INTEGRITY INITIATIVE

Understanding mis- and disinformation in Nepal



BBC MEDIA ACTION

Research summary

Why this research matters

The spread of mis- and disinformation is becoming one of the most pressing challenges to Nepal's media ecosystem, driven by increased internet and social media use. False and misleading information often spikes during elections, with unverified or misleading content created and disseminated for the purposes of political gain. Disinformation campaigns, and the online violence, abuse and harassment that accompany them, are often gendered in nature, with women more frequently targeted. Yet, robust, publicly available research remains limited, focusing on geopolitics, the information environment, and risks rather than audience experiences with information disorder.[1] The dearth of research highlights the urgency for evidence ahead of the 2027 elections.

What this research did

In response to these challenges, BBC Media Action, in collaboration with BBC Monitoring, carried out a comprehensive study to better understand Nepal's information ecosystem with funding from FCDO. The project included analysis of identified key mis- and disinformation narratives (i.e. false claims circulating widely online), who is spreading them, and how people engage with and respond to them.

This research provides recommendations on how to support people to be more resilient to the false and misleading content that they come into contact with in their everyday lives.



Methodology

Consultation workshop with government, media, CSOs, and academic partners to understand key stakeholders' perceptions of information disorder in Nepal

Key informant interviews (n=28) with political actors, CSOs, and journalists to identify examples of mis- and disinformation and associated risks

Social listening of Facebook, X and YouTube to understand what mis- and disinformation is discussed online, how, and by whom

BBC Monitoring analysed broadcast content of seven TV channels across main news and talk shows to understand where mis- and disinformation appears in broadcast

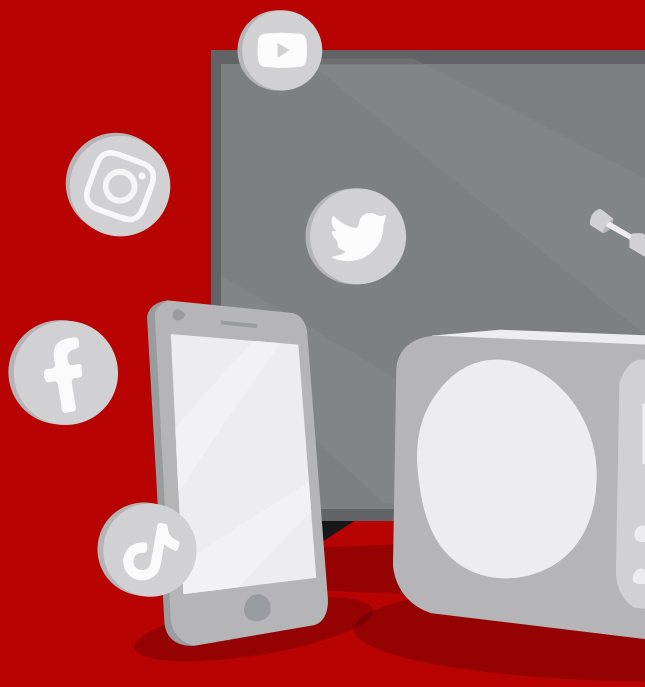
Quantitative survey (n=1,974) conducted in October-November 2024, representative of internet users across Nepal to explore how people interact with information in their environment

In-depth interviews (n=32) with a varied cross-section of Nepali internet users based on key demographic criteria (e.g., gender, age, education, socioeconomic status) to better understand specific audience segments and identify vulnerabilities to mis- and disinformation

What we found

Social media dominates daily internet use, while use of traditional media is declining

- Overall, 7 in 10 Nepalis use the internet daily,[2] with Facebook and YouTube being the most used platforms (63% daily usage for both).
- Among those with internet access, 80% are heavy users of social media, i.e., they go on social media platforms at least once a day. Only 40% use the internet for purposes beyond social media, such as online search and emails.
- Internet users are using TV and radio less. Only 24% watch TV daily and 19% listen to the radio daily.



[2]Based on a separate, nationally representative survey of 2,856 people conducted in December 2024 by BBC Media Action.

