

Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by
Ujjwal Acharya

Center for Media Research – Nepal
Kathmandu, Nepal

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

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Table of Contents

Foreword	1
Misinformation: Shared Concern, Limited Interventions <i>Tilak Pathak & Bhuwan KC</i>	
Introduction	9
Misinformation and Democracy <i>Ujjwal Acharya</i>	
Chapter 1	25
An Anatomy of Information Manipulation in Nepal <i>Rishikesh Dahal & Ujjwal Acharya</i>	
Chapter 2	51
Public Perceptions of Misinformation: Sources, Impacts, and Societal Implications <i>Ujjwal Prajapati & Lekhanath Pandey</i>	
Chapter 3	73
Framing Misinformation: A Review of Literature and Media Discourse <i>Rishikesh Dahal</i>	
Chapter 4	95
Mapping Misinformation: An Analysis of 10 Prominent Misinformation Cases <i>Ujjwal Acharya</i>	
Chapter 5	137
Media and Information Literacy: Examining the Effectiveness of Educating Youths <i>Chetana Kumwar & Ujjwal Prajapati</i>	
Chapter 6	157
Fact Checking: How Misinformation Challenges Mass Media Authenticity <i>Ujjwal Acharya & Chetana Kumwar</i>	
Final Note	175
Fighting Misinformation to Strengthen Democracy <i>Prof. P. Kharel</i>	
<i>Contributors</i>	184

INTRODUCTION

Misinformation and Democracy

Ujjwal Acharya

Democracies around the world are at risk. The quality of democracy in developing and transitioning countries has been in steady decline over the past 20 years, as the Transformation Index of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) states. Out of 137 countries, including Nepal, surveyed, only 63 remain as democracies, while a majority are classified as autocracies. “Where there is authoritarianism, there is disinformation,” and “this rise of authoritarianism is accompanied by polarization and the use of disinformation by autocratic governments to shape domestic and international opinion” (Klatt & Boese-Schlosser, 2025).

Misinformation poses the greatest threat to democracy. While many factors influence the thriving or decline of democracies, in recent years, the manipulation of information has emerged as the most significant challenge, undermining the very foundation of democratic governance. The core assumption of democracy rests on the power entrusted to well-informed citizens and their ability to make educated political decisions, particularly when choosing their representatives. Information manipulation—the production and dissemination of misinformation—creates a situation where citizens are misinformed rather than well-informed. The prevalence of false stories online erects barriers to informed political decision-making, making it less likely that voters will base their choices on genuine

information rather than lies or misleading narratives (Persily, 2017). However, the concept of misinformation as a threat to democracy extends beyond the electoral process. Tenove (2020) identifies three normative goods of democracy that are jeopardized by misinformation: self-determination (threats to national security and sovereignty), accountable representation (threats to electoral integrity), and deliberative processes of opinion formation (threats to the quality of public discourse and debate).

Misinformation is not a new phenomenon; lies, rumors, and propaganda have been present in society, especially in politics, for centuries. However, the impact of misinformation on society and politics has surged exponentially due to the omnipresence of internet-based communication systems and information-sharing platforms. Before the advent of the internet and social media, misinformation was confined to specific spaces and times. In recent decades, however, misleading information has transcended these boundaries, reaching millions within seconds and persisting due to the permanence of digital content. Since the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election—an event some scholars identify as a turning point in the impact of misinformation on electoral outcomes—misinformation has become a global concern.

Misinformation is defined as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information, regardless of the intent to deceive,” while disinformation refers to “the deliberate creation, distribution, and/or amplification of false, inaccurate, or misleading information intended to deceive” (Ooi et al., 2021). This book uses misinformation as an umbrella term encompassing all types of false and misleading information. This means that whenever the term misinformation is used, it could refer to any or all of the following: unintended false information, disinformation, malinformation, propaganda, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, and hate speech. Deliberately produced and distributed misinformation is referred to as disinformation. The term “fake news” is rarely used these days “because of the way it has been co-opted by politicians around the world to discredit and attack professional journalism” (Wardle, 2020). News, in its true sense, is defined not merely as what is published in the media but as a product of rigorous journalistic processes that inherently strive for accuracy and credibility.

