



## Political Misinformation and Fact-Checking in India: How False Information Spreads During Elections and What Fact-Checkers Can Do About It

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### Abstract

Political misinformation has become a serious problem in India, especially during general elections. With hundreds of millions of people using social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, false information can travel very fast and reach a large number of voters. This paper looks at how political misinformation spreads in India during election time and what role fact-checking organizations play in trying to stop it. The study uses a mixed-methods approach. It combines content analysis of fact-checked articles from three major Indian fact-checking websites with interviews from journalists and media professionals who work in this field. The findings show that misinformation is most common in the weeks just before voting, that it mostly travels through WhatsApp, and that fact-checkers face many challenges such as lack of resources and language barriers. The paper argues that fact-checking alone is not enough and that media literacy, platform accountability, and policy support are also needed. The paper ends with suggestions for future research in this area.

**Keywords:** Political misinformation, Fact-checking, Indian elections, WhatsApp, Social media, Media literacy, Disinformation

### Introduction

India is the largest democracy in the world. Every time elections happen, hundreds of millions of people vote. In recent years, especially since the 2014 general elections, social media has become a very big part of how people get political news and information. But along with this, there has also been a sharp rise in false news and misinformation.

Misinformation means information that is wrong, whether or not someone meant to share it that way. Disinformation, on the other hand, is when someone deliberately spreads false information to confuse or mislead people (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In the Indian political



context, both types have been seen. Political parties, their supporters, and sometimes even news channels have been linked to the spread of misleading content.

WhatsApp is the most widely used messaging app in India, with over 500 million users (Statista, 2023). Because WhatsApp groups are private and messages are encrypted, it is very hard to track or stop false information once it starts spreading. This makes it a very dangerous space for political misinformation.

To fight this problem, several fact-checking organizations have come up in India in recent years. Some of the well-known ones are AltNews, Boom Live, and FactChecker.in. These organizations check claims made by politicians and public figures and try to tell people whether those claims are true or false. But the question is — are these efforts actually working? And what challenges do these fact-checkers face?

This paper tries to answer these questions. It studies how misinformation spreads during Indian elections, what platforms it uses, and how effective fact-checking is as a solution. The paper uses both content analysis and interviews to look at this problem from more than one angle.

## Literature Review

Researchers around the world have been studying political misinformation for many years now. Since the 2016 US presidential elections, there has been a huge increase in academic work in this area. Many studies have shown that false news travels faster and further than true news on social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This is a worrying finding.

In the Indian context, studies have shown that WhatsApp plays a central role in spreading political rumors and false content. Chauchard et al. (2022) found that exposure to misinformation on WhatsApp is very common among Indian voters and that even educated people are often unable to identify what is false. This is important because it tells us that the problem is not just about literacy — it is also about the design of platforms and the emotional nature of political content.

Tandoc et al. (2018) have pointed out that fake news is a broad term and researchers use it to mean different things. Some use it to mean satire, some use it to mean propaganda, and some use it to mean completely made-up stories. This lack of a clear definition makes research in this area difficult. This paper follows the definition given by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017),



which divides the problem into three categories — misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

Fact-checking as a practice has also been studied by researchers. Nieminen and Rapeli (2019) did a review of studies on fact-checking and found that while fact-checking can change beliefs, its effects are limited. People who already have strong political opinions are less likely to accept facts that go against what they believe. This is called the backfire effect, though more recent research has questioned how common this effect really is (Wood & Porter, 2019).

In India specifically, there is still not enough academic research on fact-checking organizations and how effective they are. Most existing work is either journalistic in nature or limited to single case studies. This paper tries to fill that gap by taking a broader look at the issue using mixed methods.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper uses two main theoretical ideas to understand the problem. The first is the agenda-setting theory, which says that media does not tell people what to think, but it does tell people what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the age of social media, this idea has changed a little. Now, users themselves can set the agenda by sharing content. When a piece of misinformation gets shared millions of times, it becomes an issue that people talk about — even if it is false.

The second theoretical idea used here is the information disorder framework by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017). This framework is very helpful because it looks at not just the content but also the people who create and share it, and the context in which it is shared. It helps us see misinformation not as a simple problem with a simple solution, but as a complex social and political issue.

Together, these two frameworks help us understand how false information gets attention, how it spreads, and why it is so hard to correct once it has spread widely.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a mixed-methods design. This means it uses both numbers and stories to understand the problem. Mixed methods are useful when one method alone cannot give a complete picture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).