Sharing information is an emotionally driven and socially performative behaviour

Content is often shared not for its accuracy, but for its emotional impact, shock value, or social appeal. People are motivated by a desire to entertain, impress, provoke, or find hope, making them less likely to question the credibility of what they share.

Drawing on qualitative data, we identified segments of the Nepali population who differ by how they share information



Exaggeration Sharers

This group will often amplify exaggerated claims in order to gain visibility. They will often share contents that may elicit emotional responses, such as crime and violence. When sharing it, they may add their own take on the issue to exaggerate it further.



Show-off Enthusiasts

Similar to Exaggeration Sharers, they choose to share content that makes them look important, 'wanting to impress others' and 'seek praise'. This is particularly true when sharing may reach people they respect.



Controversy Seekers

This group seeks out explicit content such as the commonly highlighted Bhojpuri songs (typically mentioned in Madhesh), as well as celebrity scandals. Contents often shared by this group tend to have a negative tonality, including topics like ethnic and religious scuffles.



Bystanders

This group tends to use social media by watching and listening without interacting or sharing. However, they enjoy novel content (particularly religious and political content) that may become a topic of discussion within their social network.



Naïve Consumers

This group focuses their attention on content that seeks to give hope in the face of challenges such as unemployment and economic difficulties. However, they tend to be less aware of, or concerned with, implications of online sharing and privacy issues, indicating lower digital and media literacy.

Awareness of the rise of mis- and disinformation among stakeholders is high, but is less top-of-mind among Nepalis overall

All stakeholders interviewed are concerned about the rise of mis- and disinformation in the country in every domain, ranging from politics to health and business. There was a feeling among interviewees that the flood of information online shapes people's perceptions and opinions so much that they find it difficult to trust experts. Fear of backlash from spreading false and misleading information was also mentioned, as it limits open conversation, leading to self-censorship and ultimately an environment where only certain views are heard, while others are silenced. Among survey respondents, 86% express concern about false information when asked directly, but only 5% mention it as a top concern without prompting. Economic and livelihood issues dominate their immediate worries.

Demographics and media exposure influence how people perceive (mis-and dis-) information

Most people (72%) report encountering mis- and disinformation regularly ('often or sometimes'). Men, educated individuals, and heavy social media users are more likely to report encountering false and misleading information.

Across all age groups, social media was cited as the primary source for false information (80% of respondents), with 88% of respondents aged between 18-24 mentioning social media. Traditional media was cited as a source of false information by only a small proportion (5%).

