

Social Media, Misinformation, Disinformation and Democracy

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Introduction

A democracy for its sustenance requires transparency, accountability and active citizen participation in the decision-making process. Thus, the foundation of a democratic society rests upon free speech, right to dissent, electoral integrity, and the right to accurate and reliable information. However, the rise of digital communication technologies in the 21st century has altered the information ecosystem. The dominance of social media platforms has changed the ways how individuals access news and information and the threat of misinformation and disinformation have intensified, especially due to political motives. And this has impacted the public discourse today, where people interact either on the basis of partial information, fake information or propaganda and manipulated narratives.

Scholars often regard misinformation and disinformation as 'information disorder' and though often used together, they differ in intent, that is misinformation refers to false information circulated without harmful intent, while disinformation is deliberately fabricated information with a predetermined intent to create conflict and threaten the peaceful coexistence of human beings. The combination of these two, aid in the propaganda, which is nothing but a systematic dissemination of information that are biased, manufactured and misleading and fabricated information aimed at promoting political agenda. The concepts of misinformation and disinformation are not modern developments, rather they have existed since ancient times, but the modern communication technology aids in rapid circulation of these in comparison to the olden times where such technologies did not exist.

Historical analysis reveals that deep rooted presence of misinformation, disinformation and

propaganda, for instance in 44 BC, Octavian's propaganda against Mark Antony presented him as immoral and controlled by Cleopatra, aiding Octavian consolidate power. Centuries later the invention of the Gutenberg Printing Press in the 15th C amplified the spread of fabricated narratives and one such example is the Great Moon Hoax of 1835, wherein The New York Sun published fictional articles with a claim of life existing on the moon. By 20th C, institutionalization of propaganda can be seen and during the World War I, disinformation was used to mobilize national sentiments, for instance, an article by the title 'German Corpse Factory' published by the British newspaper in 1917, claimed that Germans were processing corpses for industrial use, and this disinformation resulted in unintended consequences later, as early reports of Nazi atrocities during World War II were doubted for its credibility due to the fabricated claims made earlier.

It was under Nazi's that propaganda transformed into systematic state-controlled phenomena as the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, headed by Joseph Goebbels, weaponised media to incite hatred and justify violence and this was essential to secure public acquiescence to persecution and mass killings. Further, the Cold War demonstrated the global reach of disinformation through international broadcasting campaigns.

The coming of internet technology and social media intensified the scale and pace of misinformation and disinformation, posing challenges for the peaceful co-existence of human beings. Social media enables faster circulation of information, misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, while state-sponsored troll farms or in Indian context IT-Cells, profit driven fake news channels and sites, scandals like Cambridge

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Analytica aid in manipulation of elections, public opinion and creation of fabricated reality, where everything looks perfect, when it is actually not. Further, the term 'fake news' has been weaponized by political leaders with an intent to discredit journalism, thus, eroding public trust and press freedom.

The convergence of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda has fuelled violence, communal tensions, diplomatic crisis, etc, further internet shutdowns, hacking, fabricated narratives have destabilized societies endangering human lives. Though regulation of these are necessary, poorly designed and vague laws often risk suppressing legitimate journalism and dissent. These ultimately strains and disintegrate democracy and its institutions, weakens trust and challenges freedom of expression.

The paper examines the relationship between social media, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda on democracy and explores how digital platforms and AI technologies intensify existing challenges. It also analyses their implications on governance and social harmony and the necessity of balancing the protection of freedom of speech, at the same time the need to counter harmful contents.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in India (2024--2026): As per the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report

Misinformation and disinformation emerged a challenge to democratic stability, social cohesion and institutional trust between 2024 to 2026. As per The Global Risks Report of 2024, AI generated misinformation was the most sever short-term risks across the globe, while the report of 2025 ranked it to be top to medium term risk factor and the report of 2026 categorized it as the most destabilizing global risks, leading to turbulence and polarization. In India, these patterns converged with electoral processes, communal sensitivities, geopolitical tensions, making misinformation significantly consequential.

The risks of AI- generated narratives were acute during India's general elections in 2024, and the World Economic Forum had warned that

misinformation could potentially undermine electoral integrity, intensify polarization, and provoke censorship due to circulating fabricated narratives. And this was intensified due to the vast social media penetration, and further the linguistic diversity led to amplification of both accidental misinformation and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

By 2025, the focus in India shifted from electoral manipulation to delegitimizing governance decisions, amplifying communal narratives, as well as targeting legitimate journalists and activists. The ecosystem of online harassment began to flourish and polarization of society on the lines of religion, caste and region intensified.

