

Original Article

Fake News, Political Discourse, and Media Credibility: A Critical Analysis of Dawn's Online Coverage (July 2024–January 2025)

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of fake news and AI-generated disinformation on social media has severely affected political discourse in Pakistan. This study critically examines the fact-checking efforts of Dawn News, one of Pakistan's leading English-language news outlets, to combat politically motivated fake news. Using content analysis (both qualitative and quantitative), all 29 fact-check articles published on Dawn.com between July 2024 and January 2025 were analyzed. The objectives were: (1) to identify the dominant themes and targets of viral fake news in Pakistan, (2) to assess the role and effectiveness of Dawn News fact-checks in countering disinformation, and (3) to examine the misuse of artificial intelligence tools in political propaganda. Findings reveal that 58.6% of debunked claims were related to national politics, with Imran Khan and PTI being the most frequent targets, followed by ruling party figures. Deep-fakes and manipulated media emerged as the dominant formats. The study concludes that systematic fact-checking by credible media outlets is an essential defense against information disorder in polarized societies.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, deep-fake, fact-checking, Pakistan politics, Dawn News, social media, AI misuse

Introduction:

The rapid spread of fake news, especially in the digital age, poses threats to democracy, societal cohesion, and public trust in the media. In Pakistan, a country with a vibrant media landscape and diverse political opinions, the challenge is particularly pronounced. This paper discusses the critical role that news channels play in preventing the dissemination of fake news.

Information disorder has become a significant concern and has garnered more attention lately. The open and anonymous nature of social media allows users to easily share and exchange information, but it also makes these platforms susceptible to malicious practices. While the spread of misinformation and disinformation has been explored within journalism, the public nature of social networking sites, along with the possibilities for automation, enables information disorder to spread quickly to vast audiences, leading to unprecedented

challenges. Generally, information disorder can be divided into three primary categories: disinformation, misinformation, and misinformation. (Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H., 2017).

Disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately disseminated to deceive others. Misinformation is incorrect information circulated by someone who is unaware of its inaccuracy or misleading nature. Misinformation denotes truthful information shared with the purpose of causing harm. Furthermore, there are several other associated forms of information disorder. (Lewandowsky, S., Cook, & others, 2022)

(Baker, A. 2001). A rumor is an unsubstantiated or dubious story that is spreading from person to person. Rumors typically start when there are unclear or dangerous circumstances. Urban Legend is a fictitious story with elements pertaining to local popular culture; a rumor is a sort of disinformation when its assertion is shown to be untrue. An urban legend's claim and narrative are typically untrue. Urban legends typically describe strange, funny, or terrible things that happen; spam is unsolicited messages that are sent to a lot of people and contain unwanted or irrelevant information. The dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information frequently has a dynamic character, leading to the exchange of various forms of information disorder (Baker, A. 2001)

The issue of fake news has been part of the headlines of newspapers and TV channels for many years. This is a term that is not so easy to define; political leaders call every news item fake or out of context if it conflicts with their political interests. When such news also falls under the category of fake news, it involves the dissemination of false information. That is, we can say that "fake news" is defined as news that is false, the dissemination of fabricated and unfounded information to degrade opponents, in which there are no verifiable facts, sources, or quotes. (Egelhofer, J. L., & Lecheler, S. 2019)

However, it is important to recognize that "fake news" is a complex and nuanced issue. This is more than the definition given above. The term fake news itself is political in nature as it is widely used by political opponents to discredit any viewpoint of their side. Technological advances such as the advent of social media enable fake news to spread quickly and easily. Today, most people rely on online information. Take that information and move on. (Tandoc, E. C., Jr. 2019).

Social media platforms give a new method to communicate and create details without the limitations of an editorial process. According to Ellison and Boyd (2013), the "implicit role of communication and information sharing has become the driving motivator for participation". When we examine the first interactions that occur on new social media sites, we typically discover a conversation between friends, users sharing unadorned facts, and making creative content. However, when the platform gains popularity as a free space, individuals begin to use it to debate other things, such as political and moral issues, which might lead to a tiny number of users using it as a forum for radicalization. (Prof. Dr. Arkaitz Zubiaga) social media is a platform where its user is free to write and speak it provide a new way to create detail without the limitations and editorial restriction process

(In 2013) Ellison and Boyd wrote "implicit role of communication and information sharing has become the driving motivator for participation".

