

# Political Communication and Fake News: Challenges to Electoral Integrity in the Digital Era

Rahul Tiwari

MA, Department of Political Science, Kirori Mal College

## Abstract

This study explores the connection between political communication, fake news and electoral integrity in the digital world. Electoral communication has been revolutionized by digital platforms, whose use has allowed for the mobilization of voters in an agile way, direct political involvement and greater dissemination of campaign information. In the same way, the very same platforms have also facilitated the spread of misinformation, disinformation, edited images, deepfakes and partisan propaganda. The study is based on secondary data from scholarly literature, election reports, institutional documents and fact-checking sources which are analysed through a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach. The results indicate that fake news poses a threat to electoral integrity in the following ways: it affects voters' perception of the election; it undermines trust in institutions; it tarnishes candidates' reputation; and it aggravates polarization in politics. This is especially important when considering the Indian context with its huge population, linguistic diversity, and the growing penetration of the internet in rural areas as well as the use of numerous platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and X. The study makes the case that a secure election process is not sufficient for free and fair elections; it must also be accompanied by a trustworthy digital information environment. It suggests more robust platform accountability, multilingual fact-checking, transparent political advertising and ethical digital campaigning and citizen media literacy.

**Keywords:** fake news, electoral integrity, misinformation, disinformation, digital democracy, social media, India are relevant to the Core Skills and Core Knowledge of the units.

## Introduction

Political communication has become structurally different; electorally persuading, public debating and mobilising voters is increasingly done via digital platforms. The old-fashioned paradigms of political communication were influenced mostly by party organization, mass rallies, newspapers, radio and television debates, and newspaper editorials. The modern digital public sphere is defined, on the contrary, by platform campaigns, algorithmic visibility, data-driven voter targeting, influencer politics, encrypted messaging groups, short video formats and the production of artificial intelligence. The changes have increased political participation, and allowed citizens, parties, candidates, journalists and civil society actors to engage more directly and quickly. Simultaneously they have undermined traditional gatekeeping and facilitated the spread of false, divisive and political information at speed. Disinformation can mislead citizens, divide opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions, which is essential for plural, reliable and transparent information ecosystems, according to the OECD (2024). The general context of the present study lies in this duality of digital political communication, which is at the same time participatory and manipulable.

Elections are held in highly networked information environments, creating a growing importance of fake news in electoral politics in the global arena. 2024 was a particularly impactful year due to the importance of several big elections in major democracies – the United States, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and the United Kingdom, among others – at a time where there was a significant amount of concern about the use of misinformation, deepfakes and synthetic political content. Recent research on elections indicates that false claims are spread via platforms in various forms – text, memes, audio, video, screenshots, edited news snippets and AI-generated images. In their analysis of the Brazilian election in 2022, Hale et al. (2024) report that misinformation claims vary in format, length and in detail, depending on the platform and are difficult to track false political narratives across platform ecosystems. Likewise, the research we conducted during the 2023 election cycle indicates that generative AI presents novel challenges for democratic trust, even in the absence of clear evidence of its persuasive impact that is context-dependent and hard to quantify (Łabuz & Nehring, 2024).

In India, the region and national environment plays a special role, as the electoral process is characterized by a high degree of mass democracy, linguistic diversity, party rivalry and high penetration of social media. The digital campaign space in India consists of open platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube, or semi-closed and closed networks like WhatsApp and Telegram. This results in a complex communication ecology where rumours, manipulated images, partisan narratives and misinformation can flow quickly amongst voters. Before the 2019 Indian general election, Garimella and Eckles (2020) analysed politically oriented WhatsApp groups and discovered that image-based misinformation had a significant component in the information landscape of Indian elections. In the 2024 general elections, the Election Commission of India had issued guidelines on responsible and ethical use of social media and had advised political parties against the misuse of AI powered tools like creating deepfakes and sharing misinformation, acknowledging the threat to electoral integrity.

There are some important points to be made about these concepts to be emphasized in this study. Political communication is the process of the creation, dissemination and reception of political messages by the political actors, media institutions and citizens. Fake news is a term typically applied to information or articles that are fabricated or misleading and promoted as news. Misinformation is defined as false or inaccurate information spread, but not necessarily with dishonest intent, whereas disinformation is defined as false or misleading information deliberately created or spread with the intent to deceive, manipulate, or cause harm to individuals, groups and institutions. However, malinformation can be accurate information used in a harmful or decontextualised manner. Electoral integrity is the fair, transparent, inclusive and credible nature of the electoral process, including the capacity of citizens to access information and make informed political decisions. A fake news problem is a democratic problem in this regard, because it can impact on voters' perceptions, delegitimise electoral institutions, deepen polarization, and undermine voters' trust in electoral results.

