastern region shared her experiences of encountering miscommunication and cultural clashes in Dhangadi due to her inability to understand the local language and dialects.

In the agriculture sector, misinformation has troubled both farmers and consumers. One of the main issues is the misleading information about whether a product is organic or non-organic. Participants shared how they were intrigued by sellers claiming that organic products commanded higher prices. Misinformation is prevalent regarding seeds, fertilizers and their distribution, pesticides and their applications, and subsidies for farmers, among other topics. Dharma Datta Paudel, an agro-entrepreneur based in Pokhara, said, "Though the government provides very low subsidies, it's portrayed as if everything is subsidized." Another agro-entrepreneur from Hetauda shared how news media often present misleading data about agricultural profits, frequently framing turnovers as profits.

In the tourism and hospitality sectors, social media and news media are often responsible for spreading misleading information. A participant representing the tourism sector in Pokhara shared how a misleading report by an international television channel about the 2014 avalanche at Annapurna Base Camp negatively impacted tourist traffic on that trail in subsequent years. As foreigners have a strong interest in Nepal's adventure tourism, even slightly misleading news or social media posts can significantly harm the tourism sector.

Participants expressed deep concern about the spread and exposure to disinformation and misinformation, which poses a threat to every aspect of Nepali life and society. They noted that misinformation has become so pervasive that people now have to think twice before assessing even genuine news. Many participants believe that misinformation risks provoking social or racial tensions, as it has contributed to dividing people along regional, racial, or cultural lines. One participant in Butwal stated that misinformation has promoted racial conflict and social disharmony, with many people mistakenly treating Nepalis as Indian citizens.

Legal mechanism as an intervention

Several legal documents discourage the spread of misinformation in any form. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) ensures the fundamental rights of freedom of opinion and expression but imposes reasonable restrictions on acts that may undermine the sovereignty, territorial integrity, nationality, and independence of Nepal, or harm harmonious relations between federal units or among people of various castes, tribes, religions, or communities. It also prohibits acts that incite caste-based discrimination, untouchability, defamation, contempt of court, or offenses against public decency or morality. The Electronic Transaction Act of 2008 prohibits the publication of illegal material in electronic forms (Clause 47), although it does not specifically address disinformation or misinformation. Additionally, the National Penal Code of 2017 prohibits deceitfully making telephone calls or transmitting messages (Clause 299) and writing letters with dishonest intentions of causing annoyance (Clause 300).

Despite these legal measures, participants observed a lack of an exclusive policy to deal with misinformation. Some state agencies have begun enacting policies, however. For instance, the Election Commission introduced the "Policy on the Use of Social Media in Electoral Management, 2077," which aims to control misinformation and disinformation in election management. The policy focuses on developing an institutional system and competent human resources to ensure the authenticity of information sources and regulate misinformation, disinformation, distorted information, miscommunication, and false news disseminated through social media (Shrestha, 2023). The

Election Commission's code of ethics also prohibits all stakeholders from transmitting disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech on social networks or causing others to do so (Shrestha, 2023).

Many respondents believe that Nepal needs a comprehensive policy to address all forms of disinformation and misinformation. However, they are equally concerned about the potential misuse of such laws to curtail individual freedom of opinion and expression. While a restrictive law may be necessary to control misinformation that poses severe threats to life and property, it is advisable to uphold democratic values and fundamental rights while framing such legislation.

Discussions and conclusions

This study finds that misinformation has a widespread impact on Nepali society, extending beyond politics, with the potential to increase social tensions, incite violence, and delay justice and infrastructure development. Social media is identified as the primary source of misinformation, with Facebook being the most cited platform.

While traditional media remains relevant in Nepal, it is important to note that even a small percentage of people encountering misinformation through these platforms can have significant implications, given their potential reach. Social media users, influencers, and political cadres are identified as the main sources of misleading information. Concerns about the spread of misinformation are high among the public, and there is a call for legal mechanisms to control it. However, there are concerns about the potential misuse of such mechanisms and their impact on freedom of expression and the press.

The study highlights that while politics is the prime domain for misinformation, its proliferation has extended beyond this realm. The widespread access to digital platforms, especially social media, has significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation across all aspects of Nepali life and society. Social media is the main vehicle for this proliferation, with youth and young people being the most engaged in such activities. Many individuals have fallen victim to social media trolls.

The impact of misinformation is particularly severe on vulnerable groups such as young girls and boys, women, and non-consum-

ers of mainstream media, as their primary source of information is increasingly social media. In a diverse society like Nepal, where 125 local languages are spoken and almost all major faiths are followed, misinformation has often acted as a catalyst in fueling social tensions, patriarchal perspectives, gender violence, racial discrimination, and delays in justice delivery and infrastructure development projects. One of the basic tenets of democracy is to make informed decisions, but people are increasingly making decisions, including exercising their voting rights, based on manipulation, publicity, and propaganda. Such practices undermine democracy rather than strengthen its foundations.

News media could be an effective tool to counter the flow of misinformation. However, many media outlets are influenced by social media in their pursuit of larger audiences and advertising revenue. Local media outlets are often used and misused by political parties, corporations, and interest groups, especially during critical times when impartial news and information are most needed. As a result, even news outlets are contributing to the misinformation ecosystem and the promotion of false narratives, leading to growing public distrust of news media.

Stakeholders are divided on whether restrictive policies would be effective in controlling misinformation. While many believe that strong laws should be enforced to curb disinformation and misinformation, others have raised concerns that such policies could be misused by authorities to consolidate power and curtail freedom of expression.

The most effective way to tackle misinformation in a developing society like Nepal is by promoting information literacy, digital literacy, fact-checking, and, most importantly, exercising self-restraint in engaging with and sharing viral content. Creating restrictive policies alone is not enough to control the spread of misinformation. There must be consistent and concerted efforts among all stakeholders, including the government, political parties, media, social media users, and the public, to address this threat.

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Appendix 1
Key Informant Interviews Participants

1. Ajit Tiwari, Bureau Chief at Janakpur, Kantipur Daily, Janakpur
2. Bhoj Prasad Shrestha, Member of Legislative Assembly of Lumbini Province, Butwal
3. Bhuwan Bhandari, Media Educator, Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadi
4. Bikram Khadka, CEO, Buddha Television, Butwal
5. Chandra Prakash Khanal, Journalist, Butwal
6. Dinesh Gautam, Executive Director, Hriti Foundation, Surkhet
7. Dr. Tara Prasad Joshi, Member of Legislative Assembly of Sudur Pashchim Province, Dhangadi
8. Jivesh Jha, Government Attorney Dhanusa District Court, Janakpur
9. Jyoti Katuwal, Reporter, Kantipur Daily, Surkhet
10. Lalit Basnet, Chairperson, Surkhet
11. Lila Ballav Ghimire, Chairperson FNJ Koshi Province, Biratnagar
12. Raj Kumar Sharma, Chief Minister Karnali Province, Surkhet
13. Ram Mani Dahal, Head of Gorkhapatra Hetauda, Hetauda
14. Ram Raj Pokhrel, Chairperson, FNJ Rupandehi, Butwal
15. Rewati Sapkota, Communication Registrar, Bagmati Province, Hetauda
16. Sanjeev Khanal, Chairperson FNJ Morang District, Biratnagar
17. Santosh Pokharel, Media Educator and Journalist, Pokhara
18. Sher Bahadur K.C., Editor Dainik Lumbini Daily, Butwal
19. Shyam Sundar Yadav, Chairperson, Madhes Pradesh Mass Communication Authority, Janakpur

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 8.7million 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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CHAPTER 4

Mapping Misinformation: An Analysis of 10 Prominent Misinformation Cases

Ujjwal Acharya

Abstract

This study maps misinformation dynamics in Nepal through 10 in-depth case studies of misinformation, utilizing the ABCDE framework. The purposefully selected case studies cover domains such as caste-based conflicts, crisis communication, political discourse, international relations, and media practices. It reveals patterns of misinformation diffusion through mainstream media, social media, and digital platforms. The findings indicate media's role in sensationalizing news, exploiting societal tensions, and spreading unverified information for competitive advantages. The study demonstrates how misinformation is emerging and diffusing during periods of uncertainty — be it political transitions, or health emergencies, or geopolitical tensions. The study also identifies vulnerabilities in information ecosystem, showing how misinformation can manipulate public discourse, trigger social panic, and potentially influence public behavior.

