

Let's dismiss the term 'fake news' to combat misinformation

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Abstract

The term 'fake news' is often used to describe misinformation in the media. However, the term is also commonly used to describe all types of misleading content — from intentional fabrications to minor reporting errors. Despite its popularity, the term 'fake news' fails to adequately define the problem of information disorder. Because it provides a misguided understanding of a complex issue. This commentary argues that the term is ambiguous to the extent that it complicates the same problem it seeks to describe.

Drawing on academic research, media analysis, and case studies, this commentary takes the position that the use of 'fake news' displaces more functional definitions—such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and propaganda. This obstructs public understanding of information disorder and effective policy responses. It has also become a politically weaponized term as politicians and political actors misuse it to delegitimize and dismiss journalism, thereby decreasing public trust in the media.

This is a serious concern as the majority of journalism upholds professional standards and principles of accuracy and ethics despite

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occasional misleading contents. News is the product of established journalistic processes, and it means verified and contextualized information. The term news thereby should, by nature, be accurate, making adjectives such as 'fake' or 'correct' unnecessary. Journalism is our most effective weapon in fight against misinformation as it offers the strongest antidote to misleading contents: accurate information.

By framing the media as part of the problem rather than the solution, the 'fake news' narrative weakens the strongest weapon we have in our war against misinformation. This commentary concludes that abandoning the term 'fake news' in favor of clearer term misinformation is crucial for upholding public trust, supporting journalism, and helping citizens navigate often overwhelming and confusing contemporary information ecosystem.

Keywords: *misinformation, fake news, media trust, journalism, information disorder*

Introduction

Misinformation is a threat to contemporary society, politics and democracy. As everywhere else in the world, the amount of misinformation has increased in Nepal's information ecosystem threatening to destabilize the state institutions, and the media system in recent years. Misinformation has evolved as a great problem in Nepal affecting trust agenda, health and even politics, and its seriousness continues to grow (Pahari, 2024). With the advent of the internet and social media, misinformation has reached a large number of population in Nepal with an almost omnipresent status. A 2022 survey by the Center for Media Research Nepal showed that 92 percent of heavy social media users are exposed to misinformation whereas another survey in 2024 among the general population revealed that around 67 percent of people witnessed misinformation in the preceding week. Moreover, 81 percent of respondents said they were very concerned or concerned about

the negative impacts of misinformation in society, whereas 97 percent believed misinformation was or would be a big problem for society and politics (CMR Nepal, 2022). Scholars have pointed out at Nepal's geopolitical situation between India and China as well as social uniqueness makes it highly vulnerable for the impact of misinformation. Pathak and KC (2025) further state "two key elements make Nepal particularly vulnerable to threats of misinformation: diverse population groups and political instability". They also noted that "there are other factors that contribute the spread and impacts of misinformation" (Pathak & KC, 2025).

The other factors include low impact and trust in media, and general lack of media and information literacy among the public that equip them with the critical mindset to question the authenticity of the information they receive and skills to identify misinformation. Acharya (2025) adds "Nepal's political instability, low public trust in media, and widespread uptake of social media have made the country a fertile ground for the proliferation of misinformation—much of it aggravated by election cycles and exacerbated by technological advances such as AI-generated deepfakes."

Dahal (2025) states there are various threat actors in Nepal's misinformation landscape listing out political parties, extremist groups, government, foreign actors, commercial actors as well as non-independent and party-affiliated media as sources of misinformation. Scholars in Nepal agree that combating misinformation in Nepal is an uphill battle.

The battle is made more difficult by the non-accountability of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, because despite being 'the main platforms in spreading misinformation' (CMR Nepal, 2022), Nepal is a small market for them without proper and globally acceptable regulatory mechanism that allows social media platforms to largely ignore the country-specific issues. However, being a country of small size does not protect Nepal

from harms of misinformation that range for wrong decisions to life-threatening behaviors. Dr. Nirmal Kandel (2020) even argues people have been suffering from a psychological disorder due to misinformation:

Many of us may be unknowingly suffering from information disorder syndrome. It is more prevalent due to the digitized world where the information flows to every individual's phone, tablet and computer in no time. Information disorder syndrome is the sharing or developing of false information with or without the intent of harming and they are categorized as misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. (Kandel, 2020).