## Content Analysis

For the quantitative part, the researcher did a content analysis of 300 fact-checked articles published by three major Indian fact-checking organizations — AltNews, Boom Live, and FactChecker.in — during the six months around the 2024 Indian general elections (January 2024 to June 2024). These articles were selected through purposive sampling. The analysis looked at the following things: the type of misinformation (image, video, text, or audio), the platform where it first spread (WhatsApp, Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube, or others), the political party or group being targeted or benefiting, and the verdict given by the fact-checker (true, false, misleading, or partly true).

Coding was done by the primary researcher and one research assistant. To check for consistency, 30 articles (10%) were coded by both coders independently. The inter-coder reliability score was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, and the result was 0.84, which is considered strong.

## Qualitative Interviews

For the qualitative part, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 participants. These included journalists and editors working at fact-checking organizations, digital media professionals, and one academic researcher who studies misinformation in India. The interviews were semi-structured, which means there was a guide of questions, but participants were also free to talk about things they thought were important.

The interviews were done online using video calls and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. With permission, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to find common ideas and patterns in what people said (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Findings

### Patterns of Misinformation Spread

The content analysis showed that out of the 300 fact-checked articles, nearly 68% were about content that was completely false, while 22% were about content that was misleading or only partly true. Only 10% of claims turned out to be fully accurate. This tells us that fact-checkers are mostly dealing with outright false content.

In terms of format, image-based misinformation was the most common, making up 42% of all cases. Videos came second at 31%, followed by text-based posts at 19%, and audio clips at



8%. WhatsApp was identified as the primary platform of spread in 61% of cases. This is consistent with what previous research has found.

The timing of misinformation also showed a clear pattern. There was a sharp increase in false content in the four weeks just before voting dates. This suggests that misinformation is being used in a deliberate way to influence voter behavior just before they go to cast their votes.

### **Challenges Faced by Fact-Checkers**

The qualitative interviews revealed several important challenges that fact-checkers face in India. The most common theme that came up was the issue of scale. As one journalist from AltNews said, "There is just too much false content out there. We can fact-check maybe 10 to 15 stories a day. But hundreds of pieces of misinformation are spreading at the same time. We cannot keep up."

Another major challenge was language. India has many regional languages, and most misinformation spreads in local languages like Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and others. Most fact-checking organizations are stronger in English and Hindi but are not able to effectively cover other languages. This means that a large section of the population is not reached by fact-checking efforts.

Participants also talked about the problem of reach. Even when a fact-check is published, it does not always reach the same people who saw the original false content. WhatsApp's closed nature makes it especially hard to spread corrections. One participant put it simply: "People who see the lie are not the same people who go and read the fact-check."

A third challenge mentioned was political pressure. Some fact-checkers said they sometimes face online harassment and legal threats when they check claims made by powerful political groups. This creates a chilling effect on the kind of fact-checking that gets done.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study confirm what many researchers have argued — that political misinformation is a serious and growing problem in India, and that it is closely connected to elections. The fact that misinformation spikes just before voting dates shows that it is being used as a political tool, not just as accidental sharing of wrong information.

The challenges faced by fact-checkers also tell us something important: fact-checking, on its own, is not enough. The scale of the problem is too large for any number of fact-checkers to



fully manage. This does not mean fact-checking is useless — it plays a very important role in creating a public record of what is true and what is not, and in educating journalists and civic society. But it cannot be the only response.

What is also needed is greater accountability from social media platforms. WhatsApp in particular needs to do more to limit the spread of viral false content. Some steps, like restricting message forwarding, have been taken, but they are not enough. More transparent policies and better cooperation with fact-checkers and researchers are needed.

Media literacy education is another important piece of the answer. If people can learn to question what they see online — to ask where a piece of content comes from, who made it, and why — they will be harder to fool. Schools, community organizations, and the government all have a role to play here.

Finally, the language gap in fact-checking needs to be addressed urgently. A democracy like India cannot function well if large groups of voters are exposed to misinformation in their own languages but cannot access fact-checks in those same languages.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to show how political misinformation spreads in India during elections and what fact-checking organizations are doing to fight it. The findings show that image and video misinformation on WhatsApp is the biggest challenge, and that fact-checkers are doing important work but face serious limitations.

The paper argues that a broader approach is needed — one that involves platform accountability, media literacy programs, government policy support for fact-checking, and stronger regional language coverage. Fact-checking is a vital democratic service, but it needs more support to be truly effective.

Future research should look more closely at how ordinary voters respond to fact-checks, whether corrections actually change behavior, and how regional media and vernacular social media spaces contribute to the spread of misinformation. Longitudinal studies comparing misinformation trends across multiple election cycles would also be very useful.

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