Keywords: *misinformation, misinformation landscape, misinformation actor, misinformation impact*

Introduction

The contemporary information ecosystem is increasingly confusing for the public as it is inundated with a mix of facts, opinions, rumors, and misinformation. Within this environment, disinformation misleads audiences and undermines the principles of democracy. An ideal democracy relies on an informed citizenry capable of making conscious decisions on political and social matters based on correct information. However, the growing prevalence of misleading information and narratives coupled with influence operations with malicious intent poses a grave challenge to the democracy.

In Nepal, while misinformation is spreading, many aspects of misinformation remain underexplored. Misinformation campaigns often amplify nationalistic and divisive agendas, fuel disputes, and divert rational narratives. These case studies aim to address the pressing need for a systematic understanding of misinformation by categorization, and delineating actor, behavior, content, degree, and effect. By understanding these elements, stakeholders can more effectively counter the spread of misinformation and design robust intervention to maintain information integrity.

Operational Definitions of Categorization

The following operational definitions are derived by Pamment (2020).

1. Misinformation: False or untrue information spread without malicious intent. Although uncoordinated, such information can hinder individuals from forming accurate opinions.

2. Disinformation: Deliberately fabricated or manipulated content designed to deceive, often for economic gain or to cause public harm. Unlike misinformation, disinformation involves malicious intent and poses significant risks to public trust and safety.

3. Influence Operations: Coordinated efforts aimed at achieving specific outcomes among target audiences through deceptive means. These operations may involve truthful information, propaganda, and other tools to gain a competitive advantage.

4. Foreign Interference: Strategic actions by external actors to disrupt domestic stability, influence political processes, or undermine public trust using misinformation, disinformation, and other tactics.

Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following:

1. Develop a comprehensive understanding of misinformation, disinformation, influence operations, and foreign interference, and

2. Identifying key actors, tactics, and impacts of misinformation in Nepal.

Methodology

These case studies are conducted through desk research. It utilizes the ABCDE Framework, outlined by Pamment (2020), to analyze disinformation systematically:

- Actor: Identifies individuals, organizations, and entities involved in producing or disseminating disinformation.
- Behavior: Examines techniques, coordination, and intent behind disinformation campaigns.
- Content: Assesses the truthfulness, risks, and manipulative elements within the information.
- Degree: Evaluates the reach, virality, and scale of disinformation efforts.
- Effect: Measures the impact on public health, human rights, socioeconomic stability, election integrity, and national security.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: USA's MCC Compact and China

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact is a US$500 million grant from the United States of America to Nepal which was first signed in 2017 after 'determining goals to modernize Nepal's energy and transportation sectors.' The compact was ratified by the Federal Parliament on February 27, 2022. However, before the ratification the compact became a controversial topic in Nepal's political and social arena with the politicians as well as public divided on whether to the five-year grant was beneficial to Nepal. For weeks before the ratification at the Parliament, there were debates and demonstrations on streets – and some clauses of the compact were interpreted in various ways.

The major issue debated was whether the clauses of compacts – which included need for India's approval to construct transmission line for exporting electricity to the neighboring country and allowing USA to bring in forces for rescue operations of American citizens if needed – compromised Nepal's sovereignty as an independent nation. There were multiple interpretations of the clauses, many thinking it's against Nepal's sovereignty. As such, there were a flood of contents – on newspapers, televisions, radios, and social media – among which many contents were clearly misinformation.

It seemed like China didn't want MCC to be ratified by the Parliament and while it at the diplomatic level maintained that "development assistance to Nepal was welcome, however it shouldn't come with political strings attached" and that they "oppose coercive diplomacy and actions that pursue selfish agenda at the expense of Nepal's sovereignty and interests", there were attempts through social media to ignite people's opinion against MCC.

China Radio International (CRI) – a state-controlled media – maintained a dedicated Facebook page to Nepali service called CRI Nepali Service[1] @crinepali. The page has 2.7 million likes and usually posts news and videos of news promoting China and Sino-Nepal relationship. Between February 25 to March 2, 2022, when the MCC was hotly debated in the Parliament and there were violent streets protests, CRI Nepali Service published 6 videos related to MCC:

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1   *CRI Nepali Service Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/crinepali*

Date	Title	Contents	Views
February 25, 2022	Why 500 million US dollars can't buy Nepal's sovereignty and people's self-respect[2]	Reporter-led opinion with visuals of protests at streets and Parliament	737K
February 27, 2022	What are inequal conditions for Nepal in USA's MCC[3]	Interpretation of some debated clauses with anti-US messages	428K
March 1, 2022	Who is Nepal's true friend? Why USA is putting pressure on Nepal to ratify MCC[4]	Anti-US and anti-MCC messages linking MCC to USA's Indo Pacific Strategy; and pro-China message	264K
March 1, 2022	MCC-related example - Warning[5]	Anti-US message with examples of MCC created problems in other countries	178K
March 1, 2022	MCC in Chinese eyes[6]	Reporter-led opinion with Chinese diplomatic views on MCC	80K
March 2, 2022	What Chinese netizens say about MCC[7]	Scenes of protests, anti-US social media posts of Chinese people, and pro-China message to conclude	61K

2   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=494631825571607
3   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=4749303495168954
4   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=949932989216972
5   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=520323679462478
6   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=465304505289371
7   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1482871022114579

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: The actor is foreign state's media outlet using social media platform in producing and promoting videos with biased messages to promote own's agenda.

Behavior: The actor is transparent in identifying themselves and are using lawful means of communication, their Facebook page, to publish videos in Nepali languages. The actor has an aspersive intent to create public opinion against USA and MCC by providing one-sided information and projecting USA as a 'not a friend'.

Content: All videos promote pro-China and anti-USA sentiments. Some of the videos have inflammatory messages seemingly to incite Nepali citizens to protest against MCC. None of the videos have any external or balancing quotes (except March 1's MCC in Chinese eyes which use statements by China' Foreign Ministry spokesperson) and the videos do not have any balancing opinion or contents. There are accusations, defaming terms used for USA, and unverified or misleading information presented as facts. Therefore, the contents are one-sided thus deceptive.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as they were posted in Facebook page intended to Nepali users and the contents are produced in Nepali language. Facebook is the most popular social media in Nepal and the page has 2.7 million likes therefore the platform used has a wide reach although there was not any visible content boost. The contents are part of China's ongoing campaign to promote pro-China sentiments and Chinese strategies.

Effect: Since the MCC controversy was a big multi-layered issue in Nepal that generated discussions and debates in public spheres and Parliaments as well as violent street protests, it's not easy to measure the effect of the contents. But by the numbers of views and engagements, as well as the comments left on the videos, the campaign did probably have some impacts on public opinions. The inflammatory statements promoted to incite Nepali citizens to protest against MCC might have encouraged some to participate in violent protests.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as influence operations because a foreign state's government-controlled media used it's Facebook page targeted at Nepali citizens to aggressively promote their one-sided positions on the matter relevant to the third country at the time when the issue was being hotly debated in Nepalis society and the Parliament; and there were violent protests in the street. The operation seems to be a coordinated effort as they published six videos on the topic within a week.

