Misinformation: Analysing the Role of Fact-Checking in Countering Communal and Political Narratives during the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in India

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Abstract

The surge of misinformation and disinformation during elections poses a significant risk to democratic processes globally, especially in India. This study analyses the efficacy of fact-checking programs and the public's opinion of these efforts within the framework of Indian elections. The study used a mixed-methods methodology to analyse data from notable fact-checking platform, like Alt newsconcentrating on the six months prior to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The study categorizes these events into communal and non-communal narratives, demonstrating how misinformation exacerbates societal divisions, shapes voter perceptions, and undermines political and economic stability. The paper advocates for cooperative efforts among governments, social media platforms, and the public to combat misinformation, improve media literacy, and protect democratic principles.

Keywords: Misinformation, Social Media, Fake News, Fact Checking, Fact-Checking Tools, User Behaviour, Awareness

Introduction

The proliferation of misinformation on social media has emerged as an escalating issue in recent years. Research indicates that misinformation frequently disseminates more rapidly and reaches a broader audience than information on digital platforms. Misinformation, or disinformation, encompasses inaccurate or deceptive content disseminated either deliberately or inadvertently via social media or other online platforms. Social media platforms exacerbate this issue as their algorithms prioritize content that garners significant engagement, irrespective of its veracity, hence facilitating the rapid dissemination of misinformation(Alohali, 2024). Moreover, the capacity to effortlessly generate and disseminate content on these platforms facilitates the widespread and rapid circulation of misinformation. Research indicates that almost two-thirds of persons utilizing social media depend on it for news to varying degrees.

Misinformation on social media is a rising problem that affects people and society in many ways. It increases anxiety, fatigue, panic, and sadness among users while eroding trust in news sources and making it harder for people to differentiate between truth and falsehood which in turn can result in bad decisions that impact health, money, and relationships. It can also be used to share false information or

sway elections. Fact-checking tools have been created to help fight against false information. Although there are many fact-checking tools and social media sites have added these features, not many people know about them or use them(Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016). It isalso, still unclear how well these tools can change how users behave or fix their misunderstandings. This study looks at the different kinds of Political Misinformation busted by Fact checking websites like Alt News.

Misinformation and disinformation have become widespread challenges to electoral integrity in democracies worldwide. In India, the extensive influence of social media platforms, along with the nation's sizable and varied population, has fostered an environment conducive to the dissemination of misinformation. The 2019 general elections, sometimes termed India's inaugural "social media elections," underscored the pivotal influence of digital platforms in constructing electoral narratives. This trend had escalated during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with platforms including as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube serving as crucial arenas for political discourse.

With the rapid increase in internet usage across India, supported by affordable data plans and the widespread availability of smartphones, social media has emerged as a crucial platform for political engagement. There were 911 million broadband connections in India as of January 2024, according to a report of the telecom regulator, the TRAI(Pandey, 2024). The 2019 general elections were the first in which a significant portion of the electorate, roughly one-third, had regular access to social media platforms. As India approached its 2024 general elections scheduled to take place between 18 April, 2024 to 2 June, 2024, the influence of social media was more pronounced than ever. This accessibility has transformed the landscape of political communication, enabling more people to participate in the discourse. However, it has also opened new avenues for the spread of misinformation. As the 2024 elections drew nearer, the role of social media in shaping voter opinions and potentially influencing electoral outcomes is expected to be even more significant.

During election periods, misinformation spreads widely and through various methods. A study on social media misinformation during the 2019 elections found that false information was frequently used by major political parties as a tactic against their opponents.The study highlighted that most of the misinformation came from accounts associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC)(Rao, 2019). The common themes of this misinformation included election campaigns, corruption, religion, celebrities, nationalism, and issues related to gender and development. In the 2024 elections, political parties reportedly circulated fake videos, known as deepfakes, on platforms like WhatsApp and social media. One example involved a video of a political leader in Telangana appearing to urge people to vote for a rival party, which was not true(Sharma, 2024).

In India, independent fact-checking platforms like AltNews and Boomwork to counter misinformation. The Indian government's Press Information Bureau (PIB) also runs a fact-checking service called PIB Fact Check. Recently, the Supreme Court halted the creation of a new Fact Check Unit under the PIB, which was intended to have the authority to label alleged misinformation related to the government and its agencies.Nonetheless, the efficacy of these activities and their capacity to shape public opinion remain insufficiently studied. Moreover, public opinion of fact-checking organizations is frequently influenced by political prejudices, with accusations of partiality commonly aimed at these entities.

Political misinformation is widely prevalent in India; however it is frequently eclipsed by health and religious misinformation, which can occasionally exacerbate the former. Political misinformation

typically escalates during major political events. The prevailing political environment in India facilitates the dissemination of misinformation across multiple categories. Two principal variables contributing to a conducive atmosphere for misinformation are societal polarization and populist rhetoric, both of which are prevalent in contemporary India. Furthermore, diminished trust in news media, inadequate public service media, a disjointed audience, and extensive social media usage also facilitate the proliferation of disinformation in the nation.

Rather than implementing extensive and innovative anti-disinformation initiatives, the Indian government often resorts to internet service shutdowns, occurring 95 times in 2019 and 30 significant instances in 2023, to curtail the dissemination of misinformation(Dasgupta, 2024). Furthermore, the nation's legislation complicates the identification of individuals disseminating rumours. Throughout the epidemic, many digital technologies, like as chatbots and the Aarogya Setu app, were implemented to combat misinformation; yet, they have engendered a crisis of trust among individuals in diverse manners. India, as a democracy, has exhibited a varied and tumultuous track record in combating misinformation. Despite the government's collaboration with prominent technology firms to curtail the dissemination of misinformation, certain politicians have persisted in subverting these initiatives.