Significance of the study

This research is a valuable contribution to both theoretical and practical research because of the exploration of the phenomenon of fake news that is increasingly popular in the political discourse on social media, and the particular analysis of the Dawn News web page between July 2024 and January 2025. In a time when digital platforms are more and more shaping the opinion of the masses, it is vital to comprehend how the

spread of misinformation occurs and how mainstream media can address this issue. To start, the research introduces something new to the academic literature, in that it applies established frameworks of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information to a situation of Pakistani media. Although research on fake news has been carried out worldwide, there is scanty empirical studies in particular reference to the digital news environment in Pakistan. This study, by examining one of the most credible and widely consumed sources of news, Dawn News, fulfills an important gap in the region, as well as contributes to the existing knowledge on how fake news is expressed in local political communication. Second, the paper shows the importance of mass media as a gatekeeper in combating misinformation. The research by Dawn News sheds more light on how effectively traditional media could be used to avoid the spread of misinformation on social media. It is especially relevant in Pakistan, where political polarization and the use of digital media is fast growing. Third, the results of this research have practical implications on the journalists, policy makers, and media regulators. It offers details of the dilemmas news organizations are grappling with to stay credible and accurate in an accelerated digital world. This research can be used to develop more effective fact-checking systems, ethical methods of journalism, and media literacy programs that can help decrease the effects of fake news. In addition, the research is socially relevant because fake news can affect the electoral process, trust and stability in democracies. This study by analyzing the political discourse in a critical period aids in the comprehension of how misinformation can be used to influence the way people think and act politically. It also highlights how the audiences should be responsible in their media consumption. Last but not least, the research provides a basis to conduct a future study by outlining the patterns, trends, and gaps in covering fake news by mainstream media. It invites the further indulgence into the comparative media studies, the reception of the audience, and the place of emerging technologies in misinformation propagation and prevention.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in Social Responsibility Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory. Social Responsibility Theory positions the media as a watchdog responsible for truth verification and public enlightenment. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how media prioritizes certain issues, influencing public perception of political importance.

In the context of Pakistan, agenda-setting is particularly relevant because digital misinformation campaigns often attempt to manipulate issue salience rather than outright beliefs. By amplifying or suppressing political narratives, social media actors influence public discourse even without changing factual accuracy directly.

Content analysis (both qualitative and quantitative) was conducted on six months of fact-checking news coverage published by Dawn News from July 2024 to January 2025. The research sample examined the media organization's role in promoting social responsibility and ethical communication practices under Social Responsibility Theory. The selected data indicate that media organizations have a vital responsibility toward their audiences to provide truthful information and guide the public toward factual understanding of reported events.

According to Social Responsibility Theory, the media should serve society and engage only in activities that contribute positively to public welfare. Furthermore, media organizations should avoid publishing unclear, misleading, or contradictory information, as such content may create confusion and contribute to social unrest. This perspective supports the importance of fact-checking practices as a mechanism for maintaining public trust, ethical journalism, and informed citizenship (Ward, 2019).

Literature review:

Recent scholarship on misinformation emphasizes that fake news is not merely a digital anomaly but a structural feature of contemporary media ecosystems. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) demonstrate that false news spreads faster than truthful information due to novelty bias and emotional engagement. In politically polarized societies such as Pakistan, this effect is amplified by partisan media consumption patterns.

Deep fake technology has further complicated verification processes. Chesney and Citron (2019) argue that synthetic media poses a 'liar's dividend,' where real evidence can be dismissed as fake. In developing democracies, where institutional trust is already fragile, this phenomenon can severely distort political accountability.

Fact-checking research (Walter et al., 2020) suggests that corrective journalism is effective but limited in reach. Audiences often remain within ideological echo chambers, reducing exposure to corrections. This highlights the need for integrated media literacy strategies alongside fact-checking initiatives.

Fake news (FN) on social media (SM) gained popularity in 2016 during the presidential election in the United States (USA) which has led many people to question science, true news (TN) and standards of society (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). FN is rapidly affecting society norms, changing the views on key issues and themes, and redefining facts, realities and beliefs. This study provides a new conceptual framework grounded on the literature on FN, SM, and the theory of societal acceptance to gain a better understanding of the degree to which FN has influenced society and what FN signifies. The conceptual framework has been extended to a meta-framework for analyzing survey data collected from 356 respondents. This study examined fuzzy set theoretic comparative analysis; the study results show that there is disagreement about the degree of differentiation of TN and FN among societies. The findings also show differences in societal ideals. Overall, this research highlights new information on how FN on SM is harmful to populations and substituting TN for FN.

The findings of this study suggest that SM platform providers have to work to understand better the hazards of FN cascading and its effect on society as a whole. As a result, it is important to use fact-checking technologies in reducing the spread of FN and providing society with more trust and confidence. SM platform providers should make sure that there is ongoing monitoring of online behaviours encouraged by the propagation of FN, as well as frequent upgrades of fact-checking technologies to address new techniques and strategies utilised in cascading FN in society.