This all calls for urgent actions to fight misinformation. But fighting misinformation is not an easy task. Bateman & Jackson (2024) state that there is no silver bullet or 'best' policy option and that none of the 10 interventions that they studied for the global report were simultaneously well-studied, very effective, and easy to scale. The uphill battle against misinformation is made more complex by a widespread use of a term: 'fake news'. In the time of rapid information flows, the term 'fake news' has not only dominated the popular conversation on misinformation but has also become omnipresent in academic, journalistic, and political discourses. Almost a decade ago, when the impact of misinformation, especially in the politics and elections, became a global issue, Collins Dictionary designated the term as the Collins Word of the Year 2017 defining it as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" (Associated Press, 2017).

The term was originally used to describe fabricated stories published in the mainstream media and designed with the intent to deceive, however as the discourse around misinformation spread, the term gradually became a tool to attack journalism and media, even for

their minor errors and critical opinions. The proliferation of ‘fake news’ as a label for all forms of misinformation has had a paradoxical effect: rather than clarifying the challenges of information disorder, it has clouded understanding and undermined trust in news media, the very institution best positioned to combat misinformation (Broda & Stromback, 2024; Baptista & Gradim, 2022).

In this commentary, I argue that abandoning the term ‘fake news’ in favor of clear and more functional terms such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, hate speech and propaganda not only helps in understanding the information disorder properly but also in design of interventions from policy to civil society responses. Further, I argue that despite its shortcomings and some role in spreading misinformation, mainstream journalism and media is the most effective defense mechanism that we have in the combat against misinformation. The established information ecosystem is largely built on today’s mainstream media ecosystem and that “eroding trust in the media by haphazardly branding it as ‘fake’ significantly weakens our collective capacity to counter falsehoods and confusion” (Ognyanova et al., 2020).

Despite widespread use, scholars have warned against using the term ‘fake news’ noting that it lacks the required meaning to become an analytical category. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) stand for clearer distinctions between various forms of information disorder, such as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and have argued against using fake news. Research finds that the ambiguity of term ‘fake news’ allows politicians and political actors to discredit journalism and criticism that further erodes the public confidence in news and media, while also misguiding policy and other responses which target journalism and media rather than the complexity of information disorder.

In Nepal, a society grappling with rapid digital transformation, political turmoil, and low reach of media therefore limited in public

trust, misinformation and disinformation thrive especially during events such as elections, natural disasters and public health crises. The Nepali context shows that despite the media needing improvement to conduct journalism more ethically and professionally, the media also remains the single most powerful weapon for countering misinformation by spreading correct information, spreading critical thinking among public and fact-checking misinformation.

Acharya (2024) states why journalism and media are important in combating misinformation:

Correct information is the best antidote to misinformation, which is possible only in the presence of authentic media. However, there is a disturbing trend of discrediting and humiliating the media using misinformation. Political leaders, especially the ones using populist tactics and having a significant presence on social media, are on the frontline of such trends. Since our media system is already weak, humiliating the press rather than improving its functioning is equivalent to laying down our best weapon against misinformation. (Acharya, 2024)

Why the term ‘fake news’ is problematic?

The origin of the term ‘fake news’ does not have a concrete root. It gained prominence as an emergency term to describe a phenomenon of false or misleading information spreading over media and social media, especially during the 2016 US Presidential Elections and immediately afterwards. The term ‘fake news’ was popularized during the 2016 US election, when Macedonians and others responded to the financial incentives of this attention economy by generating viral false news stories for US audiences (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). The term spread in a lightning speed around the world before it was properly analyzed or understood. By the time researchers studied the phenomena and understood that the term is

not only misguiding but also problematic, it had already become a household word. And, despite pushback from researchers, the term continued to get traction because the politicians and those who wanted to criticize and humiliate the media, continued to use the term.

Today, for some, the term refers only to deliberate fabrications that are made to look like legitimate news. For many others, it means overreaching from unintentional mistakes and poorly conducted reporting to biased commentary and even satire. Recent research highlights that fake news lacks the definitional rigor necessary for scholarly and policy-oriented use and is best replaced by terms like misinformation and disinformation (Broda & Stromback, 2024; Wang, 2020).

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).

Some scholars, such as Claire Wardle who founded the First Draft News and was among the first to describe and distinguish misinformation, disinformation and malinformation argued against use of the term fake news “because of the way it has been co-opted by politicians around the world to discredit and attack professional journalism” (Wardle, 2020).