The issue of fake news has gone beyond the mere false articles or rumours as it has improved over time. Electoral lies are now multimodal, hyper-emotional and strategically promoted. Political players and their allies rely on pre-cut films, fabricated sound bites, artificial images,

fake opinion polls, edited screenshots and synchronized hashtag campaigns to influence public opinion. As per Ferrara (2024), Generative AI can be used and abused for online election manipulation via deepfakes, botnets, synthetic identities and targeted misinformation campaigns. But, the developing literature also cautions against technological determinism. Reports from the 2024 election cycle indicate though that while the technology for creating fake content was made easier due to generative AI, it was not always as significant as initially predicted, in part because many of the deepfakes were identified, debunked or used mainly within already polarised groups. This reflects the fact that the problem is not just technological, but also the one of the platform design and the relationship between platform design, partisan identity, institutional trust, media literacy and political incentives.

A number of studies have been carried out in the understanding of the relationship between political communication, fake news and democracy. Many have contributed to the understanding of the relationship between political communication, fake news and democracy. Systematic reviews reveal that fake news has affected political campaigns and electoral processes and voting intentions in various regions across the globe and has contributed to changing the discourse on freedom of expression, post-truth politics and democratic accountability (Castro et al., 2024). Miró-Llinares and Aguerri (2021) point out that the problem of fake news is too often discussed without conceptual precision or empirical distinction, as a generic threat to democracy. This is a critical warning as not all misinformation has the same impact on voters or on the actual political outcomes. Meanwhile, analyses of the platforms highlight the importance of understanding the social and technological flows through which misinformation circulates, pointing to the need for a more comprehensive platform-specific analysis. The question of the existence of fake news has thus been replaced by the question on how fake news is fabricated, promoted, believed, challenged and regulated in a specific political and media system.

### **Literature Review**

With the rise of digital media, social media and algorithm-driven electoral campaigns, quickly the literature on political communication and fake news has proliferated. The research on political communication has focused primarily on agenda setting, framing, propaganda, public opinion and mass media in elections as areas of concern until now. More recently, however, scholars contend that digital platforms have revolutionized the process of producing, disseminating and absorbing political information. As Broda and Strömbäck (2024) note, while misinformation, disinformation and fake news are hardly new phenomena, digital technologies have been able to heighten their speed, visibility and political ramifications. This shift is crucial as platforms are not just conduits for political messages, but they also influence public attention, enhance emotionality, and foster divided political communities.

Academically, it is still debatable what fake news actually means. Miró-Llinares and Aguerri (2021) have stated that the term is frequently employed in a generic way and is applied to misinformation, disinformation, satire, propaganda and rumours, as well as low quality journalism. This conceptual confusion generates methodological and regulatory issues, as not all false or misleading is of equal democratic impact. The OECD (2024) thus called out the

difference between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, and recommends dealing with information integrity in democratic action, not with the truth of the state. This is crucial in the study of elections and is significant since fake news emerges as a threat to electoral integrity when it is purposefully utilized to affect voter perceptions, undermine institutional confidence or to impair political competition.

Theories of fake news and the transformation of public sphere are a central theoretical discussion. Digital media has undermined conventional gate-keeping nature of journalists and editors, and left space to political actors to circulate political information directly to all users. This has increased democratic participation, but also led to the formation of echo chambers, affectual polarization, and coordinated manipulation. The research of Castro et al. (2024) showed that articles published in the field of fake news consistently correlate with electoral campaigns, voting intentions and post-truth politics. But most of the literature is focused on Western democracies, including the United States and Europe, and India, a large digital democracy, is relatively under-studied.

Methodologically, surveys, experiments, content analysis, network analysis, computational detection and platform data as well as systematic review have been applied in the studies. Experimental studies are valuable for studying belief changes and correction effects, but may not reflect actual election contests. Scale, virality and coordination can be computed and identified, but typically require data from open platforms like X, Facebook and YouTube. They tend to underrepresent closed and encrypted networks like WhatsApp and Telegram. This is important since political misinformation can often travel through private networks and social networks that are accepted as trusted, where it is hard to detect and correct.

There is also a discussion in the literature concerning strong effect and limited effect views. Rising to the challenge, scholars who are more vocal about the threat fake news poses to democracy claim it can manipulate voters, drive polarization, weaken institutions and undermine free and fair elections. This claim is backed up by research that indicates that emotionally charged misinformation is spread rapidly and accepted when it aligns with one's political convictions. Munusamy et al. (2024) highlight the importance of cognitive bias, motivated reasoning, emotional arousal and social identity in the dissemination of fake news. Other scholars, however, have found that exposure to misinformation does not necessarily result in an actual change of voting behavior and instead has effects on already partisan audiences. This indicates that the effects of fake news are context-dependent, shaped by political context, media literacy, platform architectures, institutional trust and voter identity.