The nation's legislation complicates the identification of individuals disseminating rumours. During the pandemic, several digital technologies, like as chatbots and the Aarogya Setu app, were implemented to combat the escalating issue of misinformation. Nevertheless, these initiatives have resulted in a diminished confidence among individuals in various manners. India, as a democracy, has encountered a varied and somewhat tumultuous experience in addressing misinformation. Despite the government's collaboration with major technology firms to curtail the dissemination of misinformation, certain politicians have persisted in subverting these initiatives. The Indian central and state governments have persistently restricted internet access in several regions of the country during COVID-19 to manage the dissemination of information. Some individuals contend that this primarily concerns the suppression of political dissent and civic demonstrations rather than merely addressing misinformation (Nazmi 2019).

As mobile phone usage and internet accessibility rise in India, social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp have emerged as crucial instruments for communication and political mobilization. Although these technologies have facilitated widespread information distribution, they have concurrently elicited apprehensions regarding their detrimental effects on mental health, attention spans, and the calibre of public discourse. The proliferation of misinformation on social media, propelled by advanced algorithms, presents significant threats to democratic principles and societal unity. Social media firms employ psychological strategies include variable ratio reinforcement, A/B testing, and push alerts to attract and retain user attention. These tactics, however excellent for engagement, also facilitate the swift dissemination of misinformation and false news, hindering initiatives to foster critical thinking and media literacy. Moreover, social media platforms have transformed into commercial arenas characterized by targeted advertising and corporate agendas, diverting attention from public conversation to profit maximization.

This evolution has converted social media into a platform for governmental monitoring, business data acquisition, and political manipulation. Initially representing a mechanism for democratic movements,

social media is now increasingly perceived as a medium that cultivates echo chambers, extremism, and societal division. The transition to personalized media consumption has resulted in fragmented experiences, alienation, and a decline in confidence towards institutions. Governments and social media corporations confront the difficulty of reconciling the safeguarding of free expression with the necessity to mitigate misinformation. The fragmentation of media consumption, coupled with excessive mobile device usage, fosters loneliness, alienation, and societal divisions. These factors hinder consensus-building in varied democracies and create apprehensions regarding the future of social cohesiveness and democratic integrity.

Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Google have implemented various strategies to tackle concerns around political material and misinformation. These measures encompass augmenting transparency in political advertisement expenditures, verifying the accuracy of political advertisers, overseeing content in partnership with entities such as the Election Commission of India, and initiating programs to inform users regarding the sources and characteristics of political content. Facebook has collaborated with independent fact-checking organizations to detect and refute fraudulent information in 11 Indian languages, enhancing its initiatives since the original launch in Karnataka in 2018. Likewise, WhatsApp has restricted mass messaging and established a fact-checking hotline to mitigate the dissemination of misinformation. Nonetheless, these methods have been criticized as ad hoc and unable to address the magnitude and intricacy of disinformation in India, where inexpensive tools such as "clone apps" and anonymous phone lines persist in facilitating the widespread distribution of incorrect information.

The phrase "misinformation" has acquired prevalence following the 2016 U.S. elections. This study used an expansive definition of misinformation to examine misleading content on Indian social media. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, there was a surge in misinformation, concentrating on both communal and non-communal themes. This study has analysed 81 cases of misinformation refuted by an Indian fact-checking platform, Alt news from January 1 to June 1, 2024, preceding the elections. These instances offer essential insights into misinformation trends and its influence on public discourse during this politically sensitive era.

81 examples of misinformation have been incorporated in this study, obtained from Alt News to establish an empirical basis for analysing the spread of fake news preceding the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India. These cases facilitate the identification of patterns and trends in misinformation, including differentiations between communal and non-communal content, while conforming to extensive study on the dissemination of incorrect information within the Indian setting. The study used a quantitative methodology to classify misinformation into themes, including communal, political, health-related, and additional categories, while determining their corresponding rates. The results indicate a notable frequency of communal misinformation, which has been presented in tabular form.

The results highlight the considerable influence of communal misinformation, frequently intended to intensify religious discord. These insights facilitated a discourse on the constraints of existing fact-checking projects and the pressing necessity for more efficacious tactics to counter disinformation. The

report offers legislative solutions to curtail the swift dissemination of misinformation, especially during pivotal events such as elections. The table below contains a comprehensive list of all 81 incidents, detailing names, platforms, dates, and succinct descriptions of each incidence to furnish readers with a thorough grasp of the examined data. The study highlights the critical need to tackle misinformation in India, particularly during elections. It underscores the practical ramifications of addressing misinformation, bolstered by scientific facts, to safeguard democratic processes and societal cohesion. A considerable amount of the misinformation detected prior to the 2024 General Elections exhibited communal undertones, underscoring the essential importance of fact-checking and media literacy in confronting these issues.

Literature Review

The proliferation of misinformation on social media has emerged as a significant concern as an increasing number of consumers rely on these platforms for news consumption.This growing reliance subjects users to disinformation, especially as many find it challenging to evaluate the credibility of the content they encounter.Adolescents are particularly prone to accepting misinformation, especially when it corresponds with their preexisting ideas or ideals(Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016). Peer influence and social media algorithms exacerbate the dissemination of misinformation, complicating users' ability to identify the truth. Confronting this dilemma necessitates imparting individuals with the competencies to critically assess the veracity and dependability of information on social media, hence enhancing media literacy to mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation.Social media platforms have started using fact-checking tools to help combat the spread of misinformation. These tools have features such as information labels, links to articles that debunk false claims, and ratings from third-party fact-checkers. These tools provide users with quick access to verified information, helping them spot and steer clear of misleading content. It is important for researchers to investigate how these tools affect user behaviour and how well they work in stopping the spread of misinformation. By analysing this, we can gain a clearer understanding of how technology helps fight misinformation. The goal of these efforts is to help users check the accuracy of news and information shared on social media, creating a more informed online space.