This paper examines the various forms in which social media abuse negatively impacts Pakistani politics such as the dissemination of false information, the deepening of political division, the increase of Cyberbullying, and the manipulation of public opinion through the use of trolls and bots. Real-life examples are drawn to illustrate the detrimental impact of unregulated use of social media, for example; the 2018 general elections and the impact of the internet on the masses in terms of public opinion during political campaigns. The research has also highlighted the ethical issues of exploitation of data and micro targeting which threaten voter transparency and privacy. This study used qualitative method to study and describe the misuse of social media and its impact on political. To proceed further and come to a conclusion, descriptive and analytical methods would have been used in the study. It indicates. Responding to these concerns would require strong regulatory frameworks, increased media literacy, as well as adopting a moral political behavior. Implementing such techniques helps counteract the negative effects of social media abuse to ensure that these platforms are optimized to serve as tools for healthy political involvement rather than avenues for disinformation and division.

Objectives of the Paper:

The objectives of the paper can be stated as:

To examine the nature, themes, and primary targets, and formats of fake news items that went viral on Pakistani social media and were subsequently fact-checked by Dawn News between July 2024 and January 2025.

To evaluate the role and effectiveness of Dawn News' fact-checking section in combating politically motivated disinformation and upholding journalistic social responsibility.

To analyse the extent to which artificial intelligence tools (deep-fakes, voice cloning, image manipulation) are being misused for political propaganda in Pakistan.

To offer policy and media-practice recommendations for strengthening fact-checking mechanisms and media literacy in the country.

Research Methods:

In this paper the researcher examined fact news on dawn news social web. Content analysis was used for selected data for the qualitative research method (Krippendorff, 2018)

Hypothesis:

H0 (Null Hypothesis): Misuse of AI-generated disinformation on social media does not create bipolar voter groups in Pakistan.

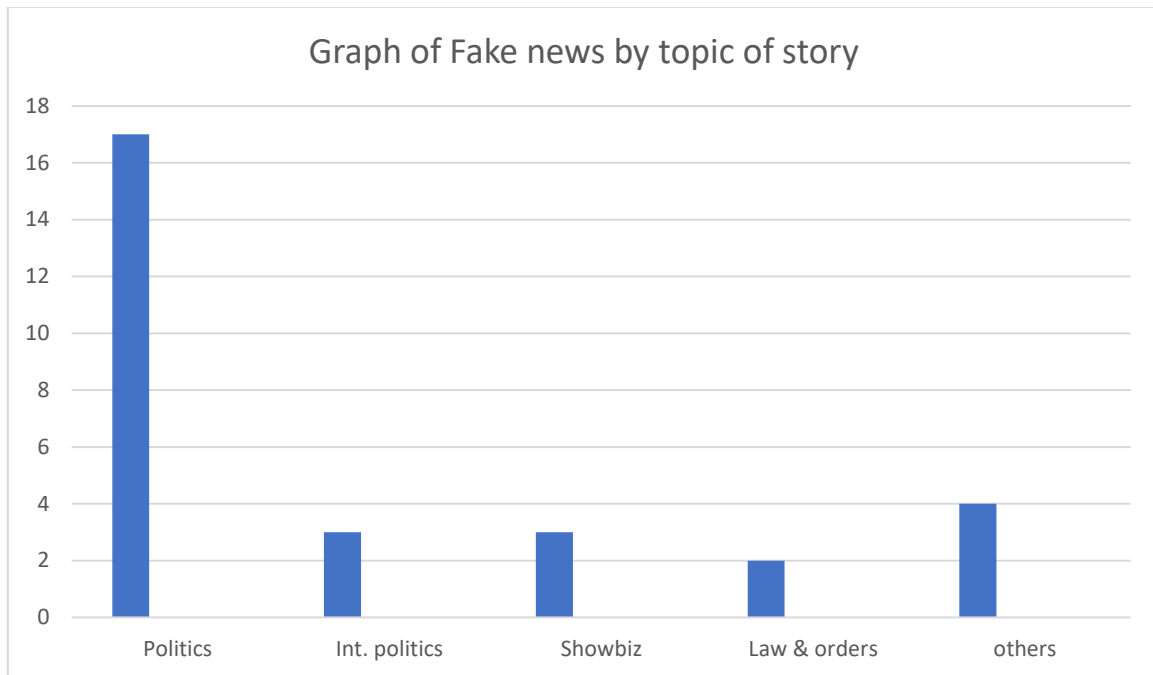
H1 (Alternative Hypothesis): Misuse of AI-generated disinformation on social media creates bipolar voter groups in Pakistan.