The debate has gotten another layer of complexity thanks to new scholarship in the field of AI and deepfakes. Deepfakes can undermine democratic trust even when ultimately disproven due to the lack of citizens' trust in the authenticity of evidence, as argued by Ferrara (2024) in this work about the uses of generative AI for synthetic identities, automated propaganda, voice cloning, and deepfakes. But there is also growing evidence that the creation of AI-induced misinformation has not supplanted other types of fake news. The influence of misleading captions, edited videos, old images and fabricated screenshots have not gone away and continue to be very powerful, particularly in election campaigns.

Important context-specific insights can be gained from Indian studies. Linguistic diversity, widespread usage of smartphones, caste identity, religious identity, strong party competition, and the use of WhatsApp are all contributing factors to India's electoral communication. For the political context, during the 2019 Indian general election, Garimella and Eckles (2020) identified image based misinformation as one of the key factors in political WhatsApp groups. Subsequent research on rural WhatsApp networks revealed that misinformation is often disseminated via trusted community relationships, thus reducing the efficacy of fact checking. This means fake news is not just a technological issue; it's a social and cultural issue in India.

### **Research Methodology:**

The study is qualitative, descriptive and analytical research in examining the impact of fake news on political communication and electoral integrity in the digital era. It uses secondary data gathered from peer-reviewed journals, books, election reports, government documents, fact-checking websites and institutional reports. Thematic content analysis is used to explore misinformation and disinformation, digital campaigning, social media platforms, deepfakes, and voter behaviour and institutional response. A critical analytical approach is used to compare the global and Indian world view. No primary field surveys or interviews have been carried out and the study is based on secondary sources.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The data suggest that India's electoral process is now surrounded by a highly digitalised communication environment which is a structural challenge to electoral integrity by fake news. The 2024 Lok Sabha election was one of the world's biggest democratic processes with approximately 642 million voters casting their votes in seven phases. ECI's 2024 Election Atlas also revealed that 97.97 crore registered electors, of which 47.63 crore are women, was the scale at which political information needs to be communicated, verified and regulated. With so many people to reach, even a small amount of misinformation in the form of digital content can shape public opinion, particularly when amplified by social media, messaging apps, and local-language networks.

India is seeing an increasing influence of digital political communication, fake news and electoral integrity. The influence of digital political communication, fake news and electoral integrity are rising in India.

**Table-01: Digital Political Communication, Fake News and Electoral Integrity in India**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Analytical relevance</b>
Voters in 2024 Lok Sabha election	About 642 million	Election Commission of India / Reuters	Shows the massive scale of India's electoral communication environment.
Women electors in 2024	47.63 crore	ECI Election Atlas 2024	Indicates the need for inclusive and reliable voter information.

Active internet users in India, 2024	886 million	IAMAI–Kantar report via Business Standard	Shows the expansion of digital political communication.
Rural internet users, 2024	488 million, 55% of total users	IAMAI–Kantar report via Business Standard	Highlights the penetration of digital political messaging beyond urban voters.
BOOM election-related fact-checks, March–May 2024	258 fact-checks	BOOM	Indicates the scale of election-related misinformation.
Old/unrelated visuals among BOOM election fact-checks	43%, 111 fact-checks	BOOM	Shows that visual misinformation remained more common than sophisticated AI deepfakes.
AI-generated election-related claims	12 fact-checks in March–May 2024	BOOM	Shows emerging but still limited AI misinformation in election-specific content.
ECI fake-content removal direction	Within 3 hours of coming to notice	ECI / PIB	Shows institutional recognition of digital misinformation as an electoral risk.

**Source:** Compiled by the author from Election Commission of India data reported by Reuters, ECI Election Atlas 2024, IAMAI–Kantar Internet in India Report 2024, BOOM Election Misinformation Report 2024

Internet has reshaped political communication geography. As per the IAMAI–Kantar Internet in India Report 2024, as of 2024 there were 886 million internet users in the country, out of which 488 million were from rural India, which is 55% of the total internet users in India. This is important because electoral communication is no longer limited to an urban, literate and elite audience. The transmission of political messages is now quick via the rural and semi-urban networks, which are frequently in regional languages and using mobile first platforms. Democratic benefit: greater political participation; risk: false content or emotionally charged content may reach voters who may not have easy access to institutional fact-checking or source verification.