Nepal is a prime target for misinformation due to its political instability, weakened public trust in its relatively new media system, a lack of media and information literacy among citizens, the influence of its two large neighbors, its diverse population, and the rapid adoption of mobile phones and the internet (Acharya, 2022). As social media increasingly becomes the primary source of information, there has been a rise in information disorder, including substantial misinformation, sporadic instances of disinformation, and hate speech (USAID et al., 2024). The use of internet-based technologies for both positive and negative purposes is also increasing during elections, which are among the most critical democratic processes.

Social media has played an important role in media and elections since 2013 and was initially used as a platform to connect with candidates and political parties. However, the 2022 elections saw a rise in premediated misuse of social media to spread fake news and false information regarding candidates... Candidates and political parties used social media teams to not only reach out to their constituencies but also to navigate general sentiments. However, this brought on the challenge of misinformation and false stories smearing political candidates and mislead voter. (Sapkota & Adhikari, 2023)

Has misinformation impacted Nepal's elections? While researchers agree that concerning amounts of misinformation circulate during elections, they disagree on the extent of its impact. Pahari (2024) argues that misinformation has significantly influenced Nepal's elections, voter behavior, and public opinion, often destabilizing democratic processes. In contrast, Pathak and Prajapati (2023) contend that despite the presence of misinformation and disinformation during the campaigning period, fears that disinformation could undermine the integrity of election results, discourage voting, or foster disinterest in the electoral system proved unfounded. Similarly, Shrestha (2022a), who identified instances of shallow fake information (such as selectively edited videos lacking context), fake online media brands, misuse of popular media, and premature announcements of election results, concluded that "dangerous misinformation creating suspicion over

election results, discouraging voters, or eroding trust in electoral integrity or the system” was not observed during the election period.

However, with the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, the threat of misinformation is becoming even more severe. Deepfake audio and videos, in particular, have the potential to mislead citizens, making it increasingly difficult for them to distinguish between real and fabricated content. Researchers in Nepal have expressed concerns that AI could transform the shallow fakes that were prevalent during the 2022 elections into deepfakes, potentially having a more profound impact on Nepali citizens. This vulnerability is exacerbated by a general lack of critical skills among the population to identify and counter misinformation. As a result, misinformation aided by AI poses a grave concern, threatening to undermine democratic norms, electoral integrity, and potentially helping the election of populist candidates who are adept at spreading misleading narratives in future elections.

Nepal is scheduled to hold federal and provincial general elections, as well as municipal elections, in 2027. As political parties, politicians, and allegedly foreign actors increasingly utilize social media to control or manipulate narratives, there is growing apprehension that the worst is yet to come for Nepal in terms of organized disinformation campaigns (Healy & Moktan, 2023). Political parties in Nepal appear to be aware of the power of internet tools as a means of conveying their agendas to citizens. Some have even formed organized cyber teams to promote their candidates, advance their agendas, and counter opposition narratives on digital platforms. While these efforts reflect the growing digitalization of political campaigns, they also heighten the risk of political propaganda and misinformation.

In recent years, Nepal has witnessed a rise in populist tactics, particularly from emerging leaders and new political parties, as well as authoritarian decision-making from established leaders and parties. Populists, liberals, and conservatives have not only emerged but have also achieved significant political and electoral success in a short period, with some even reaching positions of power (Wagle, 2024). This political landscape, combined with the rapid adoption of digital technologies and the spread of misinformation, makes Nepal partic-

ularly susceptible to the rise of populism. As the country approaches its next elections, the potential for AI-driven misinformation to disrupt democratic processes and influence electoral outcomes remains a pressing concern.

The 2022 election saw the emergence of independent [leaders and new] parties came out of nowhere by campaigning mainly through social media to ride the wave of disillusionment against the three established parties and their alpha males who have monopolized Nepali politics for the past 18 years. (Nepali Times, 2024)

Scholars globally have begun suggesting that manipulated narratives – which may be understood as stories, claims, or explanations that are false, misleading, or inaccurate, and are spread intentionally often distorting facts, exploiting emotions, or manipulating perceptions to influence public opinion, behavior, or beliefs – are more dangerous than pieces of misinformation – which may be understood as isolated false or misleading information. Ooi et al. (2021) identify five types of misinformation narratives during elections, however many of those are usually the common contents in information manipulation campaigns: polarizing and divisive content, delegitimization narratives, political suppression narratives, hate, harassment and violence, and premature election results or claims of victory.

