TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY

DIS-INFORMATION WARFARE:

INDO-PAK CONFLICT AND TECHNOLOGY

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CONTEXT

An average Indian spends upwards of five hours on the internet daily, with 70 percent of the time devoted to social media platforms, gaming, and videos (Ashish Pherwani, 2025). It would be no surprise to anyone who sees young toddlers in India demanding YouTube during mealtime or students secretly making reels in classrooms or uncles incessantly forwarding the latest claims about ancient India that they received on their WhatsApp. Social media has replaced news channels, movie theaters and television, all at once. It does seem harmless, except for a few heated arguments between family members, lectures by teachers on harms of ChatGPT, the cost of spending time on internet doesn't seem that high when data prices are negligible. Social scientists may go on and on about how the sense of anonymity provided by social media has turned us into hate-mongering trolls that we actually aren't and how it is pulling at our social fabric, but yet on usual days, the cost doesn't seem that high and the risks abstract. But what happens during times of crisis when cost of one unverified or irresponsible forward would be the lives of many?

This is exactly what happened in the past days, when amidst an escalating armed conflict with its neighbour, India also fell prey to an 'information warfare', unleashed by its adversary causing panic and chaos amongst millions of people. In the past days, Indian social media was flooded with misinformation regarding the scale of conflict, number of causalities, and level of external interference. It is true that in tense times, some disinformation can be predicted to do rounds, but such was the scale of misinformation and disinformation that amidst the fog of war, it was difficult to determine which news is true and which false. This information warfare was certainly unleashed by our adversary, who after an year-long ban restored Twitter, so as to open the floodgates of misinformation and set a favorable narrative. But we cannot cry wolf as we fell easy prey to such tactics as there were many Indian accounts passing video games clips to be real videos from sensitive areas and Indian parliamentarians sharing unverified news, some from Pakistani handles and even legacy media proved more un-trustworthy than ever. Such was the state that government agencies issued multiple advisories advising restraint, caution and reminding of past incidents where sensationalization put lives at risk and banned multiple accounts.

This raises important questions, while the conflict has been contained for now, in times of crisis, how do we conduct ourselves on the internet so as not to deepen conflict or chaos but as responsible citizens whose duty is safeguarding fellow citizens and national interests. Further, while still abiding by the principle of freedom of expression and internet as a fundamental right, how should the government control misinformation and disinformation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, two theories are used which defines present information ecosystem on how misinformation is circulated, received, perceived and responded by the receiver. Hence, two theories include two-step flow theory and Misinformation Recognition and Response Model (MRRM).

The **Two-Step Flow Theory**, first articulated by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), challenged the assumption that mass media exerted a direct and uniform influence on audiences a dominant 'hypodermic model'. Instead, the theory proposed a model wherein opinion leaders act as intermediaries, interpreting and transmitting media content to wider, less engaged audiences, thereby shaping public opinion in subtle yet profound ways (Taddicken, 2015). In contemporary information warfare, with a particular focus on the dynamics of misinformation and dissemination during wars and conflicts. Social media platforms and influencers have emerged as new types of opinion leaders.

In today's world that is increasingly defined by the social media platforms, hyper connected information ecosystem opinion leaders have emerged beyond traditional elites. For examples, social media influencers and micro-celebrities, activist pages and diaspora communities, meme creators, livestream, encrypted platforms' group admins and ideologically aligned anonymous accounts. These leaders wield enormous power in today's information ecosystem with huge number of followers, trust and visibility.

This transformed information ecosystem has further worsened the situation of mis- and dis-information by rapid content mutation in a bid to reformulate emotive tone, and visually manipulation and the effect of algorithms by creating ecochambers by reinforcing selective exposure.

The **Misinformation Recognition and Response Model (MRRM)** will be used to identify key gaps in the response to the information and psychological warfare. MRRM is a framework developed by Dr. Michelle A. Amazeen, Director of the Communication Research Centre at Boston University (Amazeen, 2023). It helps to study and understand what leads people to recognise misinformation and what the outcomes are. It suggests that people respond to misinformation or correction messages by fact-checking units depends on personal traits (such as curiosity or how informed they are) and situational factors.