As per the 2026, report, the AI technologies embedded intensification of misinformation whereas, disinformation resulted in multipolar geopolitical competition, geoeconomic confrontation leading to declining trust in governance. These, in Indian context translated into manipulated narrative around geographic borders, economic downturns, and national security debates. Further, AI- generated deepfakes, communal rumours, fake narratives on governance, justification of administrative failures through propaganda contributed to instability.

The technological development and their democratic implications are profound, for instance, electoral legitimacy is threatened as misinformation erodes trust in Election Commission, further confidence on the judiciary, media and law enforcement also weakens due to their selective and biased approach, ultimately resulting in fragmentation and polarization of society. These, further intensify due to selective curbing of free speech and selective sanctions against propaganda and hate.

Thus, due to high social media penetration, rapid AI adoption, linguistic diversity and digital political mobilization contribute to structural vulnerabilities, making India significantly vulnerable. The period between 2024 and 2026 resulted in misinformation, disinformation and propaganda shaping and reshaping governance, fracturing society and eroding democratic resilience.

Social Media, Misinformation, Disinformation, Propaganda and Democracy

The rise of social media has changed the way of production, circulation and consumption of information. Social media at its early stages were celebrated as a democratizing force, but today it has transformed itself into a space of selectively regulated and restricted content generation network, often contributing to thriving of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda. These social media platforms like 'X', Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc today operate as political instruments shaping and reshaping electoral outcomes, polarizing societies, weakening institutional credibility and independence. Thus, social media intensifies 'information disorder' by collapsing the distinctions between journalism, satire, fabricated narratives, propaganda, and dissent creating an environment of confusion and chaos eventually facilitating authoritarian structure.

The founding principle of social media is engagement over accuracy. The algorithms are structured to amplify sensational content, enabling faster diffusion of falsehoods, fake narratives than the truth, reality or authentic information. These are aided by bots, coordinated campaigns, deepfakes, and they create an illusion of consensus and thereby manipulating public opinion. This structural framework of operation on the basis of virality poses an extreme challenge for democracy.

The contents mobilization in social media directly influences voting behavior, as emotionally charged fabricated narratives spread through strong social ties, further shaping voter turnout and political self-expression, thus destabilizing elections through digital manipulation. These narratives weaken confidence of the masses on public institutions and erode vertical accountability, that is the ability of the citizens to hold their leaders responsible.

Social media also contributes to the formation of antagonistic narratives, like the pure vs. impure, corrupt vs. incorruptible, which are capitalized by populist actors, substituting rational debate with emotionally charged ones, resulting in a pathological form of democracy than participatory

democracy, in which fragmentation and radicalization replace pluralism and dialogue.

The social media generated misinformation, disinformation and propaganda undermines the fundamental rights, create communal tensions, communal narratives and at the same time, poorly designed counter-disinformation laws suppress legitimate dissent and journalism. Thus, they aid in strengthening autocracies and weaken democracies as social media amplifies fake narratives, disinformation intensifies polarization and polarization erodes institutional trust, and weakening trust undermines democratic legitimacy.

How Digital Platforms and AI Technologies Intensify the Challenges of Tackling Misinformation, Disinformation and Propaganda

The crisis of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda have been part and parcel of history, but in 21st century the rise of digital platforms and generative AI technologies have intensified their pace, scale and impact. The problem of false claims and narratives have evolved into a complex ecosystem of synthetic media, algorithmic amplification, automated bots and hyper-personalized propaganda.

Today, the circulation of misinformation, disinformation is not just restricted to state or organized campaigns, but it can be produced and circulated by any individual with access to AI technology. The generative AI tools such as image synthesizers, voice cloning etc allow creation of persuasive synthetic media with minimal expertise, and it can affect credible journalism, authentic political discourse, making deception easier and more accessible than ever. And these are amplified by algorithms driven engagements that prioritize virality and emotional driven content over accuracy, leading to creation of echo-chambers and filter bubbles. These can be further magnified by AI powered bots, and automation of amplification transforms misinformation from isolated incidents into systemic campaigns that override human moderation and fact checking systems.

Deepfakes and voice cloners often blur the line between authentic and fabricated content, and it becomes difficult or technically impossible for traditional fact-checking methods to detect and identify the authentic content against the fake content, which often results in dismissal of genuine evidence as fake, a phenomenon termed as the 'liar's dividend', thus, destabilizing the basic foundation of truth itself. Hence, it results in an environment where, both authentic and fabricated content are looked with suspicion, promoting public scepticism and weaponization of distrust.