Democracy in Nepal, as in any other country around the world, should be prepared to face it all: populism, criminal content such as hate speech, attacks on democratic values, processes, and institutions through misinformation and misleading narratives aided by technological advancements. The information space is already chaotic, and without concrete and effective interventions, the space is going to become uncontrollably chaotic.

The most popular explanation as to why people believe and share misinformation, according to Altay et al. (2023), are partisanship, identity, confirmation bias (the underlying tendency to notice, focus on, and give greater credence to evidence that fits with your existing beliefs), motivated reasoning (an unconscious or conscious process by which personal emotions control the evidence that is supported or dismissed), and lack of trust in institutions. ‘For some time now,

it is seen that the Nepali society is rapidly moving towards unwanted polarization and unnatural extremism’ (Wagle, 2023), and there is ‘the tendency of the political elite to engage in identity politics, particularly over the last few years’ that ‘threatens to fragment the political spectrum’ (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024), fueling partisanship and identity. The public trust in democratic institutions, including political parties and media, has been on the decline for a few years now. This makes Nepal a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and its irreversible negative impacts. In a country where political dissatisfaction has been simmering for decades, and with the government preoccupied with smoothing over the differences in the coalition, such [misinformation] campaigns could trigger political unrest and violence (Healy & Moktan, 2023).

This all leads us to the dreadful question: how to combat misinformation? Sadly, there is no easy answer. Bateman and Jackson (2024) analyzed ten types of interventions to combat misinformation while noting “none of the interventions considered in the report were simultaneously well-studied, very effective, and easy to scale.” They classified the interventions as public information, government action, and platform action (see Table i.1).

Altay et al. (2023) identified six individual-level interventions and nine system-level interventions to combat misinformation. They found that experts agree on digital/media literacy training, labeling of false content, and fact-checking as the three most effective individual-level interventions. Regarding system-level actions against misinformation, the most widely agreed-upon solutions were platform design changes, followed by algorithmic changes, content moderation on social media, de-platforming prominent actors sharing misinformation, and stronger regulations to hold platforms accountable (see Altay et al., 2023).

Scholars generally agree that there is no silver bullet intervention to combat misinformation. Some of the most effective interventions—such as algorithm changes, de-platforming malicious actors, or content moderation—are to be carried out by social media platforms. However, platforms and tech cannot be the sole focus, as social media platforms help fuel disinformation in various ways—for example, through recommendation algorithms that encourage and amplify misleading content (Bateman & Jackson, 2024).

Table i.1: Overview of interventions to combat misinformation

Type	SN	Intervention	How much is known?	How effective does it seem?	How easily does it scale?
Public information	1	Supporting local journalism	Modest	Significant	Difficult
Public information	2	Media literacy education	Significant	Significant	Difficult
Public information	3	Fact-checking	Significant	Modest	Modest
Public information	4	Labeling social media content	Modest	Modest	Easy
Public information	5	Counter messaging strategies	Modest	Modest	Difficult
Government action	6	Cybersecurity for elections & campaigns	Modest	Modest	Modest
Government action	7	Statecraft, deterrence/ disruption	Modest	Limited	Modest
Platform action	8	Removing inauthentic asset networks	Modest	Modest	Modest
Platform action	9	Reducing data collection and targeted ads	Modest	Limited	Difficult
Platform action	10	Changing recommendation algorithm	Limited	Significant	Modest

Source: Bateman and Jackson (2024)

Experts agree that social media platforms have worsened the problem of misinformation (Altay et al., 2023), and they are unlikely to make these changes voluntarily, as implementing such measures is either resource-intensive or likely to impact user engagement with their products. State-level interventions, such as designing stronger regulations to hold platforms accountable, are essential. However, “responsible regulation means establishing a balance between the risks of disinformation and the risks of regulatory interventions” (Jungherr, 2024), and “regulation must effectively combat the adverse effects of fake news while also respecting freedom of expression” (Helm & Nasu, 2021).

Two other interventions, media and information literacy and fact-checking, are considered effective. There is significant evidence that media literacy training can help people identify false stories and unreliable news sources (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). Media and information literacy is a long-term, proactive, resource-intensive, and time-consuming intervention, but until this is achieved, the impacts of misinformation cannot be fully tackled. The level of media literacy in Nepal is fairly low, with many people, including politicians, lacking awareness of critical media literacy concepts (Gurung, 2023).