Conclusion of Case Study 1

The MCC assistance by USA was a heatedly debated issue in Nepal. At one point, it became a public safety issue as huge violent protests were organized around the Parliament building and elsewhere. As in other controversial issues, there were lots of contents around it in media and social media, and campaigns for and against it, sometime using misinformation. An influence operation by a foreign

state actor, through China Radio International's Nepali service page, was identified where they published at least six videos' contents with aspersive intent to promote anti-USA and pro-China sentiments using inflammatory and unverified claims. The videos reached thousands of Nepali citizens and based on the comments by Nepali citizens, were successful in enraging anti-MCC sentiments. The violent protests and controversy slowed down immediately after the MCC compact was ratified, and the contents on MCC at the CRI Nepali Service page stopped soon afterwards.

Case Study 2: Chinese encroachment in Nepal

On June 20, 2020, Kantipur – Nepal's biggest daily Nepali-language newspaper – published news[8] on the frontpage with title: 'Seven districts encroached on Chinese side also'. The news quoted unnamed government officials, Survey Department officials and government reports to claim that China had encroached lands in seven districts of Nepal. The news named districts, provided detailed encroached land areas and history of Nepal-China border talks.

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8   https://ekantipur.com/news/2020/06/24/159295784663236593.html

The news report's major source of information was named as a report by Ministry of Agriculture stating that the Ministry annually prepare report on arable land stating whether the total land was decreased or increased in the country. The news claimed the report stated a total of 35 hectares of arable land encroached by China. It said the report also stated there was problem with border earmarking in 11 points.

The news report also quoted a member of the National Human Rights suggesting government to urgently talk with China if Nepali land was found to be encroached; and former Director-General informing about Nepal-China border talks. The news was shared 52,700 times on social media.

The news created quite a stir as this was the first time that a major media had talked about Chinese encroachment. The social media users questioned the report pointing out that the Ministry of Agriculture was not relevant authority to report on border encroachment. Within next few days, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock issued a statement refuting existence of any such report published by the Ministry; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issuing a statement[9] refuting the news and asking media 'to verify information for relevant authorities before commenting on sensitive matters which may adversely affect the relations between two friendly nations.' Kantipur also published news report on the statements.

Kantipur published an apology a few days after on the second page stating that 'serious factual error as a government source made available a fake report stating it was report by Nepal Government's Ministry of Agriculture'.

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: The actor was Kantipur – the biggest national daily newspaper published in Nepal with daily circulation 4,53,000 and estimated print readership of 3.2 million and digital readership of 1.5 million.

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9   *https://mofa.gov.np/press-statement-on-news-reports-about-nepal-china-boundary/*

Behavior: The actor was transparent in identifying themselves and was using lawful and registered means of communication, the newspaper, to publish the news report. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent and as they claimed were misguided by their sources. They however failed to verify the document based on which the news report was written and published.

Content: The content was the text news published in the newspaper and their online portal, shared through their social media pages. It was a misinformation regarding China encroaching land of Nepal as the border, based on the fake report. The report, although identified as the Ministry of Agriculture's report, was not verified with the relevant agency and presented as it was received thereby creating misinformation based on unverified facts. The unverified facts were mixed with historical facts, tertiary quotes from respectful experts and people so when the people received it, audience were misled to believe in the deceptive content.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as it was published in the Nepali-language newspaper. Kantipur was the biggest daily newspaper with close to five million combined readerships thereby having a wide impact across the country.

Effect: The news report was one of the widely discussed topics in the public sphere and digital public sphere when it was published. It came at the time when there were widespread concerns among public about India's encroachment in Nepal's territory; and when there was comparison between two big neighbors – India and China. The report therefore misguided the public discourse on Nepal's relationship with China as many believed in the news report.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of misinformation. Although the newspaper later claimed that they were fed the report by credible government sources thereby indicating that there could be an influence operation to divert the public discussion, it was a weakness in the part of the media on publish news based on the report without verifying it. However, their public apology indicated that they had no malicious intention.

Conclusion of Case Study 2

Nepal's relationship with India and China is often compared and discussed, particularly during the time when there are feelings of one of them not behaving with Nepal in a friendly manner. Unsolved issue of border with India is often a matter of resentment towards India and looking towards China as friendlier neighbor, often described by Indian media as Nepal's China card. The news claiming China encroaching in seven districts of Nepal was published at the time when Nepal's relationship with India was at the poor level due of Nepal's publication of map including disputed region of Lipulekh in west Nepal bordering India and China. The timing of the publication of the news derailed the public discourse and although seemed to be not intention by the media, they failed to verify the report therefore becoming an actor of the misinformation.

Case Study 3: Viral Videos on Coronavirus

In early 2020, coronavirus pandemic had just begun. On January 23, 2020, Nepal announced first case of coronavirus infection in South Asia on a Nepali student at Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China, who returned to Nepal with cough 10 days earlier. Second case was announced three months later in April, but it didn't start going up until early May. However, due to the pandemic spreading in other part of the world, there were unprecedented public health fear in the government and the citizens, who imposed nationwide lockdown on March and suspended international flights although there was not a single active infection.

There were huge amount of mis/disinformation on corona-virus, especially during the early days of the pandemic. In this case study, four viral videos – two of them published on YouTube channels and two of them broadcasted on television channels, are analyzed:

Date	Platform	Title	Interview of	Views
April 14, 2020	YouTube	Detailed revelation for the first time, know the hidden game & the reality[10]	Nabin Joshi, 'Psychologist'	292K
August 29, 2020	YouTube	German and Italian experts said this about COVID-19, what happens now?[11]	Surajeet Dutta, 'Social activist'	171K
September 12, 2020	AP1 Television	AP Center: Different angle of Corona discussion[12]	Jagreet Rayamajhi, 'Activist'	n/a 144K
June 2, 2021	Suryodaya Television	Corona Special Program: Gold attracts virus, reveals the Mayor[13]	Dhruva Kumar Shiwakoti, Mayor	n/a 600+

10   Video 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvOwL4–U3Yc
11   Video 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6pjxUzBo–c
12   Video 3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oQYLFbMC4o
13   Video 4: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2UsTnsMaVw

Video 1 was published by a YouTube channel 'Himal Online TV' which has 273K subscribers. It is 1 hour 10 minutes long interview with Nabin Joshi who claims to be 'Tribhuvan University Psychologist'. It was one of the trending videos in Nepal when it received 180K views in the first week. In the interview, Joshi made numerous false claims about coronavirus including those few: a. although PCR was invented 27 years ago, it wasn't used until coronavirus pandemic; b. the European Union in 2011 declared World Health Organization a robber organization; c. mask doesn't protect people [from coronavirus]; and, d. mortality rate of coronavirus is very low (0.1%) compared to swine flu or bird flu (9%).

प्रमाणसहित सुरजित दत्तको नयाँ खुलासा

"This is a unique situation where we as a company simply cannot take the risk if in ... four years the vaccine is showing side effects," Ruud Dobber, part of AstraZeneca's senior executive team, said.

"In the contracts we have in place, we are asking for indemnification. For most countries it is acceptable to take that risk on their shoulders because it is in their national interest," he said.

Reuters reported that European Union nations and drug companies such as Pfizer, Sanofi and Johnson & Johnson were finding that liability protection an issue.

के हो वास्तवमा कोरोना र यसभित्रको खेल

Video 2 was also published on YouTube channel 'Himal Online TV'. In 37-minute long interview, Surajeet Dutta, who claims to be social activist, made numerous false claims about coronavirus including those few: a. morality rate of covid is very low and medical data proves that there is no need to panic; b. Bill Gates had already registered for patent of Covid vaccine; c. Gates in 2015 proposed vaccination to control 10-15 percent of world's population; d. wearing mask is dangerous; and, e. sanitizers weakens us.