The pace at which the contents diffuse poses an extreme challenge, as fake narratives, synthetic contents diffuse at a faster pace, and by the time it is checked and reported, it would have already been internalized by the public and any effort to correct is looked with suspicion and threat. Thus, the asymmetry between disinformation and verification ensures that misinformation and disinformation always outpace truth, and this is accelerated by AI with its real-time personalization and micro-targeting. Even though AI tools can aid in identifying synthetic content, malicious actors adapt quickly, generating more sophisticated fakes. With multi-lingual nature, a society like India, would find it difficult to productively use these technologies as the possibilities of the AI tools underperforming in non-English environments are high. Further, with wide gaps in digital literacy, the challenges are magnified and leave the population vulnerable to manipulation, for instance, AI enabled misinformation or disinformation can intersect with existing social realities and stigmas, thus intensifying religious, caste, and regional divisions and crisis.

Digital platforms and AI technologies democratize deception, automate amplification, enhance realism, erode trust and enable scalable propaganda. Hence, the fight against disinformation in the age of AI is not just about correcting fake narratives, but also about rebuilding trust, improving digital literacy and media literacy, and developing hybrid governance mechanism that combine human judgment with technology.

The Indian Scenario

India's digital ecosystem consists of over 950 million internet users, making India the largest online populations globally. Further if take platform specific statistics, India has around 448 million YouTube users, around 530 million WhatsApp users, 410 million Facebook users, 210 million Instagram users and 15 million X users. With this backdrop the analysis of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda has to be understood, as digital platforms have democratized communication, enabling active political participation and engagement, and such manipulated content can reach millions of users within minutes posing systemic risks for democracy and governance. And the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report suggests the same as it places India as one of the most vulnerable nations to misinformation and disinformation, presenting India's digital growth a state of fragile empowerment.

India witnessed a 214% rise in misinformation, accounting for one in six fake news articles globally especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included health related misinformation, like false and unscientific remedies, cure mechanisms. WhatsApp was the major platform for such circulations and this included contents in multiple formats, that is audio, video, text and image. Apart from that short period of COVID-19, the political misinformation and disinformation dominate the Indian socio-political atmosphere, and it raises a genuine concern about electoral manipulation, as alarmingly 38% of fake news originates from verified accounts and pages, and 70% spreads through at least one verified handle, and this is concerning as verification badges symbolize credibility and the same when misused hampers the trust in digital authentication mechanisms. Further, UNESCO- Ipsos survey highlights that 85% of urban Indians encounter online hate speech with 64% attributing its circulation to social media platforms, and this often-triggering real-world violence. These are amplified due to the psychological aspects, like, confirmation bias, echo chamber, and the illusory truth effect reinforcing falsehoods.

Today, Indian politics centre around social media, not just as a communication tool but as a political infrastructure. Social media platforms like,

Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram etc have become an integral part of governance, which has been extensively used for electoral mobilization and political discourse. They often bypass the traditional media gatekeepers, and amplify political discourse at a rapid pace, and most of the time they also facilitate the rapid diffusion of misinformation, disinformation, fake narratives and divisive contents. The social media groups of intimate and trusted circle are the hub where falsehoods acquire emotional credibility, making it harder to detect and correct. Thus, emotionally charged content diffuse at a faster pace than factual information, as the algorithmic amplification reward outrage and sensationalism leading to communal tensions and ideological divides.

The trend of influencer economy in India was valued at over 1,200 crores in 2023, which indicates that there are thousands of unregulated information ecosystem in place, where unverified advice on health, finance, unchecked and inaccurate information on political scenarios, historical aspects emerge with a self-tag of experts on subject by the influencers. Citizens often fall for it, as the explanations given are in simple language, or regional language, making it more understandable, and with lack of rationality, they buy in whatever is stated as they blindly trust the influencers. Recently influencers use of AI generated contents with deepfakes and synthetic videos blurs the line between authentic and manipulated information, and it has a significant impact on democracy and governance. For instance, election campaigns today make use of digital platforms, and misinformation often shapes voter perceptions, polarizes campaigns weakening public trust in election bodies. Further, it is not just about manipulating elections, but incidents like mob violence in states like Jharkhand and Maharashtra, triggered by WhatsApp rumours symbolizes how misinformation and disinformation interact with pre-existing social bias and perceptions, posing a serious threat to India's pluralistic structure leading to identity divisions or segregation and marginalization.