Fact-checking is a specific practice in which, based on available evidence, data, or scientific research, any information, news report, or claim is tested, and its results are presented (Shrestha, 2022b). However, fact-checking is reactive, short-term, slower than the spread of misinformation, resource-intensive, and has limited reach to target population. With the increasing use of technology, fact-checking is one way to address the spread of misinformation and its harmful effects (Shrestha, 2022b). A large body of research indicates that fact-checking can effectively correct false beliefs about specific claims, especially for audiences not heavily invested in the partisan elements of the claims. However, influencing factual beliefs does not necessarily result in attitudinal or behavioral changes, such as reduced support for a deceitful politician or a baseless policy proposal (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). The fact-checking scene in Nepal is not very strong, as there are only a few organizations and limited efforts to combat misinformation. Despite the current lack of perceived serious threats to Nepali society and politics, the presence of elements that could cause problems in the

future makes it crucial to strengthen measures to combat misinformation (Acharya, 2023).

In Nepal, there are only two fact-checking initiatives in operation. Nepal's first fact-checking initiative was launched in 2015, followed by two more fact-checking initiatives in the next nine years. SouthAsiaCheck.org was established in 2015 by the non-governmental organization Panos South Asia to verify claims made by politicians, ministers, bureaucrats, and diplomats. This pioneering fact-checking initiative received funding until 2020, but once funding became scarce, it was shut down.

NepalFactCheck.org started in March 2020 as a joint effort by the Center for Media Research - Nepal and the first Nepali-language blog, mysansar.com, during the proliferation of coronavirus-related misinformation. It was an urgent response to viral misinformation about the coronavirus (Shrestha, 2022).

NepalCheck.org, established in August 2022, describes itself as a “volunteering effort to hold politicians, public and elected officials, and political party leaders accountable for their false, misleading, and half-truth statements through an act of fact-checking” (Acharya, 2023).

Fact-checking in Nepal has a limited scope due to a lack of initiatives and public awareness. Operating fact-checking initiatives is not easy. Fact-checking also lacks human resources with appropriate technical knowledge, and there is a need to recognize that fact-checking and the media are not adversaries but complement each other (Shrestha, 2022). A study of fact-checking in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal by Haque et al. (2018) identified five major challenges emerging from interviews with fact-checkers: lack of human resources, lack of machine learning tools built for local languages, lack of digital archives, lack of a sustainable business model, and political pressure. Except for political pressure, the other four challenges—along with the specific challenge of media consumers not recognizing the value of fact-checking, making it hard for fact-checking organizations to reach large audiences—apply to Nepal (Acharya, 2023). Fact-checked information, even if delayed, plays an important role in creating a database of common misinformation narratives and in long run can become prominent search results on common misinformation topics. Nepal-

FactCheck.org and NepalCheck.org, continue to operate with limited resources and an uncertain future.

As discussed earlier, the misinformation landscape is complex, and developing effective interventions requires understanding its nuances from multiple perspectives. This book attempts to assess Nepal's misinformation landscape through various angles and lenses. The chapters are divided into two broad sections. The first, Chapters 1 to 4, focuses on understanding the state of misinformation in Nepal and public perceptions surrounding it. The second, Chapters 5 and 6, examines interventions—specifically media and information literacy, and fact-checking — and their state and effectiveness in Nepal.

In Chapter 1, **Rishikesh Dahal and I** examine the landscape of misinformation in Nepal through 29 interviews conducted across seven provinces and two discussions in Kathmandu. The study assesses 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). While in many ways, findings of this chapter are reinforced by Chapter 2, there are also some contradictory perspectives. Dahal and I state that misinformation is particularly prevalent during critical periods such as elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also highlights how foreign governments, particularly China and India, influence Nepal's information ecosystem through strategic dissemination of false narratives, as evidenced in cases like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact and Pokhara airport discussions.

Ujjwal Prajapati and Lekhanath Pandey, in Chapter 2, draw from a survey and focus group discussions in all seven provinces, and key informant interviews in Madhes and Lumbini provinces to assess the spread, prevalence, and impact of misinformation at the grassroots level. They state that widespread access to social media platforms has significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation and impacted vulnerable groups such as children, youth, women, and those who primarily rely on social media for news. They also identify social media, especially Facebook, as the primary medium for misinformation, with political groups, celebrities, and social media influencers being the primary sources.