Video 3 was broadcasted in AP1 Television – a national channel - in an hour-long talk show called AP Center with senior journalist Tika Ram Yatri hosting Dr. Sameer Mani Dixit and Jagreet Rayamajhi, a former student leader who claims to be an activist. During the program, Rayamajhi made several false claims about coronavirus such

as a. 99 percent of Italians who died of Coronavirus died because of other complications and not due to Covid-19; b. US agency CDC had only called it disease and not pandemic; and c. a papaya was tested positive in Tanzania.

Video 3 was broadcasted in Suryodaya Television – a regional television station of east Nepal. It is an hour-long interview with Dhurva Kumar Shiwakoti, the Mayor of Birtamode Municipality in Jhapa district falsely claimed that a. sniffing a mixture of camphor, garlic and carom seeds cures Covid; b. inhaling a home brew mixing mango leaves, mug wort leaves and basil 'puts Covid into a coma; c. wearing a mask is a crime; and d. gold jewelry attracts virus quickly.

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: 'Himal Online TV' is a YouTube Channel with 273K subscribers. It's seemed to be operated in a managed way looking at the quality of the video, camera works and studio. The presenter is Pradeep Dhami, who is identified as Founder/Chairman in an associated news portal. Its office address is listed as Anamnagar, Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Its operation started in 2018.

AP1 is a national television channel based in Kathmandu; and is a part of Nepal News Network International Private Limited, which also runs a daily Nepali newspaper, a weekly English newspaper, and a FM radio station. It's owned by Captain Rameshwor Thapa, a well-known media and business personality. It is in operation since 2017.

Suryodaya is a regional television station based Birtamode, east Nepal and owned by Suryodaya TV and Media Private Limited. It was in operation since 2016.

In all the videos studied here, the misinformation about Covid was claimed by people who were not experts in relevant health field and have no expertise to talk about the disease or virus, yet the media provided them space to make false claims, and didn't counter their statement or arguments.

Behavior: The actor is transparent in identifying themselves and are using lawful means of communication, YouTube channel and television channels, to publish videos in Nepali languages. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent and rather seemed to have public awareness motive. They however didn't challenge the false claims, despite some of them being outright false ('masks are dangerous' or 'medicine for Covid'). More seriously, three of them used either misinformation or clickbait headlines based on misinformation to attract audience. Himal Online TV seems to have financial motivations behind publishing such videos as despite the first being criticized for misinformation and fact checked as fake, they published second video with similar misinformation.

Content: The videos contained lots of false contents that were presented as verifiable information, in some cases with misinterpretations of data or statements from credible institutions. The contents were targeted to ordinary Nepali citizens and there were clear attempts to present the misinformation in a way that it looks authentic and

backed by evidence however although immediately difficult to verify, there were loads of misinterpretations, false claims.

Degree: The contents were either published on YouTube channel or broadcast in televisions channels and shared in multiple social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube in attempts to reach as many populations as possible. The platforms used were among the popular and powerful medium, however they were not boosted or paid to be pushed to bigger number of audiences. The videos seem to be one-off content.

Effect: At the time the video were broadcast and published, coronavirus pandemic was still at the early stage with many things now clear. However public safety measures such as wearing masks and unavailability of medicine were clear - and best precaution about it to understand whatsoever was known about it and follow the guidelines. However, the videos promoted messages that were against public safety measures, false claims that could've put the people in risk situation thereby threatening society and individuals' health and medical safety.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as incidents of misinformation because the intent of the actors doesn't seem to harm the public and is largely uncoordinated but these affected other's ability to form their own ideas as the consequences of false information.

However, there is also indications of these being incidents of disinformation as those who spread verifiably false contents deliberately promoted it for 'economic benefits' (in case of YouTube channel) and their use of headlines suggest they tried to 'intentionally deceived the public'. The content also had the element to causing public harm.

Conclusion of Case Study 3

During the Covid pandemic, there was also infodemic – the huge amount of information and misinformation about coronavirus spreading quicker than the virus. In the early stage, when many facts were not scientifically established, there quite a huge amount of misinformation about Covid. It was true in Nepal also and a study of four videos – two broadcasts in mainstream media and two published in social

media – showed that 'irrelevant experts' were given space to make false claims without a counter question. In some cases, the presence of relevant health expert or well-known journalist made the misinformation believable to the audience. Some of the false claims clearly have public health safety implications that might have encouraged people to change their behavior. Although the assessment of impact of the video couldn't be well-established empirically, the messaging has the potential to impact those who have watched it to follow riskier behavior or assess the risks posed by coronavirus in a hazardous way.

Case Study 4: "Hello Himal": Viral audio about Covid

"Yes, Himal. I am calling you to give an important information." Thus started an audio file that became viral in late March 2020, when coronavirus infection was rare in Nepal, and the fear of Covid-19 among the public was high. The audio, made like a phone call but with only one voice, claimed that six out of nine people tested at the Novic Hospital were found infected by coronavirus.

The audio first appeared in the Facebook of 20-year-old Bibek Thapa Magar at 10PM on March 20, 2020, with a post: "Even if corona pandemic has hit Nepal, why government hide such a news. Listen to the audio below… compulsory." With the post, he linked an audio uploaded to his own site.

Next morning, he found that although his post was not liked or shared by many, the audio clip had gone viral[14] to an extend that it was being shared in every messaging platform – be its WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger or Viber. The hospital in Kathmandu, which didn't have any coronavirus testing facility then, refuted the claim.

Thapa Magar was arrested in less than 17 hours of posting the audio and charged with cyber-crime. Thapa Magar told police[15] that he created the clip to increase reach and likes of his Facebook page. Fact-checker Umesh Shrestha in his blog[16] pointed out a few suspicious aspects in the audio that clearly indicated that it was a fake audio, still thousands of people continued sharing it even after the police arrest. Shrestha pointed out that although it was meant to be a phone call, there was only one voice, the address of the hospital was wrong, and Norvic Hospital was not listed as hospital to test coronavirus in official documents shared at the time by the Ministry of Health. However, the audio remained viral for a few more days.

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: A 20-year-old ordinary youth, Bibek Thapa Magar, who wanted more likes in his Facebook post. He was arrested by the police and charged with cyber-crime for spreading false information.

Behavior: In the content (audio file), the actor is not identifiable thereby the creator and the speaker were anonymous. However, the in the Facebook post where the audio file was first shared, the actor was transparent in identifying himself and was using lawful means of communication. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent but was well aware that the content he was sharing was not correct.

Content: The content was an audio file, claimed to be a phone call, which contained misinformation about coronavirus test. The sound in the file falsely claimed that many people who were testing for coronavirus were positive and the government was not making public right information about the spread of coronavirus in Nepal.

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14   *https://ekantipur.com/news/2020/03/21/158478963042285284.html*
15   *https://khabarhub.com/2020/21/144219/*
16   *https://mysansar.com/2020/03/39174/*

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as the audio was in Nepali.

Effect: The audio file created a widespread fear among public and it was shared through messenger apps – WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook Messenger. Although the exact number of people who accessed the audio file cannot be determined, given the fact that the arrest of the actor by police was widely covered by mainstream media, and there was analysis published in the top national daily newspaper about how the rumor spread indicate that its reach was wide.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of disinformation. The actor who created the audio and first uploaded it on the internet was well-aware that the content of the file was fake yet decided to upload it hoping it would go viral, and boost likes of his Facebook page. Although the disinformation was initially uploaded by a youth on his Facebook page with limited number of likes, it was later shared and forwarded by thousands of people who believed the content of the audio file could be true.

Conclusion of Case Study 4

In the early days of Covid pandemic, many things about the virus and infection were unclear and there was many misinformation that people intentionally and unintentionally spread. The viral 'Hello Himal' audio file was an example of such disinformation, although had no malign intention, it created public panic and was a public health information crisis. The hospital and police were quick in reaction and the audio file was proved to be a disinformation in less than 24 hours.