Studies have yielded mixed results on the effectiveness of fact-checking tools in reducing misinformation spread. This variability stems from differences in fact-checking strategies and tools used in various studies. Research has often focused on real-world fact-checking practices while excluding approaches like humorous videos or partisan cues. While some studies highlight that fact-checking tools help users identify and avoid misinformation (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2024), others suggest their limited effectiveness in curbing misinformation spread. Factors influencing effectiveness include the type of fact-checking, its presentation on social media platforms, limited user awareness, and challenges in seamlessly integrating fact-checking into user experiences. These findings underscore the need for improving fact-checking strategies and enhancing user engagement to address misinformation effectively.

Various fact-checking tools and methodologies have been created to aid consumers in discerning and assessing the reliability of internet news and information. These tools comprise browser extensions, external fact-checking groups, and integrated fact-checking functionalities within social media

platforms. Browser extensions are intended to identify possibly incorrect or misleading content when users navigate websites. Studies indicate that these additions can effectively notify consumers of dubious material and diminish the probability of disseminating misleading news. Independent third-party fact-checking groups examine news accuracy and offer users trustworthy evaluations. Their endeavours are crucial in dispelling disinformation and mitigating its dissemination on social media platforms(Giancurasuca, 2021). These organizations are essential in preserving information integrity by providing an impartial viewpoint.

Third-party fact-checking platforms offer an effective solution for addressing misinformation. These organizations provide users with timely access to additional information, including links to verified sources, and help identify potentially deceptive content. Research suggests that seamlessly integrating these tools into the user experience is essential for their adoption and effectiveness. Users are more likely to engage with fact-checking tools that do not disrupt their browsing experience. Social media platforms that embed fact-checking features directly into posts, such as warning labels or links to third-party verifications, often see improved user engagement(Porter & Wood, 2022).

Alt News is a notablethird-party fact-checking organization in India, committed to addressing misinformation and deception in the digital era. Established in 2017, it has become a credible resource for refuting misleading assertions disseminated on social media and other online venues. In the context of widespread misinformation, especially within a varied and politically volatile landscape such as India, Alt News is essential for maintaining information accuracy through meticulous investigation and verification of viral assertions. Its scope encompasses multiple realms, such as politics, religion, health, and entertainment, rendering it a vital instrument for enhancing media literacy and cultivating public confidence in accurate reporting. Through the utilization of technology and a rigorous research methodology, Alt News not only uncovers false narratives but also informs users about the perils of disinformation. This has rendered it an essential institution in safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes and fostering an informed citizenry in India (Valiyamattam, 2024).

This study looks at misinformation situations that occurred before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India, specifically by checking out cases that were debunked by the fact-checking platform Alt News. This research highlights the different kinds of misinformation that were spread during this politically sensitive time, classifying it into communal and non-communal narratives. It also looks at the trends and themes of fake news spreading to show how misinformation affects public opinion, increases societal tensions, and weakens democratic processes. The study highlights how important it is to stop the spread of fake news because it can influence how people vote, increase social divisions, and weaken trust in institutions. The findings are intended to help us better understand the patterns of misinformation in India. They highlight the need for strong fact-checking measures, increased media literacy, and greater accountability from social media platforms to protect electoral integrity and democratic values.

Research Methodology
The methodology employed in this research is a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative case study analysis, designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the types and patterns of misinformation disseminated prior to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India. The study

focuses on the dataset obtained from Alt News, a leading fact-checking platform, which includes 81 instances of fake news debunked between January 1, 2024, and June 1, 2024. This methodology was designed to identify the patterns and themes of misinformation during a politically sensitive period.

The data includes titles and descriptions of the debunked misinformation, dates of the incidents, thematic classification of the misinformation (e.g., communal, political, health-related) and such information whether the content involved altered images, videos, or text. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods ensures a holistic understanding of the issue and provides actionable insights for policymakers, fact-checking organizations, and social media platforms. By documenting the patterns and impacts of misinformation, this study highlights the urgency of developing stronger regulatory frameworks and fostering media literacy to mitigate the spread of fake news during crucial electoral periods.

Analysis of Communal and Non-Communal Events

To analyse the misinformation events(The detailed dataset of misinformation instances is provided in (Appendix A), they have been categorized into communal and non-communal type based on their content and intent. Communal events are intended to provoke religious tensions, misrepresent religious symbols, or contribute to occurrences of communal violence and persecution. Such occurrences are frequently deceptive or wholly fabricated, designed to incite fear, hatred, and discord among various religious groups. Misleading assertions on religious violence, inaccurate portrayals of harassment, or concocted narratives of coerced conversions are intended to manipulate sensitive matters and exacerbate societal divisions. The misrepresentation of religious symbols or persons is widespread, as misleading narratives about religious leaders or distorted imagery are employed to incite religious sentiments.

Non-communal events involve misinformation that, although erroneous or deceptive, does not explicitly aim to provoke or exacerbate religious conflicts. These occurrences entail political misrepresentation, administrative inaccuracies, or general misinformation not pertaining to religious or communal factors. Misleading political assertions or inaccurate representations of historical events constitute forms of non-communal disinformation. Although these events may lead to confusion or misunderstanding, they do not exert the same direct influence on religious concord that communal misinformation does.