Research Question:

Is misuse of AI creating bipolar voter group?

Statistics:

S:No	Politics	Int politics	Showbiz	Law orders &	others	Total of news
No of news	17	3	3	2	4	29
Percentage	58.6%	10.3	10.3%	6.8%	13.7%	100%



Results:

Politics dominated fake news narratives, primarily targeting Imran Khan, PTI, and occasionally PML-N and government figures like Maryam Nawaz. AI-generated misinformation was widely used. For misleading public opinion. Social media users were using deepfake videos, fabricated screenshots, voice manipulations, and misleading headlines for manipulating political statements for this purpose; mostly Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were the main propagation sources. During research we found out that Dawn News actively used such misleading news and expressed truth through the Fact Check section. According to selected data, we also found that the proliferation of politically motivated disinformation often favours ruling parties.

Hypothesis note (Results): Overall, the findings are consistent with H1 by showing frequent AI-enabled political disinformation and signs of widening political differences, but voter “bipolarity” is not measured directly in this study, so H0 cannot be statistically rejected.

Above the mentioned finding, we recommended that Pakistani news channels, especially Dawn News, are becoming more responsible by verifying content. Fact-checking programmes are effective in educating the public about misinformation.

Findings (July 2024 – January 2025)

No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	National politics	17	58.6%
2	Law enforcement & judiciary	4	13.8%
3	International politics	3	10.3%
4	Showbiz & celebrity	3	10.3%
5	Health & miscellaneous	2	6.9%

	Total	29	100%
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Most Targeted Political Figures/Entities in the 17 National-Politics Items

Target	Number of fake claims debunked
Imran Khan / PTI	12
Maryam Nawaz / PML-N	3
Shahbaz Sharif	1
Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa	1
Total	17

Format of Fake Content (multiple counting possible, n=34 formats across 29 items)

Format	Frequency
Deep-fake / AI-generated video or audio	11
Edited/manipulated video	9
Fake screenshots	7
Out-of-context quote/video	5
Fabricated letter/document	2

Discussion and Conclusion

During the research study, it was revealed that Dawn News has published 29 news on its website from July 2024 to January 2025 and confirm that the trolling news on social media were misleading and fake news. In terms of topic, most of this news were published on national politics. The total number of such reports is 17 (58.6 %). 3 news items related to international politics and showbiz were placed in the unverified news portal. 2 news related to the implementation of laws and 4 news in the category of news have been included in the fact check and declared as unverified news.

Fake news is intentionally false information published as news that may mislead the public. In Pakistan, the proliferation of social media platforms has hastened the propagation of such misinformation. This outline provides a structured method to discussing the complex role of Pakistani news outlets in preventing the spread of fake news across the country. The suggested research could help to advance scholarly discourse and give a foundation for practical media interventions.

Many Pakistani news channels have established fact-checking segments to verify the authenticity of news stories. This section evaluates several initiatives and their impact on public perception. Examples of misinformation incidents in Pakistan, including political disinformation campaigns and health-related myths, underscore the severity of the issue. For this purpose, many news channel Incorporating AI and machine learning to detect and flag false news content represents a progressive step by some channels.

During the research, it was observed that from July 2024 to January 2025, the most fake news on social media in Pakistan went viral against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and its founder Imran Khan (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). These news reports include immoral videos, Toshakhana case, Bushra Bibi Iddat case, PTI workers attacking Jamaat-e-Islami, viral video of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif apologising to Imran Khan, a video of Imran Khan being shown praising Nawaz Sharif through deepfake and Imran Khan kissing two women (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This news has been shared by users of social media platforms "Facebook" and "X." This kind of content clearly shows that between July 2024 and January 2025, more news related to the political personalities of the country was published based on their character assassination. If you look at the news below, it will be seen that in the political case, the news has been made viral out of political context and an attempt has been made to prove PTI as a party and Imran Khan as a bad character person, which directly benefits the political opponents of PTI. If you look at the news below, the content presented in it shows that it was a social media campaign under a certain agenda, in which political opponents are criticizing his role more than the political wisdom of their side. Dawn News has made all such news as part of its fact check, in which the role of political leaders has been negated or information related to the ongoing case has been presented out of context on social media.

For example, the news about Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif went viral on social media, trying to give the impression that what went wrong with Omar Khan and the cases against him are of a political nature, which Shahbaz Sharif has realized and apologized for. Below is the news.