Case Study 5: Indian TV channels' biggest 'corona conspirator'

On April 10, 2020, Indian TV channels – especially TV9 Bharat-varsh and TV24 – started broadcasting what they claimed to be a 'big news'. The report claimed that Jalim Mukhiya, a Nepali citizen of Islam religion and a 'weapon dealer and counterfeit Indian banknotes dealer' who acting on the direction of the ISI of Pakistan was conspiring to send more than 200 coronavirus infected people across border

to spread Covid pandemic in India. The TV channels based their report on a letter by Indian armed border force SSB that allegedly stated that Jalim Mukhiya of Jagannathpur of Parsa was attempting to send corona infected Muslim Indian from working in various countries across border from Nepal.

Although DGP Gupteshwor Pandaya of Bihar, India refuted the letter – to Nepal's media and to India's media – saying that the letter was unverified and that the border was sealed, for next few days, the Indian TV channels continued broadcasting news reports about him repeating the same claims and naming him the biggest corona conspirator.

Jalim Miya, also known as Jalim Mukhiya for his previous and the-then role as head of the village, was a 61-year-old elected representative. Previously in 1980s, he was found to be guilty of timber smuggling and was imprisoned for two months. He was a politician who was also a central advisor to the Maoist party. As a Jamati, he visited India often and on April 1, 2020, he assisted Nepal Police to move 15 Nepali Muslim residing in a mosque at his village to a quarantine facility where all of them were tested negative for coronavirus infection.

Examples of the news reports

SN	TV	Title	Date	YouTube views
1	TV9	Coronavirus: Conspiracy to spread corona in India; Nepali citizen Jalim Mukhiya[17]	April 10, 2020	24k
2	TV24	Conspiracy to spread corona in India, corona infected can enter Bihar from Nepal[18]	April 10, 2020	10K
3	TV9	3 gang-members of Jalim Mukhiya tested corona positive; planned conspiracy in Nepal[19]	April 12, 2020	9K
4	TV24	Zalim Mukhiya's 24 men taken into custody in Nepal[20]	April 12, 2020	15K
5	TV9	Jalim Mukhiya gives interview on TV9 Bharatvarsh; See exclusive[21]	April 13, 2020	9K
6	TV9	Coronavirus: Corona conspirator against India Jalim Mukhiya arrested[22]	April 13, 2020	6.8K
7	TV24	Mastermind Jalim Mukhiya of corona conspiracy arrested[23]	April 13, 2020	10K

17 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0Rjv6fGTDk*
18 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAbwfFV1D68*
19 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGHwb2L5sM4*
20 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0tqNNzWha0*
21 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS4k_BLxU7Q*
22 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paxCveswvus*
23 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCOvy0p2Byk*

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: The actors were two Indian television channels headquartered in Noida, Uttar Pradesh – TV9 Bharatvarsh and TV24. TV9 Bharatvarsh, launched in 2019, is an Indian Hindi-language news channel owned by TV9 Network and claimed to be second most popular Hindi language news channel in India. TV9 Bharatvarsh's YouTube channel had more than 11 million subscribers.

TV24 is a free-to-air 24-hour national Hindi news television channel owned by A-One NewsTime Broadcasting Private Limited. Its YouTube channel had more than 15 million subscribers.

Behavior: The actors were transparent in identifying themselves and were using lawful and registered means of communication, the television channels and their social media pages, to publish the news report. The actors seemed to have an aspersive intent as they continued accusing him and standby their misinformation despite failing to verify them from authentic sources; and despite that fact that Mukhiya himself and Indian security agency claimed the reports were not correct.

Content: The content was the news report in video format broadcast over television channels and shared in social media pages, especially YouTube. It was a misinformation regarding an elected

representative of Nepal conspiring spreading coronavirus in India by sending infected people across sealed border on direction of ISI of Pakistan. The tone and language of the report were aggressive, alleging, one-sided and claiming him to be a criminal without any verified facts. Quoting an unverified internal circular of security agency, the television first named him to be a conspirator and then falsely claimed that the was arrested by Nepal Police.

The content constantly and repeatedly used words as expose, or big news, or exclusive, or biggest criminal, or corona conspiracy to establish unverified points.

Degree: The content was targeted to Indian citizens as it was broadcast in the Hindi-language television news channels. The televisions have big impact on Indian population thereby the report reached millions of people though the channels as well as their YouTube channels.

Effect: The report created quite a stir in Nepali public sphere, with many querying about Jalim Miya whereas some of the social media users took up the issue to blame Muslims of the wrong deeds. The comments in India were also similar, people expressing hatred towards Muslim people on religious grounds. Nepal Police went to question Miya and took the people in his village mosque in quarantine facility (who all were found to be negative).

Miya was forced to repeatedly and frantically refute the news reports and had to bear a greater psychological impact whereas the Muslim people were also subjected of insults and allegations.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of disinformation with some elements of influence operation. It seems to be an organized attempts to achieve advantage in viewership over competitive media among a target audience. The reports contained deceptive materials creating confusion and adversely affecting religious sentiments. The accusations and sensitization of the report continued for four days (April 10 – 13, 2020) broadcast multiple times a day in news bulletins while also brining in 'experts' to talk about the topic although the contents were not verifiable and denial from both the accused and security agency.

Conclusion of Case Study 5

During the early days of coronavirus pandemic in South Asia when covid cases were sporadically identified in countries, there were a fear among public. When some participants of an Islamic convention in New Delhi were found to be positive, Indian media alleged Muslims of ignoring public health warning and conspiring to spread coronavirus. Jalim Miya, being a Muslim who had attended the convention with his background in timber smuggling, and as a head of a village who volunteered to transfer people from his village mosque to quarantine facility in Birgunj, near Indian border, Indian media found a person who could be accused and continued spreading disinformation for a few days until he sensational elements in the reports died out. This is a case of how mainstream media spread disinformation without verification of the documents for the influence operation to gain viewership edge in the competitive television news market.

Case Study 6: IWOC Award, Muskan Khatun and Malala Yousafzai

On March 8, 2021, the State Department of USA announced 16 winners of the annual International Women of Courage (IWOC) Awards. One of the winners was Nepal's Muskan Khatun, a human rights activist and an acid-attack victim whose activism contributed impactfully in drafting and approval of law that provisioned stricter punishment in crimes related to acid-attacks.

As soon as the news was out, Nepali media published the news with priority as it was the first time that a Nepali woman has won the IWOC Awards since its inception in 2007. However, most of the news also consisted of an additional sentence that Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai had also previously won the award. Khatun was also quoted as saying that she was happy to know that she was named for an award that Malala had previously received.

However, fact-checkers pointed out that Malala Yousafzai had never named for the IWOC Award.

The misinformation was first shared by the US Embassy in Nepal, which issued a press statement – posting them in their website and social media platform as well as sending it out to email lists, with that

piece of misinformation. Nepal's news media simply carried that press statement without verifying the statement.

