Nepal's Misinformation Landscape

Edited by

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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 stake-holders 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