In the dataset, 39.50% of the events were categorized as communal, reflecting a significant portion focused on issues that could exacerbate religious tensions. This indicates a troubling trend where misinformation is frequently used to target religious communities and stir conflict. In contrast, 60.49% of the events were classified as non-communal, highlighting that misinformation also proliferates in areas not directly related to religious issues but still affects public perception.

Below is a detailed breakdown of these events, categorized by their specific type and the percentage of the total communal events:

1. **Misrepresentation or exploitation of religion (43.75%)**: This category constitutes the predominant segment of communal events. These are deceptive or false assertions intended to incite religious discord or hostility. Instances encompass fabricated narratives regarding communal violence or persecution,

designed to provoke fear and animosity among various religious groups. The objective is to leverage sensitive religious matters to influence public opinion and exacerbate societal divisions. This style of misinformation is especially detrimental as it specifically targets the emotional and cultural attitudes of religious communities, potentially inciting real-world conflicts.

2. **Provocation of Communal Discord by Misrepresentations (31.25%):** This category encompasses instances in which religious symbols or figures are distorted to fabricate a misleading narrative. Instances may include deceptive imagery or assertions regarding religious leaders or symbols designed to misrepresent their significance and elicit responses. Such occurrences facilitate the dissemination of misinformation by distorting the perception of religious symbols or individuals, thereby exacerbating current tensions, or engendering new conflicts.

3**. Misrepresentation of Religious or Cultural Symbols (15.63%):** This group encompasses cases in which images or claims of violence or harassment are either falsified or misrepresented to imply a communal problem. For example, fabricated recordings or photographs may portray fictitious communal violence or harassment, thus deceiving viewers into believing there is active conflict. This style of misinformation can exacerbate tensions by offering a skewed perspective of reality and perpetuating unfavourable preconceptions of populations.

4**. Erroneous Accounts of Interfaith Conflict or Conversion (9.38%):** The least significant share of communal occurrences pertains to concocted narratives regarding coerced religious conversions or persecution. These occurrences inaccurately assert that individuals are being coerced into conversion or that a specific religious community is facing persecution. These fabrications aim to elicit pity or anger, frequently to legitimize or garner support for a specific cause or purpose. These erroneous narratives can sustain misconceptions and exacerbate inter-community tensions.

Type of Communal Events	Count	Percentage of Communal Events
Religious Misrepresentation or Exploitation	14	43.75%
Incitement of Communal Tensions through False Claims	10	31.25%
Misrepresentation of Religious or Cultural Symbols	5	15.63%
False Narratives of Inter-Religious Conflict or Conversion	3	9.38%
Total	32	100.00%

Table 1 Communal Events

Breakdown of Non-Communal Events

Non-communal occurrences constitute 60.49% of the overall misleading cases in the sample. These events are marked by misinformation that, although not explicitly aimed at inciting religious conflicts, nonetheless facilitate the dissemination of incorrect information. This is a comprehensive analysis of

non-communal occurrences, classified by category and their corresponding percentage of the total non-communal events.

1. **Administrative or Political Misrepresentation (32.65%)**: This group represents the predominant portion of non-communal events. It pertains to false information concerning political personalities or administrative actions that lacks a direct religious context. Examples encompass inaccurate assertions regarding politicians' remarks or behaviour, erroneous reporting of administrative judgments, or skewed representations of political events. These events may generate misunderstanding and mislead the public about political processes; but they do not explicitly seek to incite religious sentiments.

2**. Unfounded Assertions Unrelated to Religion (26.53%):** This category encompasses diverse forms of disinformation that are devoid of religious or community elements. Examples may encompass deceptive information regarding secular subjects such as occurrences, administrative matters, or general falsehoods. While these occurrences facilitate the dissemination of misinformation, they do not explicitly target religious communities or seek to incite religious conflict.

3. **Inaccurate Representations of Historical Events (20.41%):** This topic encompasses misinformation pertaining to the distortion of historical events or past happenings. Examples encompass the distortion of historical facts or deceptive representations of notable events that are devoid of religious undertones. These misconceptions can skew popular comprehension of history or events, yet do not explicitly target religious people or matters.

4**. Various Erroneous Assertions (20.41%):** The fourth category encompasses diverse forms of false assertions that do not conform to the other classifications. This may entail deceptive information regarding various subjects that are neither political nor religious, yet remain inaccurate. These diverse assertions contribute to the overarching problem of misinformation but lack a distinct communal or religious emphasis.

Type of Non-Communal Events	Count	Percentage of Non-Communal Events
Administrative or Political Misrepresentation	16	32.65%
False claims not related to religion	13	26.53%
Incorrect historical or event depiction	10	20.41%
Miscellaneous false claims	10	20.41%
Total	49	100.00%

Table 2 Non-Communal Events

Impacts of Misinformation

1. Social Impact - In the months running up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, communal propaganda has harmed social and religious harmony. The intentional distribution of misleading information targeting specific populations has exacerbated religious tensions and divided society. False statements about religious conversions or religious groupings have generated suspicion and

enmity within communities. Narratives often aggravate social divisions. Communal mis information erodes trust between religious and social groups. Misleading content portraying one group as unfriendly or combative reinforces preconceptions, impeding conversation and collaboration.Viral fake news, especially doctored videos or photographs, typically sparks rapid outrage, and leads to protests, riots, or bloodshed. Unrest in some localities has been caused by false allegations of community crimes or attacks on religious sites.Misinformation has affected personal and societal interactions at the grassroots level. More people are suspicious of persons from different communities, which hurts multicultural cultures.