On March 10, 2021, the US Embassy posted an apology[24] on their Facebook page:

U.S. Embassy, Nepal
March 10, 2021 · 🌐

सबैजनामा नमस्ते। गएको शुक्रबार हामीले एक प्रेस विज्ञप्ति जारी गरेका थियौं, जसमा एउटा गल्ती थियो: हामीले लेखेजस्तो पाकिस्तानी महिला तथा बालबालिकाको क्षेत्रमा काम गर्नुहुने अभियन्ता मलाला युसफजाइले अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय साहसी महिला पुरस्कार जित्नुभएको होइन, नोबेल शान्ति पुरस्कार जित्नुभएको हो। हामीले आफ्नो गल्ती महसुस हुनेबित्तिकै आफ्नो वेबसाइटमा रहेको विज्ञप्ति सच्यायौं। मलाला र मुस्कान दुवैजना हाम्रो लागि जुनसुकै पुरस्कार जिते पनि महिला र बालबालिकाको लागि अझै उत्तम संसार बनाउन लागि पर्नुहुने हिरोहरू हुनुहुन्छ। हामी आफ्नो गल्तीको लागि क्षमाप्रार्थी छौं, विशेषगरी ती मिडिया संस्था जसले हामीमाथि भरोसा गरेर समाचार बनाउनुभयो। साथै यो मिथ्या सूचनाको तथ्यजाँच गरेर सही सूचना बाहिर ल्याउनुभएकोमा मिडिया वाचडगहरू प्रति हामी कृतज्ञ छौं।

Hello everyone! Last Friday we issued a press release with an error: Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist for women's and girls' education, did not win the International Women of Courage Award as we stated, but the Nobel Peace Prize only. We corrected ourselves on our website the following day, as soon as we realized the mistake. Both Malala and Muskan are heroes and have made a better world for women and girls, regardless of awards received. We sincerely apologize for our mistake, especially to the media outlets who rely on us, and we appreciate the media watchdogs that fact-check our product.

NP.USEMBASSY.GOV

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: US Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal, which usually is a trusted source of information related to the USA and Nepali media, who carried forward the press statement coming in from US Embassy without minimum effort to verifying facts in the statement.

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24   *https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3701638439873188&id=108560955847639*

Behavior: The actor was transparent in identifying in the press statement, Facebook page and was using lawful means of communication. The actor didn't have an aspersive intent and rather wanted to promote the award and the awardee comparing her to a world-renowned Nobel laureate.

Content: The content was a text statement about a Nepali activist named for IWOC Awards with a piece of misinformation presented as a fact.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens and media as it published by the US Embassy in Kathmandu and distributed through their platforms connecting Nepali citizens and media. The content was published in both Nepali and English language.

Effect: The misinformation caused mass sharing of a misinformation through social media by general public and republication by hundreds of media.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of misinformation. It was shared by a trustable entity to millions of people and journalists through their publishing platforms. The actor wanted to promote the award and the awardee comparing the Nepali winner to a world-renowned Nobel laureate therefore there was no malicious intention. However, it injected a misinformation in the general knowledge of thousands of people.

Conclusion of Case Study 6

The case is a simple case of widely shared misinformation, unlikely to have any negative impact on people. The misinformation was shared unintentionally by a trusted source and was widely carried by the mainstream media and reshared by a large number of people without verifying it although a simple search was enough to verify. Although no negative impact, the misinformation is likely to stay with a lot of people for long, who would continue to believe that Malala Yousafzai received the IWOC Award before Nepal's Muskan Khatun.

Case Study 7: Foreign minister threatens to jail opposition leaders

In January 2021, the politics in Nepal was highly charged and volatile situation. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli had dissolved the Parliament announcing a new election in the wake of intra-party conflict. The intra-party conflict within the ruling CPN-UML was heightening (that later resulted in split), and the Supreme Court was hearing the constitutionality of the dissolvement with the public discourse deeply divided whether the PM's move was right or not. The opposing political leaders were taking public forums and mass gathering to accuse each other of wrongdoing – some of the leaders used very demeaning and humiliating words for others.

कान्तिपुर

समाचार

अख्तियारमा धूलो परेका फाइल निकाल्दै छौं : परराष्ट्रमन्त्री झवाली

'कुर्सीका लागि पार्टीमा बबाल मच्चाउने काम दाहाल र नेपालले गरे'

माघ १०, २०७७ | वीरेन्द्र केसी

गुल्मी — परराष्ट्रमन्त्री प्रदीप झवालीले अदालत र अख्तियारमा धूलो परेका फाइल सरकारले निकाल्न थालेको बताएका छन् । यसले पार्टीभित्र नयाँ तरंग आएको उनको भनाइ छ ।

परराष्ट्रमन्त्री प्रदीप झवाली । तस्बिर : संजोग मानन्धर, कान्तिपुर

भ्रष्टाचारीको कुनै पार्टी, जात र रङ नहुने भएकाले कसैलाई पनि नछाडिने मन्त्री झवालीले बताए । 'वर्षौंसम्म थन्क्याएर राखेका धूलो परेका फाइललाई निकालेर हेरिन्छ, भ्रष्टाचारी त्रसित भएका छन्,' शनिबार ओली समूहका अगुवा कार्यकर्तालाई गुल्मीको रेसुंगा नगरपालिकाको तम्घासमा सम्बोधन गर्दै मन्त्री झवालीले भने । उनले सुशासन कायम गर्न सरकार दृढ रुपले लागेको बताए ।

Amidst the situation, on January 23, 2021, ekantipur.com – the online news portal of Nepal's biggest daily Kantipur, published a news report[25] with title: "We are digging filed colleting dusts in the CIAA (Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority):

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25   https://ekantipur.com/news/2021/01/23/16114104382308439.html

Foreign Minister Gyawali". The report from Gulmi district in west Nepal went on: "Foreign minister Pradeep Gyawali has said the government has started opening files collecting dusts in CIAA and court. He said this had brought new wave in the party. Minister Gyawali said no one should be spared as corrupt people have no party, caste or color. 'Files collecting dusts for years will be dug out, corrupts are scared,' Minister Gyawali said while speaking to cadres of Oli faction in Resunga municipality of Gulmi."

Ekantipur.com shared the news in social media – both Facebook and Twitter – that was re-shared by many including two well-known and influential editors of other online news portals. They included a comment that largely indicated that the government was thinking of interfering with constitutional body (CIAA). The posts went viral and soon became an issue of public discourse and many harshly criticized minister Gyawali for the statement.

However, it emerged that Minister Gyawali was not quoted correctly. He while speaking to BBC News Nepal refuted the news and claimed that he didn't talk about CIAA. And the video[26] published by BBC News Nepal showed that he hadn't uttered CIAA during the short clip.

On January 27, 2021, NepalFactCheck.org published a fact-check[27] classifying the news report as misleading. It included in the fact-check a Facebook live video by a participant where minister Gyawali talked about the corruption and corruption control policy of government but hadn't named CIAA or court. It concluded that the title of the news report and direct quote in second paragraph were not said during the program therefore it was a misinformation.

After fact-check, ekantipur.com corrected the news removing the word CIAA and court and the apology stated: "Earlier news where headline and Foreign Minister Gyawali's quote was printed differently has been corrected with an apology. In the quote by Minister Gyawali, it should have been 'we started digging out files of corruptions', but words 'CIAA and court' was mistakenly added thereby corrected. – editor".

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26   https://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-55784721
27   https://nepalfactcheck.org/2021/01/minister-gyawali-quote/

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: The actor was ekantipur.com – the online news portal of privately-owned Kantipur Media Group that carried the masthead of Kantipur daily – the largest newspaper in Nepal. Media conglomerate Kantipur Media Group claimed to have 1.5 million digital readerships. Its Facebook page had 4 million followers and Twitter account was followed by nearly 1.4 million people.

Behavior: The actor was transparent in identifying themselves and is using lawful and registered means of communication – the online news portal of the daily, and its social media pages to publish and promote news. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent, but it sensationalized the headline and the lead to attract more audience to the news.

Content: The content was the text news report published in news portal and shared in social media. It wrongly quoted the Foreign Minister to mislead the audience. Adding a word (CIAA – a constitutional body) made his legitimate statement illegitimate because the constitutional bodies were independent and not controlled by the government.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as it was published in Nepali by a local news portal. The news portal is influential and trusted by many since it carries the masthead of Nepal's largest newspaper. The news was shared to Facebook (4 million followers) and Twitter (nearly 1.4 million followers).