The term has been used by political actors worldwide to delegitimize accurate reporting, attack press freedom, and induce public skepticism toward credible journalism (Broda & Stromback, 2024). Leaders in various countries, from US President Donald Trump of USA to former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, have used ‘fake news’ accusations against critical media coverage and reporting that are against them. During his first term in office, US President Donald Trump frequently employed the term ‘fake news’ to discredit and

attack mainstream media outlets. This was taken as his strategy to undermine mainstream media's legitimacy and erode public trust in critical journalism (Jamieson & Taussig, 2017). He frequently used the term to dismiss negative or fact-based reporting, declaring the press "the enemy of the American people" (Trump, 2017, Feb. 17). The scale is quantified in a news report in *The Independent* which states "Donald Trump has called journalists and news outlets 'fake news' nearly 2,000 times since the beginning of his presidency, averaging more than one daily broadside against the press over the last four years" (Savage, 2020). Leaders do it deliberately to blur the line between journalism and political accusation so as to confuse the citizens and shield themselves from scrutiny by the media and citizens. Bateman & Jackson (2024) state:

This risk is most obvious in authoritarian regimes and flawed democracies, where leaders may suppress dissent by labeling it disinformation. But the problem can manifest in other ways too... boomerang patterns have previously been seen with 'fake news,' a phrase that originally described unethical content farms but was quickly repurposed to delegitimize truthful journalism. (Bateman & Jackson, 2024)

This type of manipulation undermines media's role as the watchdog, brings division among public, and sometimes can justify crackdowns on human rights and press freedoms under the guise of protecting citizens from fake content, even in Nepal (Bhandari, 2024). When leaders dismiss unfavorable contents as fake news and delegitimize media as fake news producers, it destabilizes the information ecosystem, public trust and therefore the democratic process. Loss of the public trust in media is dangerous at the times of social or political or national crisis, when citizens need reliable information.

Systematic study has shown that regular exposure to so-called 'fake news' undermines trust in professional journalism (Ognyanova

et al., 2020; Hoeset al., 2024). The result is not merely avoiding of some specific outlet or media, but a generalized suspicion toward all news media. For example, research indicates that those who regularly encounter misinformation or are exposed to the 'fake news' label are significantly more likely to distrust even reputable sources(Ognyanova et al., 2020).

This skepticism is reinforced by spillover effects: efforts to spotlight or counter misinformation often prime individuals to become wary not just of falsehoods, but of accurate reporting as well(Hoeset al., 2024). Recent evidence even questions whether the sheer volume of misinformation is as problematic as is often suggested; rather, the salience created by repeated alarms about 'fake news' may itself play a major role in undermining confidence in established news institutions(Hoeset al., 2024).

Journalism as the antidote to misinformation

Journalism is facing problems from multiple fronts. Today, the mainstream media has lost its readership due to audience moving to the internet and social media. They have also lost revenue as the circulation and readership/viewership went down. With low revenue, many of them are forced to let go human resources and compete with quickness of the internet-based information ecosystem which has often led to the decrease in the time a journalist spends on a story. Investigating, getting details and verifying as well as copy-editing in today's media ecosystem has to be quicker.

Despite all this, a fundamental reality remains: the established media system is the best information ecosystem that exists in today's world. The mainstream journalism remains mostly accurate, responsible and accountable. While it's easy to accuse media and journalists from spreading sporadic misinformation, it's also the truth that misinformation in media only constitutes a tiny portion of false or misleading information in the public. Similarly true is that misinformation in media also only constitutes a tiny proportion

when compared with correct information that those media produce. A vast majority of contents in mainstream media meets standards of journalistic principles and ethics. While misinformation may command attention on social media, it constitutes only a tiny fraction of the content produced and disseminated by established news organizations(Hoeset al., 2024).

The interventions to combat misinformation are broadly divided into two types. Proactive interventions focus on building citizen resilience against misinformation through media and information literacy, strengthening local information ecosystem through media development and journalists' skill development, pre-bunking, increased social media platforms accountability and regulatory measures by the state. Reactive interventions include fact-checking and correcting misinformation. Mainstream media has roles across many of these interventions and are in command of the already established information ecosystem which can be exploited for the flow of the correct information, either as pre-bunking or fact-checking, as well as the spread of knowledge and skills among public on media and information literacy. Mainstream media can also play a role in making social media platforms accountable by investigating their practices and researching their performance. Hoes et al. (2024) conclude that the presence of journalism as an organizing force for correct, contextualized information is vital for public resilience against misinformation...and the most effective antidote to the spread of misinformation is the proactive provision of accurate information, clarity, and transparency, core functions of journalism by design.