2. Political Impact: - Non-communal misinformation has directly and significantly affected the political environment, which has shaped voter preferences, party perceptions, and electoral turnout. Misinformation regarding political leaders or parties has affected public opinion, altering voter choices. For example, altered recordings or false assertions on politicians' remarks or actions have been deliberately utilized to augment or reduce their attractiveness to voter demographics.

    Misinformation aimed at political parties has attempted to damage reputations and undermine credibility. For instance, misleading narratives regarding corruption scandalscan undermine confidence in a party's leadership and objectivesanddeter electoral participation. Misinformation regarding electoral procedures, such as erroneous assertions about voter identification mandates or polling place closures, can bewilder and dissuade voters, especially among vulnerable communities.Algorithms on social media sites can generate echo chambers, wherein individuals encounter content that corresponds with their established convictions(Dhulipala, 2023). This results in the entrenchment of political biases, hindering voters' ability to critically assess politicians or policies.Political parties and interest groups have progressively utilized misinformation to undermine opponents. Deepfake videos and manipulated visual content have been employed to adversely depict adversaries, which diverts attention from authentic policy discussions and matters of public interest.

3. Economic impacts: - Misinformation can significantly impact local economies by triggering negative consumer behaviour like boycotts, damaging business reputations through false rumours, and creating an atmosphere of regional instability, leading to decreased investment and tourism, ultimately hurting local businesses and employment opportunities. The dissemination of a false rumour regarding a local business's unethical activities might result in extensive boycotts, significantly diminishing its sale and revenue.If false claims are made about a product's safety, it can hurt sales and damage customer trust, even if those claims are proven wrong later. Rumours about bad employee behaviour can hurt a company's image and scare away potential customers. Incorrect information about crime or health risks in an area can put off tourists, which harms local businesses that depend on tourism money. Misinformation can lead to unrest, making investors hesitant to invest in the area. It also impacts local economy by causing confusion and discourages people from investing (Bairoliya & Mckiernan, 2024).

Strategies to combat Misinformation

1. **The Importance of Fact-Checking platforms**

Fact-checking websites like Alt News are important as they check false claims and help educate people. They are useful because they websiteswork hard to find inaccurate information, correct false claims, and give quick and accurate information. Before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, these platforms worked to combat divisive and highly charged messages, providing clear information in a time of widespread misinformation. Platforms like Alt News are now offering information in many Indian languages, allowing them to connect with different groups throughout India. They clarify false information in local languages to make sure that people have access to correct information. These fact – checking organizations collaborate with social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp to mark false information, make it less visible, and guide users to trustworthy sources. Working together can help slow down the spread of fake news during important political moments.These platforms help users learn how to identify fake news, as well as correcting false information. Alt News often shares guides on how to spot fake pictures, videos, and misleading stories, helping users think more critically about the information they see.

2. **Public Awareness Initiatives**
Enhancing public knowledge is an essential tactic to counter misinformation. Governments, NGOs, and educational institutions can implement digital literacy initiatives that instruct individuals on recognizing misinformation, validating sources, and critically assessing content. These programs should prioritize vulnerable demographics, including rural people and older adults, who are frequently more prone to misinformation.Social media platforms can conduct awareness campaigns to emphasize the perils of misinformation. Platforms such as Facebook and YouTube should display banners or films instructing users ways to identify and report misinformation to the relevant authorities.

Collaborating with educational institutions and community organizations to facilitate courses on media literacy to help cultivate critical thinking. These workshops can incorporate practical exercises, including reverse image searches and the ways to identify reputable sources.Journalists and mainstream media entities must report on the dangers of misinformation and advocate for fact-checking initiatives. There should bededicated portions on television or radio to highlight the techniques employed to refute viral misinformation and promoting public awareness.Social media platforms may issue notifications or pop-ups prompting users to verify material accuracy before sharing, especially during sensitive times like election periods.

3. **Rules and guidelines set by authorities**
There should be policies to make social media sites and content creators responsible for spreading false information. Social media platforms should be required by governments to keep an eye on and control the information shared on their sites. Policies might need tools to mark false information with notes or links to fact-checks.Use algorithms to reduce the spread of harmful or misleading material.Imposing tougher punishments on people or groups that intentionally make and share fake news can help prevent it.Money penalties or finescould be imposed for sharing misinformation on communal issues. There are criminal penalties for people who purposely cause trouble in public by spreading fake news.Governments should make rules

for better content moderation, asking platforms to hire more censors, especially for regional languages, to watch for and report misinformation.Update cyber laws to clearly deal with propaganda, including issues like deepfakes, false content made by AI, and organized efforts to spread lies.Governments might make it necessary for online platforms to work with independent fact-checkers so that flagged material is checked quickly. They could require that all political ads during election campaigns be checked for accuracy.

Challenges in Combating Misinformation

1. **Magnitude of the Issue**: - The magnitude of misinformation during pivotal events like elections is staggering. The overwhelming number of incorrect information disseminated on social media platforms significantly surpasses the ability of current fact-checking efforts to address them effectively. Platforms such as Alt News, BoomLive, and Factly frequently function with constrained resources, encompassing financial support, personnel, and technological assistance. In the months preceding the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, platforms refuted hundreds of false news narratives; nonetheless, numerous others remained unaddressed due to limitations in resources. Social media services such as WhatsApp and Twitter facilitate the exponential spread of disinformation via shares and forwards, complicating the efforts of fact-checkers to maintain synchronization. The multilingual nature of India complicates fact-checking efforts, as organizations must combat misinformation in various regional languages, necessitating enhanced knowledge and resources. The imbalance between the prevalence of misinformation and the capabilities of fact-checking platforms underscores the pressing necessity to expand operations, enhance funding, and utilize technology to automate aspects of the fact-checking process.