"A statement is going viral on social media regarding Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in which he announced to apologies to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder chairman Imran Khan and said," "If Imran Khan does not agree, we will go to apologize," "but there is no truth to this post."

"The news gives the impression that the pro-PTI social media users want to create such an atmosphere that the impression is established that the military leadership has done wrong with Imran Khan and he is a victim of political persecution.

"Various social circle are claiming on social media that the health of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, the founding chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), deteriorated during his imprisonment in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail.

"A video was shared on social media by members of the Pakistan Muslim League (N) in which Imran Khan, the head of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was seen praising Nawaz Sharif, but in reality, it was Imran Khan praising former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and the video was edited and circulated.

On January 2, a number of users on the microblogging platform 'X' shared a video claiming that supporters of the Majlis-e-Wahidul Muslimeen (MWM) shouted anti-national slogans during a sit-in in Karachi, but the slogans were actually against the United States.

Balochistan's former caretaker information minister John Achakzai shared screenshots of US analyst Michael Kugelman's alleged on X in which he called PTI's protest a complete failure, but he did not make such posts and the screenshots are fake.

During the research, it has been revealed that most of the fake news in Pakistan is made on a political theme and most of the AI tools have been misused in these news. Social media users have given the impression of distrust in public circles against the opposition party leaders to meet their political objectives on the basis of their likes and dislikes, as well as their character assassination. The news below confirms that the fake news circulating on social media has been shared by political circles or their sympathizers. Since January 7, 2025, several users on various social networking websites have shared various videos of the alleged meeting

between Chief Minister Punjab Maryam Nawaz and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, but these videos are fake and made using AI technology. Other news are below:

On November 8, a number of users on social media platform X shared a video of Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz leaving for Geneva at Lahore airport in which people were chanting slogans against her, however, the video has been dubbed which is actually dated September 2023."(16)

On the other hand, a news related to Imran Khan is also going viral in which it is said that the former Prime Minister is among the 500 most influential and favourite people in the world. By adding this news to Fact Check, Dawn News is claim that this news has been taken out of context.the news is under below

"On January 3, several users on the microblogging platform 'X' claimed that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf founder Imran Khan has been included in the top 25 leaders in the list of the world's 500 most influential Muslim personalities, but the former prime minister's name has been included in the edition not in terms of ranking but as an honour."(17)

Islamabad incident in which a man at a shop expressed his dislike for Chief Justice Qazi Faiz Isa and shouted slogans against him. The incident not only went viral on social media but was also propagated by political opponents. The news as viral as below

"A picture of a doughnut shop is going viral on social media platform X claiming that a doughnut shop in Islamabad was shut down for insulting Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa."

"In Pakistan, inappropriate videos and screenshots of Punjab Information Minister Uzma Bukhari are being shared on Facebook, including X and Instagram, since July 24, which are actually fake and deep fake."(18)

"On December 3, some users on the social media platform 'X' shared a video of the founder of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan and criticised him, claiming that in the video, the founder of PTI is allegedly giving 'kisses' to two women, however, this video has been created using fake and deepfake technology."(19)

In this context, we can conclude that social media is being used for propaganda as a political tool in Pakistan. The analysis of the above content has also revealed that three news related to international politics and showbiz have gone viral on social media. This information was based on incorrect information. On January 11, 2025, a ship engaged in extinguishing the fire in Los Angeles crashed due to fire, the second news was the letter of the Emirati Interior Minister on the immoral photos of the President of the Emirates and Maryam Nawaz, demanding that action be taken against those involved in the incident. Dawn News fact-checked and pointed out that the letter is fake. The third was the news.

On the occasion of the November 5 presidential election in the United States, many users shared a video of Donald Trump on TikTok, in which he was shown saying that if he won the US presidential election, he would try his best to get Imran Khan out of jail, but this video turned out to be distorted and actually belongs to 2017.

In a video related to showbiz, it is being tried to prove that the former Prime Minister is famous all over the world and people are expressing solidarity with him. In this regard, on August 12, 2024, a video of Indian singer Kumar Sanu went viral on social media in which it was said that he sang in favour of Imran Khan, later he clarified on his social media account that the song of his voice is fake, he did not sing any song in favour of the former Pakistani Prime Minister.

This expanded analysis reinforces the conclusion that misinformation in Pakistan is structurally embedded within digital political communication. While fact-checking initiatives such as those by Dawn News provide an essential corrective mechanism, they operate within a reactive framework that limits overall effectiveness.

A sustainable solution requires a multi-stakeholder approach combining regulatory oversight, platform accountability, and public education. Without these measures, AI-enabled misinformation will continue to evolve faster than traditional journalistic verification systems.

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