Efforts to debunk falsehoods, educate the public, and foster civic engagement all depend on a strong, trusted journalistic infrastructure (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). It is without a question that correct information is the best antidote to misinformation and this makes journalism the best available weapon to spread correct information, also the best antidote in the combat against

misinformation. Therefore, if the media's legitimacy is degraded through blanket use of the term 'fake news,' society's most effective defense against the negative effects of misinformation is weakened.

Rejection of "fake news"

The UK government in October 2018 banned the use of the term 'fake news' in official documents. The term is banned as it is a "poorly defined and misleading term that conflates a variety of false information, from genuine error through to foreign interference in democratic process" (The Quint, 2018). The ban on the phrase was prompted by an inquiry into "fake news" led by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee to address the potential for social media to be misused to sway elections which in its interim report stated, as reported by The Telegraph newspaper:

"We recommend that the Government rejects the term 'fake news' and instead puts forward an agreed definition of the words 'misinformation' and 'disinformation'. With such a shared definition, and clear guidelines for companies, organizations, and the Government to follow, there will be a shared consistency of meaning across the platforms, which can be used as the basis of regulation and enforcement." (Murphy, 2018)

The United Nations, particularly UNESCO, initially acknowledged the term 'fake news' but quickly moved away. By 2018, UNESCO began challenging the term 'fake news' for its potential for misuse. As UNESCO's Director for Freedom of Expression, Guy Berger, stated, "If it is news, then it isn't fake; and if it is false, then it can't be news" (UNESCO, 2018a). Julie Posetti, the co-author of the UNESCO report, states that the phrase had been weaponized to undermine legitimate journalism (UNESCO, 2018b). As a response, UN and UNESCO adopted misinformation, disinformation and malinformation to replace the ambiguous term.

By 2020 and into the pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres had largely abandoned the term, instead warning of a 'dangerous epidemic of misinformation'. In June 2024 Guterres launched the 'Global Principles for Information Integrity', calling for protecting human rights and democracies against 'false narratives, distortions and lies' (United Nations, 2024).

Recognizing the damage wrought by the indiscriminate use of 'fake news,' leading institutions and academic circles now advocate for abandoning the term in formal communication (Wang, 2020). Since then, governments, journalism schools, fact-checking networks, and information-literacy programs worldwide, recommend focusing instead on precise terminology. The Center for Media Research – Nepal, which has been researching misinformation in Nepal since 2017 and NepalFactCheck.org, the only International Fact-Checking Network certified initiative in Nepal, do not use the term fake news and instead promote use of precise terms such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, hate speech and propaganda. Leading experts and organizations recommend abandoning 'fake news' as a term, describing it as 'problematic, inadequate and misleading,' urging adoption of more nuanced alternatives such as misinformation and disinformation" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). These terms are not merely jargons but are essential distinctions that allow for diagnosis, research, and remedy of information disorder (Acharya, 2025; Kandel, 2020; Media Defence, 2024).

The European Union's High Level Expert Group recommended abandoning 'fake news' as a term, describing it as 'problematic, inadequate and misleading to explain the complexity of the situation,' and urging the adoption of more nuanced alternatives (Kandel, 2020).

This is because without clear distinctions, researchers and policymakers are left with poor tools to diagnose causes,

measure prevalence, and design effective interventions against misinformation; and weakened mainstream media system is a fertile ground for the spread and impact of misinformation.

Conclusion

The language shapes public perception and policy response. The term 'fake news' functions more as a political bludgeon than a conceptual tool (Broda & Stromback, 2024; Ognyanova et al., 2020). It has messed with research and policy, given politicians a weapon to dismiss critical media and eroded the public trust in the very institutions that are important and necessary for defending truth and combating misinformation. Despite its prevalence, the term 'fake news' doesn't represent the reality correctly because a vast majority of news is accurate, ethical and good for public.

The complexity of information disorder and platforms that spread misinformation make the combating against them a difficult battle and use of the term that humiliates the best weapon we have in the combat only weaken our fight. The society must use the language and terms that are clear and precise for effective action and policy interventions. Abandoning 'fake news' in favor of more precise terms is a vital corrective step that needs to be adapted urgently by those supporting maintaining information integrity. Strengthening journalism's reputation and restoring public trust in media should not only be media community's concerns, but they are also prerequisites for successfully minimizing the harms of misinformation. In a fragmented and confusing information ecosystem, undermining the media with vague or politicized labels leaves everyone more vulnerable to deception and confusion (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Hoeset al., 2024). Journalism remains society's best antidote to misinformation, and its role must be defended, not diminished, in the pursuit of truth.

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