2. **Partisanship and bias**: - Fact-checking platforms can lose credibility and efficacy due to bias and partisanship. In a polarized political environment, party members may regard fact-checking as supporting opposing agendas.Critics say platforms focus too much on misinformation about certain political or ideological groups, creating the appearance of selective bias.Sceptics of mainstream media and fact-checking organizations view them as establishment extensions, further undermining trust.Such charges damage fact-checkers' credibility and undermine users' faith in rectified information. Fact-checking organizations must be honest, neutral, and actively address partisanship to combat this.

3. **Hostility towards fact checking actors:** -Fact-checkers often work in dangerous situations that put their life at risk. These risks include internet harassment, legal threats, and even life-threatening attacks. Fact-checkers face anger from different people, including government leaders, groups, and the public. Some groups have dealt with serious situations, like bomb threats, but they still work openly by sharing the names of the people involved and explaining how they handle things.Fact-checkers face risks like personal threats, receiving hateful messages in their personal emails and social media accounts. Sometimes, they face bullying from leaders or news outlets trying to undermine their work. These challenges have caused some fact-checkers to hold back from discussing certain topics. Organizations working in difficult areas struggle to protect their systems and employees, especially when they move into new places. To lessen these risks, some groups make their staff less visible online and take safety precautions. Concerns about safety and abuse lower workplace morale and make it tougher to hire skilled workers(Westlund, Gagnon, Graves, Larsen, & Steensen, 2024).To help fact-checkers, the

International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) started a Global Legal Support Fund in 2022. This fund aims to legally protect fact-checkers and provide them with needed resources. Even with these attempts, fact-checkers still have a hard and risky job.

4. New tools have made it harder to combat misinformation as they have made it easy to create and spread very believable fake content, making it harder for fact-checkers to do their job. AI-created videos and audio clips that look real are getting more common. This makes it harder for fact-checkers to tell what is real and what is fake. For example, fake videos of political leaders saying controversial things can spread quickly, swaying public opinion before they are proven to be false. AI tools like ChatGPT and other generative models can make realistic yet false narratives, making it easier for bad actors to spread misinformation at scale.Encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram use end-to-end encryption, which creates special hurdles. Misinformation can spread quickly in secret groups, making it hard for fact-checkers to see it or step in right away. Social media systems tend to boost exciting content that gets a lot of attention, which can unintentionally spread false information. This technological bias towards involvement over accuracy exacerbates the problem.

To tackle these issues, there should be Investment in AI and machine learning tools to find deepfakes and other types of fake information created by AI. Collaborate with tech companies to gain better access to protected ecosystems without compromising user privacy. Support clear rules from social media companies to lessen the spread of false information.

Future Research Directions

Subsequent study could investigate the following domains the function of Influencers in disseminating misinformation and their influence in moulding public opinion. Investigations may explore influencer networks andthe mechanisms via which influencers cooperate or inadvertently propagate misinformation.The extent to which influencers intentionally disseminate misinformation or remain oblivious to the reliability of their sources.The influence of content creators on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (X) in disseminating disinformation.

The immediate effects of misinformation during election campaigns are evident, although its long-term ramifications are insufficiently examined. Subsequent research may explore the impact of misinformation on voter confidence in political institutions and electoral processes over time.The influence of misinformation exposure on voter participation and political involvement in later elections.

Comparative Analyses of Misinformation Dynamics in Local and National Election and disparities in misinformation trends across different governance tiers may yield significant insights. Research may concentrate on the extent to which misinformation in local elections emphasizes community-specific issues versus broader national narratives.The influence of regional languages and specific social media networks in disseminating misinformation during local elections.Variations in voter vulnerability to misinformation in urban areas compared to rural environments.By focusing on these aspects, researchers can enhance comprehension of the complex nature of misinformation and provide specific methods to alleviate its effects on democratic processes.

Conclusion

This study underscores the widespread problem of misinformation in the lead-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with considerable societal and political ramifications. The results indicate that both communal and non-communal misinformation significantly influenced public perception, frequently intensifying societal tensions and affecting voter behaviour. The examination of 81 cases of disinformation refuted by Alt News highlights the essential requirement for effective fact-checking systems, improved media literacy, and increased accountability from social media platforms.

Combating misinformation is not merely a technical issue but a fundamental democratic necessity. The unrestrained proliferation of misinformation jeopardizes electoral integrity, disrupts social cohesion, and diminishes confidence in democratic institutions. As the digital world evolves, it is essential for politicians, technological platforms, and the public to collaborate in addressing the issue of misinformation.

Policymakers must implement more stringent rules to hold platforms and individuals accountable for disseminating misinformation, while ensuring that these measures do not inhibit free expression. Technology firms must allocate resources towards sophisticated detection technologies, enhance collaborations with fact-checking organizations, and emphasize transparency in their algorithms. Moreover, public awareness initiatives must to enable individuals to critically assess the material they encounter and report any misinformation they discover.The collaborative endeavours of all stakeholders are crucial for sustaining trust, facilitating informed decision-making, and upholding social cohesion in a digital environment.