The chapter also investigates the impacts of misinformation and concludes that it has the potential to fuel social tensions and lead to violence, impede progress in areas like justice and infrastructure development; increase patriarchal perspectives, gender-based violence, and hate speech, and erode trust in the media. Prajapati and Pandey also state that people are concerned about the spread of misinformation. They highlight the need to implement legal mechanisms to control the spread of misinformation, promote digital literacy among the public and support fact-checking efforts to counter misinformation.

In Chapter 3, **Rishikesh Dahal** reviews literature and media discourses on misinformation landscape in Nepal. He draws from historical incidents such as the 2000 Hrithik Roshan scandal and overviews contemporary challenges. The chapter identifies multiple threat actors, including political parties, social media influencers, and foreign governments, who contribute to information manipulation; traditional media's declining influence; and the rise of unregulated social media platforms as factors creating a fertile environment for misinformation diffusion. Dahal argues that Nepal's unique socio-political context and digital landscape demand contextualized interventions and a multifaceted approach to effectively combat misinformation, that should include among others, media and information literacy programs, and fact-checking initiatives.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of 10 prominent misinformation cases in Nepal. I use ABCDE Framework to analyze the cases on various topics and of varying degree of impact and importance. The cases analyzed spread from unintentional simple error to coordinated information operations in various issues including foreign relations, and health, and responsible actors ranging from media to social media users to foreign governments. The chapter not only gives a glimpse of actors involved, behavior, content, degree and effect of misinformation, but also provides an overview on types, prevalence and spread of misinformation in Nepal.

In Chapter 5, **Chetana Kunwar and Ujjwal Prajapati** examine the perception and impacts of media and information literacy training programs. They analyzed 2,935 post-workshop responses from school-going youths who attended media and information literacy programs in six provinces in Nepal. The chapter points out at

two important aspects: first, increasing awareness and skills of media and information literacy through workshops was perceived as a very important step in combating misinformation, and second, media and information literacy training are impactful in increasing fundamental critical thinking among the participants.

In the final chapter of the book, **I and Chetana Kunwar** analysed 407 fact-checks published on three fact-checking websites of Nepal from March 2020 to August 2024, and four case studies, with an objective to understand how misinformation challenges mass media's authenticity and credibility. The decline in the public trust of mass media communication is a well-documented fact and consumption of misinformation is also associated with a decrease in media trust. The authors state that the mainstream media is also almost equally responsible for spreading misinformation making it sources of misinformation. The authors state that mass media are largely playing a reactive role either helping the spread the misinformation or, at least, not putting on efforts to combat misinformation even in the highly debated issues. They conclude that such practice by mass media degrades the public trust on their contents creating a situation where the public were losing confidence in mass media as source of authentic information.

This book is an attempt to comprehensively examine Nepal's misinformation ecosystem. It contributes to our understanding of how misinformation operates in Nepal, which may also be cases in other developing democracies. The methodological diversity combining interviews, focus groups, surveys, and case studies, helps to view misinformation ecosystem in a more complete picture and points out three issues needing urgent attention by policymakers and civil society organizations to fight misinformation:

First, misinformation isn't just a media problem, it is intertwined with other social issues. Misinformation can amplify social evils such as gender-based violence and patriarchal perspectives therefore fighting misinformation must also be a part of broader social justice efforts.

Second, foreign influence operations, particularly from neighboring China and India, show that that smaller nations like Nepal can become a playground of information manipulation by larger powers.

This should be a point to be noted while understanding how national sovereignty operates in the digital age.

Third, mainstream media is in a critical juncture. Despite traditional media's influence is declining, it also remains a most important weapons in combating misinformation. They are also a significant source of misinformation itself. This means there is a need for comprehensive reform of the media ecosystem aimed at strengthening local journalism and media as well as putting them on the forefront in the combat against misinformation by making them proactive against misinformation narrative, ethical, and accurate.

In conclusion, the book highlights the urgent need for a coordinated, and multi-stakeholder approach to combat misinformation in Nepal. It suggests that interventions must go beyond reactive measures like fact-checking to include proactive strategies such as media and information literacy programs to the wider audience with a long-term goal. The book also highlights the importance of addressing the structural and systemic factors that enable misinformation, including the role of social media platforms, foreign actors, and the declining credibility of traditional media, which calls for stronger rights-based regulations and accountability mechanisms to hold actors responsible for their role in spreading misinformation.

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