The analysis of misinformation content in 2024 elections by BOOM is crucial to the understanding of fake news during the Lok Sabha elections. Between March and May 2024, BOOM analysed 258 election-related fact-checks in English, Hindi and Bangla. Of the 43%, 32% were old or unrelated videos and images that were incorrectly attributed to recent election-related content. The discovery is significant because it contradicts the notion that misinformation spread via elections is primarily due to sophisticated technologies like

deepfakes. However, the “cheapfakes”, or the use of old images, deceptive captions, edited clips, and false context were more prevalent and politically beneficial in practice. In the analysis, 10 EVM-rigging related claims, 12 fabricated AI claims and 10 communal claims were identified, indicating fake news that made an attempt to target both institutional trust and social polarisation.

The evidence points to three important ways in which fake news impacts electoral integrity. The first is that it muddies the waters with regards to candidates, parties and campaign issues. Rahul Gandhi was the most targeted by election misinformation, with 18 fact-checks targeting him and 13 targeting Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi. The top target of election related misinformation in BOOM's sample for March-May 2024 was Rahul Gandhi, with 18 fact checks targeting him and 13 targeting Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi. Targeted misinformation can harm a candidate's credibility and influence voter decision making. Secondly, fake news undermines the confidence in election management. Even if there is a formal explanation of the election process, false claims regarding EVM rigging, fake voting, missing EVMs or electoral irregularities can generate suspicions of the electoral process. Third, communal or identity-based misinformation may exacerbate divisions in the society, and thus voting behaviour might be more driven by fear, resentment and identity mobilisation than by policy assessment. (BOOM)

In its response, the Election Commission of India (ECI) admitted that misinformation posed a direct threat to electoral integrity. In the framework of combating misinformation during the general election, ECI has introduced the “Myth vs Reality Register” on 2nd April 2024. The register was intended as a public fact matrix in order to break fake claims and give accurate data regarding elections. ECI also issued an instruction on 6 May 2024 to all political parties to ensure that they do not use the social media irresponsibly and to prevent them using the Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to produce ‘deep fake’ or misinformation. It also instructed the parties to take down fake content within three hours of their notice. These are the steps that show adaptation of institutions in the digital campaign environment. But enforcement and timing of regulatory responses are important issues. ECI's advisory on the use of AI and deepfakes was given on 6 May 2024, following two rounds of polling. This points to a reactive approach by election-management institutions (EMIs) in responding to misinformation. Furthermore, under the three-hour rule, it is necessary to be able to identify fake content promptly, identify the responsible actors and encourage cooperation of parties and platforms. It is even more challenging in closed networks like WhatsApp and Telegram, as those networks can be more private and content may flow through trusted interpersonal networks. As a result, institutional fact checking needs to be complemented with platform accountability, multi-lingual verification systems and citizen media literacy.

The use of artificial intelligence is rising but needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. The annual misinformation report by BOOM showed an uptick in AI-related misinformation: 108 AI-related fact-checks were identified out of a total of 1,291 fact-checks. These ranged from 39 images created by AI, to 41 voice replicas and 28 deep fake videos or sounds. For the Lok Sabha election in particular, BOOM has recognised AI-powered misinformation as a part of the ecosystem of fake news, though not the most significant type. This indicates that the danger

of AI is not just the volume of deepfakes but their ability to make political manipulation more economical, quicker and more convincing. (BOOM)

It can be seen that the fake news problem is not just a technological problem; it's a socio-political one as well. Once created, false content is well disseminated in that it's frequently in sync with prevailing political identification, communal feeling and voter fears. Images and videos can be particularly persuasive, as voters might consider them true evidence, even if they are from the past, altered, or out of context. The problem of misinformation is compounded in multilingual democracies like India by regional languages, local idioms and community specific stories. This makes it more difficult to run centralised fact checking without it being locally trusted, multi-lingual and decentralised.

### **Conclusion**

In the digital age, fake news is one of the issues that threatens electoral integrity. The increase in political participation through social media, messaging apps, AI tools and digital campaigns has also led to a rise in misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes and manipulated content. This type of information can spread misinformation, harm campaigns and affect trust in electoral systems and deepen polarization. The issue is more pronounced in India, as it has a vast voter population, language divide and platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and X are widely used. Therefore, a trustworthy information environment along with secure voting processes are necessary for a free and fair election.

### **Suggestions**

Election officials should increase the monitoring and fact checking in realtime, during elections. Social media platforms must ensure transparency in political advertisements and control fake accounts, deepfakes and coordinated misinformation. Ethical Digital Campaign Practices should be adhered by political parties. More coverage in regional languages of fact checking should be targeted in order to reach a variety of voters. Citizens need to be digitally literate to be able to fact check political information before sharing it. Electoral misinformation laws must be balanced, clear and do not need to limit legitimate political criticism or freedom of expression.

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