S.No.	Date	Event Summary	Communal	Non-Communal	Remarks on Communal Nature
Appendix A: Data Table of Misinformation Instances					
1	4th Jan	Elderly Muslim man married to a child? No, viral photo shows teacher and student from Turkey KG school		Yes	
2	6th Jan	Jatayu in Ayodhya? Viral video of vultures at least 3 years old, not linked to Ram Mandir		Yes	
3		Viral video of student thrashed in Faridabad falsely shared as Dalit boy beaten at Ayodhya Ram Mandir festival	Yes		False narrative to create communal tension between Hindu and Dalit communities.
4		Old photos/videos shared alongside claim of Jaish		Yes	

		leader Masood Azhar's death			
5	10th Jan	Hindu girl raped in Pakistan in 2019 by Muslim men; video falsely viral as Hindus raped Dalit girl in Gujarat	Yes		False narrative created to inflame Hindu-Muslim tensions in India.
6	12th Jan	Old visuals of under-construction temporary lavatories in Varanasi falsely viral as open toilets in Ayodhya		Yes	
7		Tourist's body dumped on Maldives beach after gang rape & murder? No, it's a sex doll found in Thailand in 2022		Yes	
8	15th Jan	None of the 11 spots marked in aerial view shot of Golden Temple is a church		Yes	
9		Old video of procession by Dhirendra Shastri's followers falsely shared as Hindus from Nepal arriving at Ayodhya	Yes		Misrepresentation of Hindu community's activities to provoke communal sentiment.
10	20th Jan	Old video viral as Pakistan retaliating to missile-strikes by Iran		Yes	
11	21st Jan	Truck that caught fire in Unnao was not headed to Ayodhya Ram Mandir; misreport by Republic, NDTV, Mint et al		Yes	
12	22nd Jan	Congress-linked X handles share Puri Rath Yatra footage as crowd at Rahul Gandhi's march		Yes	
13	24th Jan	Did Italian PM congratulate Hindus on Ram Mandir? No, viral clip shows her thanking followers for birthday wishes	Yes		Misrepresentation of support for religious sentiment for political gains.

14		Scuba divers' underwater stunt with saffron flag falsely viral as Indian Navy celebrating Ram Mandir consecration	Yes		Exploitation of religious symbols to create a false narrative of communal pride.
15	31st Jan	Alwar family feud over property given communal spin on social media	Yes		A personal dispute misrepresented to create Hindu-Muslim tension.
16	1st Feb	Three of Bangladeshi Hindu family killed by relative: Crime falsely communalized by Indian X users	Yes		A domestic crime falsely attributed to religious conflict to provoke communal anger.
17	3rd Feb	Mira Road clashes: Police thrashing detainees to rail station on fire — Unrelated visuals falsely viral		Yes	
18		Kharge did not 'admit defeat' by acceding 400 seats to BJP; clipped video shared by Union ministers		Yes	
19	6th Feb	Karnataka SSLC exam: Paper scheduled in 2nd half on Friday to avoid clash with pre-uni test; BJP sees 'appeasement'	Yes		Misrepresentation of an administrative decision as religious appeasement.
20	9th Feb	Darbhanga land dispute falsely reported as case of forced religious conversion, viral with communal spin	Yes		False religious conversion narrative created to incite communal disharmony.
21	10th Feb	Flag row in Karnataka's Mandya: How ANI misled its audience by using state BJP chief's erroneous statement	Yes		Misleading narrative around national symbols to create religious tension.
22	13th Feb	Rahul Gandhi did not say 50+15=73, doctored video viral		Yes	
23	14th Feb	Haldwani violence: Video of scuffle in MP falsely shared with communal slurs	Yes		An unrelated video used to inflame communal tensions

					in a different region.
24		Old video from Haridwar viral as visuals of Haldwani violence and Muslims demonstrating against UCC	Yes		Misrepresentation of an event to provoke anti-Muslim sentiment.
25	15th Feb	Rahul Gandhi's body double? False claim by Himanta Biswa Sarma after India Today's misleading tweet		Yes	
26	17th Feb	Mayawati's outburst at former VP Hamid Ansari had nothing to do with 'offering namaz', viral claims are false	Yes		A political statement falsely given a communal angle.
27	19th Feb	Bangladeshi Hindu girls converted to Islam out of free will; video viral with false claims	Yes		Voluntary conversion misrepresented as coercion to create communal discord.
28	20th Feb	Haldwani violence: False claims about spike in Muslim population viral	Yes		Demographic changes falsely portrayed to create fear and division among communities.
29	23rd Feb	BAPS Mandir inaugurated by Modi is not the first Hindu temple in UAE; false claim by govt amplified by media	Yes		False claim used to inflate communal pride and division.
30		Bargain over tractor price: Video falsely shared to discredit protesting farmers		Yes	
31	28th Feb	Modi effigy tied to a tractor: Photo from Oregon, US; not related to farmers' protest		Yes	
32		AIMIM's Rizwana Khan targeted by Premium X handles with false claims & communal barbs; FIR filed	Yes		Targeted harassment based on communal identity.
33		Photo of man with pellet injuries is from Kashmir, 2016; not linked to farmers' stir		Yes	

34	1st March	Old photo of Mahendra Singh Dhoni's visit to London Gurdwara falsely viral amid farmers' protest		Yes	
35	5th March	Doctored image of crowd shared as turnout at RJD rally in Patna		Yes	
36		Muslim girls harassed by Hindutva activists in Karnataka: 2021 video viral with 'Love Jihad' spin	Yes		An incident of harassment falsely given a communal angle to promote 'Love Jihad' narrative.
37	7th March	Akhilesh, Dimple Yadav's 2022 photo at Mulayam's resting place falsely viral		Yes	
38		Congress shares clipped video of Nitin Gadkari's interview; minister's statement taken out of context		Yes	
39	11th March	No, Mallikarjun Kharge did not say Congress had divided India on caste		Yes	
40	12th March	Morphed image of Union minister Smriti Irani in belly-dance costume viral		Yes	
41	13th March	Media outlets retract Princess Catherine's photo with kids over 'manipulation'		Yes	
42		2023 Punjab incident falsely peddled as Hindus assaulting a Christian in UP	Yes		Religious assault narrative falsely created to incite communal violence.
43	18th March	Mamata Banerjee's injury: Old photo shared in a collage to mock Bengal CM		Yes	
44	21st March	Gayatri Mantra was not recited at the swearing-in of Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif	Yes		False religious symbolism used to provoke tensions between communities.