The challenge for India is not just about the spread of false information, but the weaponisation of disinformation as a political tool and the institutional responses that reinforce it as observed

in the pattern of coordinated harassment campaigns against genuine journalists, selective enforcement of misinformation laws, and the commodification of propaganda. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 2025, identified OpIndia as a central force in orchestrating attacks on journalists, and between October 2023, and September 2025, it published around 314 articles targeting genuine journalists, with 208 articles explicitly naming 134 individuals and dozens of articles attacking independent media outlets. As per RSF 32 of the 43 analysed cases found that these articles were followed by waves of cyber harassment, signifying a deliberate trigger mechanism through publication of disparaging content, amplification through social media, coordinated trolling followed with personal intimidation. And this pattern indicates a pattern of disinformation systematically deployed to silence dissent.

The pattern of disinformation functions as narrative warfare, for instance, OpIndia articles accusing of a fictitious network of journalists and NGOs of waging narrative warfare against the government by framing independent journalism as an external threat with the recurring themes of allegations of foreign funding, western agendas, aids reinforcement of majoritarian narratives and polarized identity politics. The Fact or Fiction report indicates a broader ideological project, with attempts to rewrite history and normalize majoritarian interpretations under the guise of combating fake news. And disinformation aids not just targeting individuals but reshaping ideological narratives as well.

These disinformation and engagement results in commodification of fake news as even when advertisers withdraw, the publication agencies still receive funding through Google AdSense as the influencer driven economy generates engagement, drives traffic, sustaining advertising and mobilising political support and this in turn sustains disinformation structurally making it politically useful and economically viable. Thus, the disinformation crisis in India is not just about correcting the narratives, but also safeguarding press freedom, institutional neutrality, rule of law, and democratic pluralism.

The major problem of tackling misinformation and disinformation in India is its lingual diversity and over sixty percent of misinformation circulates in regional languages, and further the media platforms that work on clickbait and engagement principles, give less importance to accuracy resulting in retention of the flagged contents in the portal. And it can be said that misinformation in India operates at three levels, that is individual cognition, community relations, and national security, and due to this, mob violence is triggered by rumours, and information warfare manipulate cognition and public opinion resulting in national crisis.

India is characterized by massive digital connectivity, rapid political digitization and structural digital literacy gaps, AI- driven amplification, platform-based virality. Hence, misinformation and disinformation in India is not just about fake news, but it is about power, perception, legitimacy and security. Further, selective enforcement of misinformation laws adds to the crisis, for instance Section 69A of the IT Act, the Telecommunications Act 2023, and IT Rules 2021, amended in 2023, are often applied asymmetrically. The Ministry of Electronics and IT tried to establish a government fact-checking unit, but it was declared unconstitutional by the judiciary. Thus, India, has the challenge to regulate misinformation while preserving democratic freedoms and strengthening institutional resilience, as the future if India's democracy depends not just on technological solutions but on informed citizens, accountable platforms, and governance.

Conclusion

The crisis of India's misinformation and disinformation is not just about falsehoods but is also about trust as it fragments epistemic authority, transforming reflective publics into reactive crowds, thereby corroding democratic institutions through emotional mobilization. While under regulation allows misinformation to intensify, over regulation risks censorship and authoritarian suppression. And a balanced framework is necessary to counter this challenge, and that means there is a need for governance that is narrow in scope and yet firm in accountability.

A harm-based regulatory framework should target incitement to violence, electoral manipulation, deepfake impersonation and coordinated foreign interference, at the same time platform responsibility must be strengthened through independent oversight, algorithmic transparency, appeals mechanisms, and regional language moderation. The priority should be on digital and media literacy through curriculum reforms, public awareness campaigns, and community level initiatives. Further, there is a need for AI moderation through human oversight and legal review, to ensure that technology serves democratic ends rather than undermining them.

The soul idea of democracy is the free formation of public opinion, and the crisis India is witnessing is the one of confidence, that is confidence in institution, journalism, expertise, and democratic dialogue. Thus, the task is not to eliminate disagreement but to preserve a public sphere grounded in shared facts, constitutional freedom, and mutual respect, within this, the need for countering misinformation, and protecting free speech becomes an absolute responsibility. And in the digital age, governance must evolve but at the same time democracy must endure and the way forward lies in building digital resilience by empowering citizens, strengthening civil society through transparency and accountability, and fostering a sense of ethical communication. Thus, the true test of India's democracy lies on how it resists both the corrosive spread of falsehood and the temptation of suppression, and rebuilding trust in institutions, media and the process of democracy itself.

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