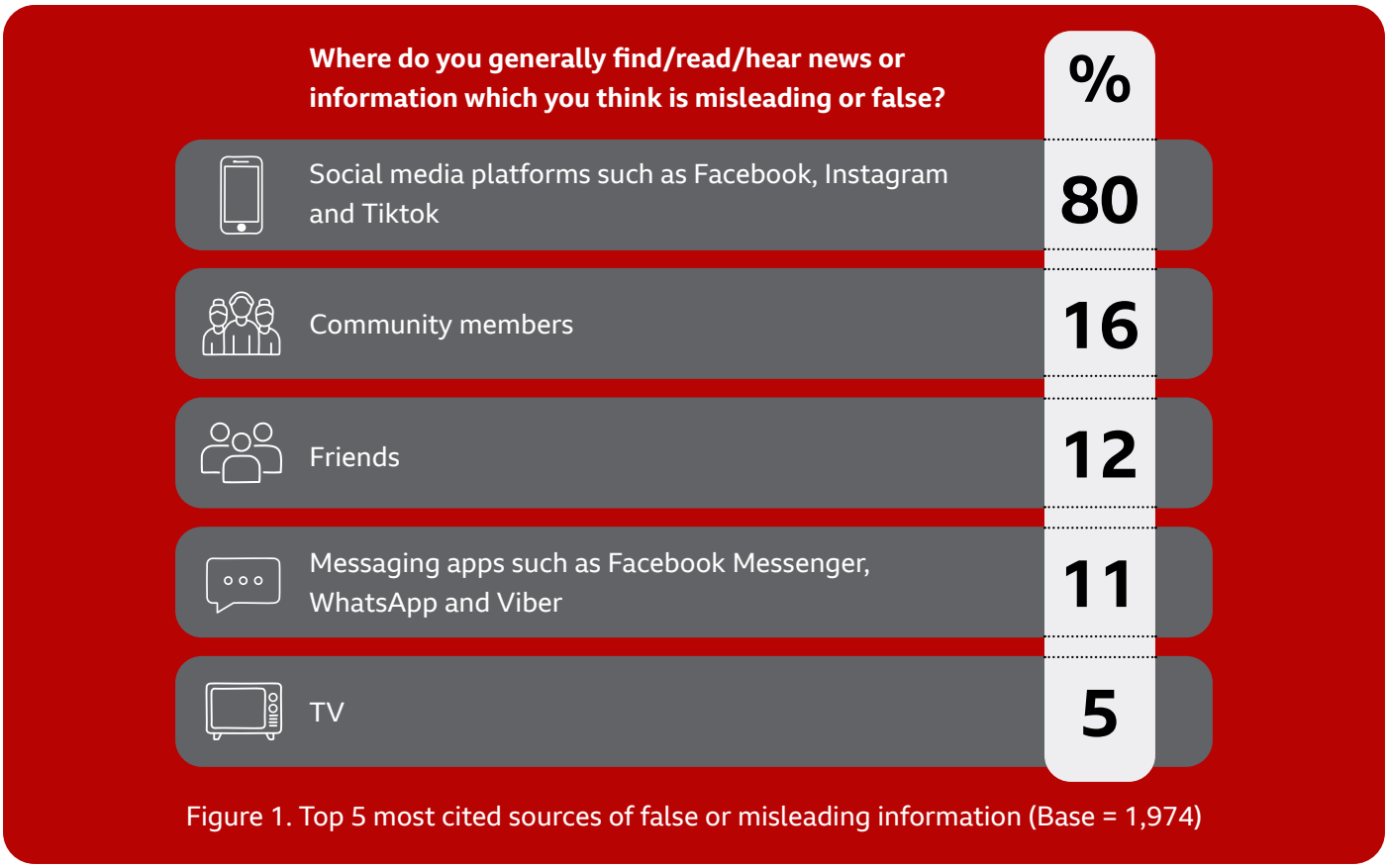


Figure 1. Top 5 most cited sources of false or misleading information (Base = 1,974)

Confidence in identifying false information is mixed and shaped by factors such as age, gender, education, and digital exposure

Many (85%) Nepalis express confidence in their own ability to spot false information: (25% said they are ‘very confident’, 24% ‘confident’, and 38% ‘somewhat confident’).

Confidence is higher among those who are younger, educated, male or frequent social media users, while those with lower education or limited media literacy tend to feel less certain. Some also acknowledge their limitations, showing caution in estimating their ability to assess credibility.

> “I’m 50% confident. Because I haven’t studied much. I can check a little, but people who are well-educated can search and verify on their own. I’m not that educated.”
>
> Male, 35-45, Madhesh



Knowledge of fact-checking mechanisms is lacking: popularity, urgency, and relevance drive belief in information (or not!)

Popularity is conflated with credibility: A substantial minority (33%) agree that “if something is widely shared on social media, it is probably true”, showing that they trust virality to be an indicator for veracity. This group are more likely to be less educated, and report being confident in their ability to spot false information, indicating a gap between perceived and actual ability to detect misinformation.

Social signals are credibility markers. Social media users look at likes, comments, and other reactions on social media. If they see social validation, they are more likely to assume this content is true.

“On pages with many subscribers, I think that is right. I think they are real because they are trustworthy. Many people follow them. I don’t think anybody with a large following would lie. Because they have many subscribers and followers, I don’t think they can lie. I trust them.”

Male, 25-34, Karnali



Speed outweighs accuracy in information sharing, with 92% agreeing it is more important to share quickly than to verify. This view is especially common during crises, where urgency is high. However, for non-emergency situations, people report more caution and value accuracy more.

Verifying information is selective and interest-driven. Qualitative respondents interviewed remained disengaged from verifying information, expressing indifference or citing lack of time. They only verify content when it interests or affects them personally. However, some noted the potential downside of not checking for accuracy is the risk that it affects their own perceived credibility in the eyes of others.