Effect: The report created quite a stir in Nepali public sphere at the time when it was deeply divided over the political action and groups. Many took Minister Gyawali's statement targeted towards the senior leaders threatening to break away from the ruling political party. Minister Gyawali was considered to be one of the diplomatically correct and logical leaders, and the misinformation tarnished his gentle politician image, and impacted for a while the political discourse. The report also impacted the fundamental freedoms by misguiding public deliberations and Minister's freedom of express his opinions freely.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of misinformation. Although the media made an ethical error by not quoting the Foreign Affairs Minister correctly and exactly, there seemed to be no malicious

intent in publishing the news. The media also corrected the news with a clear apology once there were proofs that that was a misleading content and misinformation.

Conclusion of Case Study 7

At the time of politically charged situation when Nepal's political course had gone any direction with the uncertainty over the decision of the Prime Minister to dissolve the Parliament, and legal challenge to it, and people as well as leaders had bitter opinions about the politics and opposing leaders, such politically dividing misinformation could've played a pivotal role. The news report of a minister, considered by many as a logical and gentle politician, where he was wrongly quoted for saying illegitimate statement seemingly as an anger to politicians opposing position that he was part of, not only tarnished the image of the politician himself but also misguided the political discourse on public sphere. The misinformation by the trusted media outlet has greater impact among the population and their political opinions hampering their freedom of choice and freedom of opinion and expressions.

Case Study 8: Two women who dropped banknotes on street of Janakpur

It was a Friday afternoon on April 16, 2020, when coronavirus infection was gripping the world and there were some sporadic cases in South Asian nations, when some local residents of Mahabir Chowk in Janakpur found some banknotes of Rs. 10 laying on the road. Nepal was under the lockdown due to Covid pandemic and there were some unverified claims circulating in Indian media that Covid-infected were throwing money after spitting on it to infect others. Soon the incident spread over social media as a wildfire claiming that coronavirus infected threw the banknotes.

Police were called as well as media were called. Police found a CCTV footage in a nearby place which had captured two women walking on the street. The police posted a screengrab of the video showing two women in its Facebook page asking the public to help identify the women and send the information to the media. The media, including the state-owned National News Agency (RSS), picked up the

story. Many social media users posted[28] about it. By next day, most of the media had covered a story saying that two women threw banknotes on the street of Janakpur and disappeared, and police was investigating the case as a suspected case of coronavirus spreading attempts.

The news quoted District Police Office Dhanusa as saying two women absconded after throwing banknotes at Mahabir Chowk of Janakpur. It further added that according to CCTV footage, the women were around 40 to 45 years old; and quoted district police spokesperson as saying that police was conducting investigations as the money was suspected of coronavirus infected. Police also sanitized the area and appealed people to remain calm without fear.

On April 18, police found the women in their home, which was behind the mosque and the news of their arrest was published in many media, some with misleading title such as 'arrested from behind the mosque' or 'behind the madarasa'. They were kept in a police custody

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28   https://twitter.com/naramroma/status/1251150050631155720

in a quarantine facility. On same day, police conducted RDT test, which at that time was not a reliable, and said that one of the women tested positive. Another round of news followed. On the evening of April 19, the police said both tested negative in more reliable PCR test and freed them.

Some samples of the published news:

SN	Date	Media	Headline
1	17/04/2020	National News Agency (RSS)*	Two female absconds after throwing banknotes on road in Janakpur[29]
2	17/04/2020	Ratopati.com	When two women disappear after throwing money on road[30]
3	17/04/2020	Ktmdainik.com	These are women who run away after throwing money, if anyone spot them, call police[31]
4	18/04/2020	Pahilopost.com	Sister-in-laws who threw money on road in Janakpur arrested from behind madarasa[32]
5	18/04/2020	Bizshala.com	Women who threw money on Janakpur road tested positive in RDT, is search on for planned corona spreaders?[33]
6	19/04/2020	Annapurna Post	Both women who threw banknotes in Janakpur tested negative[34]

* This news was distributed by the National News Agency and many media, printed newspapers and online news portal, reproduced it.

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29 https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2020/04/855542
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The two women of sisters-in-law – Amuna Khatun and Alina Khatun. Husband of one of them was migrant worker while other was a widow. They had gone to bank to get money and for easiness to transaction of their small money, had got Rs. 10 banknotes and were moving home when they dropped a few banknotes. When locals tried to ask them, they were probably terrified because of corona and lockdown so they probably walked away as soon as they could.

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: There was various actor involved in this. The first actor were residents and social media users who panicked fearing the coronavirus infection and spread the rumors and frantically called police and media. Second, it was the District Police Office, who to control the panic among the people asked to calm down, sanitized the area and posted the screengrab on their social media page and provided it to media. Third, it was media, many of which just carried the police version without double verification and some of which seasonalize the report.

Behavior: The actor was transparent in identifying themselves and were using lawful means of communication. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent, rather a public service duty intent but in doing so were spreading misinformation and added some sensational elements.

Content: The contents were the text news report, social media posts and photos in mainstream media and social media. Although details of incident of the reports were mostly correct, the incident was intentionally linked to unverified element that stated, 'spitting on the banknotes and throwing it on the street to spread coronavirus infection'. Thereby most the posts and report were misleading.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as all of them were published by Nepali media or social media users, mostly in Nepali language. A google search of keywords yielded in more than 2,300 results, mostly linking to the online news portal, thereby it was safe to assume that the misinformation reached a huge number of populations.

Effect: The misinformation created panic among public in Janakpur while the police were forced to use resources in locating,

taking in custody, and doing corona tests on two innocent women. The two women spent two days in police custody when they and the wider Muslim community were subjected of abusive, demeaning and religiously hurting comments.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of misinformation. Although the misinformation was spread by a huge number of people, media and a state agency, their intent was not to malign people or community but rather guided by the civic duty sense in the early days of coronavirus. The police were quick to remove the photo (the CCTV footage screengrab was removed from the police Facebook page within a few hours); expedite investigation and tests, and timely information outflow to keep people updated with correct and updated information, whereas media also covered all aspects of the incident as and when they came in as new information.

Conclusion of Case Study 8

In the early days of Covid pandemic, many things about the virus and infection were unclear and there was many misinformation that people, state agency and media intentionally or unintentionally spread. Some of those misinformation, although had no malign intention, created public panic and seemed to have impact on the harmony of the society. An example of such misinformation was the case of the women throwing money on the road of Janakpur – where citizens, security agency and media – were all unintentionally involved in spreading misinformation. The misinformation, since was about two Muslim women, had the religious sentiments. Quick action by the state agency and media's readiness to publish updated information, although that was contrary to what they had earlier published or posted, however limited the effect.

Case Study 9: Tara Air Crash Site

On Sunday, May 29, 2022, a domestic airplane belonging to Tara Air became contactless during its flight from Pokhara to Jomsom in west Nepal. Flight 197 was a Twin Otter aircraft with 22 people onboard including three crew members. It lost contact with the air

traffic control after 12 minutes after the take-off for the 25-minute flight at 9:55 AM.

Due to poor weather, the search operations faced some difficulties, and some helicopters send to locate the plane returned without success. There was news about the mobile phone of the captain still ringing and was in connection with the telephone towers, and locals of Lete village reporting hearing from bang sound. Although the locals said they had seen smokes in a hill, the search operation was called off on the day of accident due to bad weather and the wreckage of the aircraft along with bodies of all 22 people were only located on Monday, May 30 – more than 20 hours after it went missing at Thasang in Mustang district.

Immediately after the news of the missing airplane broke, all media covered it with priority. News TV channels were giving live updates and were competing for the viewership. Avenues TV – a well-known television news channel – on Sunday afternoon broadcast visuals that it claimed are from the crash site. At that point of time, although the aircraft was feared crashed, it was not confirmed, and the news presenter stated it a breaking news and said: "The aircraft of Tara Air en route to Jomsom of Mustang from Pokhara had gone contactless and right now we have received recent visuals of the site of the plane crash. This visual has been received a few minutes earlier."