45	26th March	Viral Holi video inside Delhi metro is not a deep fake, DMRC's claim false		Yes	
46	27th March	Hindu woman asked to get off bus in Bangladesh for not wearing burqa? It's a scripted video	Yes		Fabricated narrative aimed at portraying persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh.
47	28th March	Kerala hill highway not funded by Union government; claim by Right Wing influencers false		Yes	
48	2nd April	Karnataka Congress leader D K Suresh warning cops: Old video viral again		Yes	
49		Kharge did clap when Narasimha Rao's son received the Bharat Ratna on his father's behalf; contrary claims baseless		Yes	
50		Photo from Ethiopia peddled as AAP supporters on Delhi Street protesting against Kejriwal's arrest		Yes	
51	3rd April	2022 notice by Bangladesh religious body morphed to show rates for converting Hindus	Yes		Fake narrative created to incite communal fear and hostility.
52	4th April	Rumour about Muslim men kidnapping girls from Kolkata's Quest Mall viral; no truth in it, say police	Yes		Fabricated communal scare about kidnapping for religious conversion.
53	5th April	Kangana Ranaut's claim that she got ticket because of Women's Reservation Bill is false		Yes	
54	6th April	"Mukhtar Ansari se mukti…" Amit Shah's 2019 remark falsely viral after Ansari's death		Yes	
55	8th April	Video of Mangaluru middle-of-the-street Iftar party	Yes		False representation of a communal

		peddled as Kolkata			gathering to stoke religious tensions.
56	15th April	Fake newspaper clip on Siddaramaiah's statement on Muslim votes viral	Yes		Misrepresentation of a political statement to create communal division.
57	16th April	Andhra Christian festival crowd footage peddled as turnout at Congress rally		Yes	
58		Old video of Chennai BJP leader thrashing BJP worker falsely viral		Yes	
59	17th April	Aamir Khan's TV programme clips doctored with voice cloning; the actor did not seek votes for Congress		Yes	
60	19th April	Ranveer Singh did not criticize Modi in ANI interview, actor's voice has been digitally altered		Yes	
61		Man riding bike with three women in burqa: Video from Bangladesh shared out of context	Yes		Misleading use of cultural attire to incite religious or cultural bias.
62	23rd April	Rahul Gandhi did not talk about rights of minorities exclusively; video of his speech shared by Right Wing is edited	Yes		The edited video falsely portrays Rahul Gandhi as focusing exclusively on minority rights, potentially inciting communal tensions.
63	25th April	Siddaramaiah's pledge of equitable distribution of wealth irrespective of caste and religion amplified falsely	Yes		Misrepresentation could exacerbate communal tensions by implying favouritism towards certain religious groups.
64	27th April	Amit Shah did not say BJP would end SC/ST/OBC reservation; viral video doctored	Yes		The false claim targets sensitive issues of caste-based reservations,

					which could provoke communal divisions.
65	30th April	No, New York Times front page did not carry cartoon mocking PM Modi; viral image is edited		Yes	
66	4th May	Kukke Subramanya Temple: Newly appointed official is a Hindu, shows school certificate, govt document		Yes	
67	4th May	PM Modi's photo removed from vaccine certificate as per model code; nothing to do with AstraZeneca side effects		Yes	
68	13th May	Letter promising financial aid to Muslims voting for Congress is not genuine	Yes		The false claim suggests communal favoritism by Congress towards Muslims, which could deepen communal divisions.
69	15th May	Attack on Bhupendra Jogi of Instagram meme fame falsely linked to Dhruv Rathee		Yes	
70	15th May	Chicken shop on temple premises: Video from Pakistan peddled as Wayanad; Rahul Gandhi falsely targeted	Yes		The false claim associates a religiously sensitive issue with Rahul Gandhi, potentially inciting communal tensions.
71	16th May	Did Rahul Gandhi promise Rs 1 Lakh to youth browsing through Facebook, Instagram? Clipped video viral		Yes	
72	17th May	'Assault' on Swati Maliawal in Kejriwal residence: Unrelated video viral		Yes	

73	17th May	Old video of man damaging voting machine shared with misleading claims		Yes	
74	17th May	Video showing VVPAT slips being taken out after counting falsely viral as BJP tampering with EVMs		Yes	
75	17th May	Army men stopped from voting in Jabalpur in 2019; video falsely viral		Yes	
76	18th May	Garlands thrown at Akhilesh Yadav in Kannauj rally, not shoes, as claimed on social media		Yes	
77	18th May	Fact check: Rahul Gandhi is holding the Indian Constitution in image shared by Himanta Biswa Sarma		Yes	
78	21st May	Andhra assembly elections: Edited version of 2019 'The News Minute' exit poll graphics falsely viral		Yes	
79	24th May	Pune crash: Rapper in viral video is not the minor accused		Yes	
80	28th May	Jesus Christ photo behind Rahul and Sonia Gandhi's inked selfie? No, false claim by Right Wing	Yes		The false claim associates Rahul and Sonia Gandhi with Christianity, potentially inflaming communal sentiments.
81	28th May	Atishi did not announce stopping of electricity subsidy in Delhi; edited video shared falsely		Yes	

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