“If we share something without verifying it, and later find out it’s false, people will not trust us and consider us unreliable.”

Male, 35-44, Madhesh



Testing narratives

The research tested participants' knowledge of two claims, which were identified through social listening as trending topics in Nepal at the time this research was being conducted.

Claim 1: Nepal's transition from a Hindu state to a secular state was influenced by foreign actors.

Claim 2: Chinese companies are putting larger amounts of money into Nepalese businesses, infrastructure, and other projects compared to their Indian counterparts.

Insights illustrate how information is shared in Nepal, patterns which can facilitate the spread of mis- and disinformation

1. High belief and sharing despite lack of verification

A large proportion of people said they either believe or are unsure about the veracity of each claim, with only a minority clearly rejecting the false claims. Around a third (33% and 29%, respectively) reported sharing the narratives with others, mainly friends and family.

2. Confirmation bias drives acceptance of misinformation

People tend to accept information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, values, or experiences rather than critically evaluating the facts. Around half of people believed each narrative (56% and 49%, respectively) because it provided information they agreed with.

3. This explains low and selective fact-checking

Only around a fifth of people (22% and 21%, respectively) said they had taken steps to check the claims, mirroring the earlier finding about limited verification behaviour. This ties into the findings that verifying information is selective and often interest-driven, and that people accepting information they agree with are less motivated to assess it critically.

4. Verification barriers: Not caring, lack of time and know-how

The narratives show key barriers to verifying: not caring about verifying (44% and 46%, respectively), not knowing where to check (16% and 17%, respectively), and

time constraints (12% and 14%, respectively) which confirms the broader insight that verifying is selective and interest-driven, and many remain disengaged.

5. Social factors surpass accuracy when sharing

Whether people would share the tested narratives was determined not by whether it was accurate but by social desirability. For example, some men said they would share the first claim with their friends because it was something interesting to discuss, regardless of whether they knew it to be true or not. For them, the risk of spreading inaccurate information was not top-of-mind.

Media monitoring

To better understand the broadcast media landscape in Nepal relating to mis- and disinformation, and with support from BBC Monitoring, the research analysed content from a range of prominent Nepali TV channels, including the state broadcaster Nepal TV. The focus of analysis was content from the main evening news bulletins of four prominent news programmes and four political talk shows. Content was tracked and analysed against seven themes and 20 sub-themes.

The monitoring of broadcast content showed that there were no systematic patterns of disinformation. While some instances of misinformation were identified, the inaccuracies stemmed from issues such as a lack of contextual information, insufficient sourcing, or imbalanced reporting rather than deliberate attempts to mislead.

Implications

Findings from this research suggest that ongoing monitoring of mis- and disinformation trends is critical, particularly in the lead-up to significant events like elections, with regular sharing of insights among stakeholders. It calls for the formation of a coalition to promote information integrity and coordinated responses.

Strengthening the media sector and civil society is essential, including enhancing editorial standards, strengthening fact-checking, increasing digital safety, and supporting digital and media literacy work to support the resilience of citizens to mis- and disinformation, especially among at-risk groups. Additionally, the development of accurate, engaging media content is encouraged to counter false narratives. Finally, support should be provided to the media and government actors to help them understand and respond to emerging technological impacts and opportunities on Nepal's information environment.

For audiences, digital and media literacy efforts should move beyond awareness to provide practical skills and tools such as cross-checking sources and using fact-checking platforms. Fact-checking support must be simple, quick, and accessible, for example through short explainers and local-language tools. Tailored interventions are needed for groups more vulnerable to disinformation, including less educated people, older citizens, and women, combining literacy training with digital safety measures to protect against online harassment. During elections, when information spreads rapidly and risks of manipulation are greatest, targeted outreach is especially important to help people make informed choices.

Registered charity number (England & Wales): 1076235
Company number: 3521587
Registered office: Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7481 9797
Email: media.action@bbc.co.uk
Web: bbcmediaaction.org

©BBC Media Action 2025

BBC MEDIA ACTION

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office