Then it showed a photo on the screen of an aircraft accident.

The photo however was not the photo from Tara Air crash. It was a photo from a helicopter crash in India earlier in December 2021. The helicopter crash in India was widely reported because Chief of Defense Staff General Bipin Rawat was killed in it. The photo used was that of the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency, which had been published in many Indian newspapers and online site.

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: Avenues Khabar TV – a privately owned national news channel of Nepal. It was launched in 2007 and is one of the popular news channels in the country.

Behavior: The actor was transparent in identifying itself in the content and was using lawful means of communication. The actor didn't seem to have an aspersive intent however seems to have deliberately used fake photo and content to gain upper hand in the cut-throat competition among news channels during an event of high attention from the public.

Content: The content was a photo along with a spoken words falsely claiming that the photo was an image of the plane accident site.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as the news was in Nepali and broadcast over a Nepali news channel.

Effect: The news spread misinformation at the time of grief due to disappeared airplane. The fake photo of the accident was broadcast at the time when the crash was not established and there were thin hopes, at least among families and friends of those onboard the aircraft, that there could be some chances of survival. The photo showing accident and plane debris aggravating grief among concerned people.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of disinformation. The national news television channel deliberately used a fake photo and content to gain upper hand in the competition among news channels during a breaking news situation after an aircraft on the domestic flight went contactless. The photo showing accident and plane debris, and the accompanying news aggravated grief among concerned people.

Conclusion of Case Study 9

An aircraft on a domestic flight went missing midway from Pokhara to Jomsom in west Nepal with 22 onboard. The aircraft was located more than 20 hours after it went missing due to bad weather and the duration of those 20 hours was a breaking news situation for Nepal's media. Although feared crashed, it was not established until the crash site was located. To gain an upper hand in the breaking news competition, Avenues Khabar TV broadcast a photo of an old accident in India claiming it was the newest footage of the crash. The disinformation quickly became information for the public and aggravated grief among families and friends of those onboard.

Case Study 10: Pregnancy of lynched man's lover girl

On the fateful evening of May 23, 2020, six youth were killed in a lynching incident in far-west Karnali Province that created a public uproar in Nepal. Nabaraj BK, a 21-year-old youth of 'lower caste', who was in a love affair with 17-year-old girl of 'upper caste', reached the girl's village in Soti Village, Rukum. He had gathered a group of 18 friends reportedly to get the girl out of her house to elope with him. The gang however was spotted by the girl's mother 50 meters away from the home and informed the locals. The boys returned but were met with the girl's villagers carrying home weapons on the way. The villagers reportedly attacked the gang wielding sticks and pelting stones all the way to the banks of the Bheri River, which flows between Nabaraj's and the girl's villages. Many of whom jumped into the river to save lives. Six lost their lives, apparently from drowning, while 12 others sustained injuries.

The incident took a few days to be picked by the national mainstream media, but when they did, they published it as an ugly face of the case-based discrimination that exists in Nepal. Nabaraj BK, of the 'lower Dalit caste' was an ideal youth – good at sports who had passed the first hurdle to be recruited into Nepal Police and whose most published photo showed him carrying Nepal's flag. Due to the caste issue, the incident gathered huge public attention as many public figures and leaders expressing opinions about the incident and mainstream media following-up the incident with minor – and as some fact-checkers pointed out misleading – information.

Due to the public attention, the incident also became a hot issue for YouTube channels that needed contents attracting huge attention to earn money. In this case study, two YouTube channels is studied for the contents that claimed – falsely – that the girl was pregnant. The 'pregnancy' was a viral topic after the incident that reached millions and for some duration distorted the public debate around the incident. The rumor about the girl's pregnancy started early after the incident and the Police which had taken into custody the girl among others had done a health checkup where the doctors had established the fact that she was not pregnant. Despite this, numerous YouTube channels using the fake screenshots of Facebook messenger chat continued claiming the girl was pregnant. Two channels, ybk online tv with 200,000+ subscribers and The SNP Media with 300,000+ subscribers, were among the channels who published numerous videos () about the incident and the pregnancy. Some other YouTube channels have already deleted (or made private) viral videos that claimed about the pregnancy of the girl.

Both studied channels published at least two dozen videos about the incident. Here are some examples of the video claiming the girl (both channels had actually named the girl) was pregnant:

SN	Channel	Video Title	Views
1	SNP Media	Today Breaking News: Just now came unthinkable news about Nabaraj and girl[35]	693K
2	SNP Media	See secret Facebook chat of Nabaraj and his lover[36]	46K
3	SNP Media	Just revealed secret about the baby in the girl's womb[37]	121K
4	SNP Media	Secret revelation about the baby of Nabaraj and the girl[38]	111K
5	ybk online tv	Unthinkable chat revealed when Facebook messenger of Nabaraj and girl checked[39]	1.2M
6	ybk online tv	Whose baby the girl is carrying, medical test reveals this[40]	381K
7	ybk online tv	Last chat of Nabaraj and the girl[41]	150K

ABCDE Framework Analysis

Actor: YouTube channels. The first channel studied is The SNP Media which claimed to be based in India and was created on March 22, 2015, by 'Mr. Abinash Patel'. It has 300,000+ subscribers and

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35 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3OyjWysc7I*
36 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGCYxXfbooc*
37 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-_l3-s4FrM*
38 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKuZoIcbAig*
39 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=312Evyb8Ya0*
40 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7eOz7_DNY8*
41 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSaV5y-toUw*

all its videos are about Nepal, and most are in vlog format with the presenter identifiable.

YBK Online TV was created on December 9, 2018, and it's listed location is India. However, all the videos that are uploaded are about Nepal and in Nepali language. All the video has voiceover sound, but the presenter is not visible in the videos.

Behavior: The actors are not fully transparent. Although the presenter is presenting the content – either in voiceover or video, there is no identification such as name or other details. There is no mention about the company or person operating the channels.

Content: The contents are news format videos in Nepali language that were published in the YouTube channels falsely claiming or indicating that the lover girl of the person lynched in an unfortunate incident was pregnant with his child. There are elements of sensationalizing with use of words such as 'secret', 'revealed', 'breaking' or 'unthinkable' in the content to attract attention of the audience. Such words are also used widely in the video thumbnails. Some of the videos use fake screenshots of Facebook chat as the proof of what they were claiming.

Degree: The content was targeted to Nepali citizens as the contents were in Nepali and published in the YouTube channels primarily targeting Nepali citizens.

Effect: At the time when the lynching incident was a hot topic in Nepalipublic sphere with focus on impunity in crimes against people of so-called lower caste, child marriage and justice system, the misinformation diverted the discourse to a speculative and seemingly lighter topic as many people started asking whether the girl was pregnant and what would happen to the baby.

Diagnosis

The case has been identified as an incident of disinformation. The YouTube channels published news-like content with fake 'proofs' to garner views and earn advertising money. The publication was intentional, not based the verifiable facts and was speculative based on rumors. They used elements to sensualize the video and made no effort whatsoever to verify or balance the claims.

Conclusion of Case Study 10

A heinous crime was committed by lynching six innocent 'lower caste' people by a mob of 'upper caste' people in Rukum, Nepal that a parliamentary probe committee and other civil society investigations concluded had a caste-based discrimination at its root. Probes pointed out weaknesses in police investigation, impunity in crimes against so-called 'lower caste' people and other serious social issues that exists in the system hindering justice to victims. Since the incident and relevant issues became a national interest topic, many YouTube channels saw opportunity to publish videos to garner more views and produced videos that were speculative and unverified. Two such channels were studied in this case study looking at the videos that falsely claimed that the lover girl of one of the lynched men was pregnant. Such misinformation diverted the public discourse from the main issues towards lesser issues.

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Note: *These case studies were published in Disinformation.Asia and reprroduced in this book with permission from Bytes for All, Pakistan.*

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