This process involves three key steps: noticing a gap or problem in the information, caring enough to look into it, and then recognising it as misinformation. Once recognition happens, people respond in different ways; some may ignore it, some may seek more information, and others may share corrections. These responses can influence what they believe, how they feel, and what actions they take. The model allows for looking at misinformation from multiple angles to build a fuller understanding. MRRM is a guide to better understand how people identify and deal with false information. It integrates insights from cognitive psychology, media literacy, and communication theory to understand not just whether someone believes misinformation, but how they process it across multiple decision points. This model is particularly useful for studying under-equipped citizens, who may struggle at each stage due to cognitive, informational, or contextual limitations.

Hence, this model will help to pinpoint the areas where interventions can be more effective and build public resilience against false information, particularly in a crisis.

MRRM proposes four core stages in a user's interaction with misinformation:
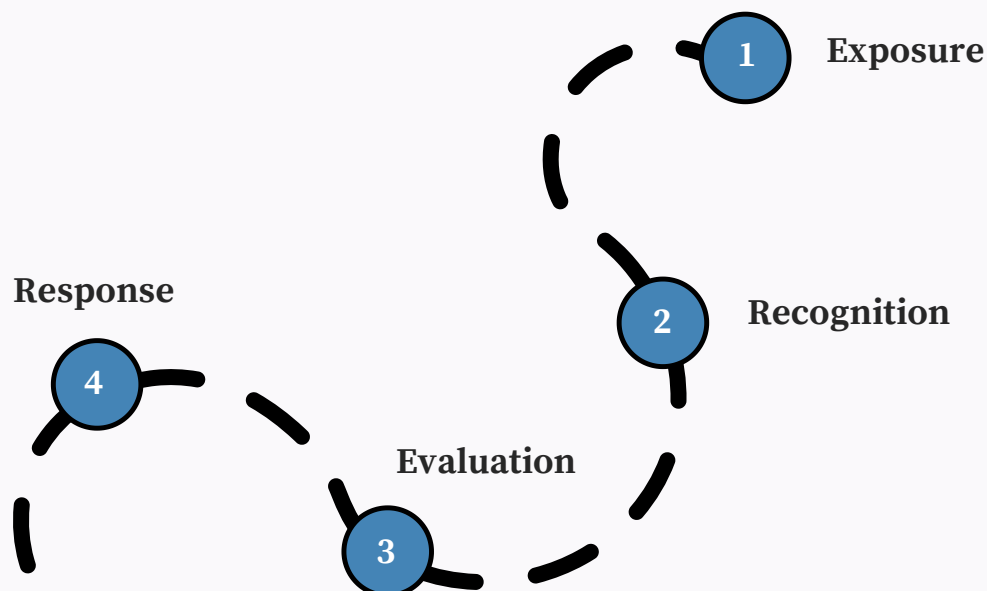
OBJECTIVES

The study aims:

- To examine the spread of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and synthetic media related to the Indo-Pak conflict of May 2025.

- To understand the implications of such information and citizen's readiness to tackle mis- and dis-information.

- To analyse governmental responses and readiness to counter mis- and dis-information.

- To detect existing gaps in current approaches and recommend policy measures to strengthen counter-disinformation efforts, particularly in sensitive situation like war and conflict.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.Type of Data: This study is exploratory research which aims to investigate complex intersection of technological, democracy, and mis- and dis-information. This would be based on both primary and secondary data sources.

2. Data Sources Include:
- Media monitoring platforms
- Official fact-checking websites
- Newspapers and TV media
- Government advisories
- Analysis of civilian engagement with misinformation/disinformation

Study Duration: From 07 May 2025 to 12 May 2025

CASE STUDIES

Misattributed or Old Media Content Recirculated During Conflict

During recent India-Pakistan tensions, a significant amount of misinformation stemmed from the reuse of unrelated or outdated visuals, for example:

- A Beirut blast video was shared as a missile strike on India (TOI News Desk, 2025)

- A farm fire was passed off as a drone strike in Jalandhar (Online Desk, 2025) and footage from a 2024 wildfire was misused to claim an attack on a military base in Amritsar (HT News Desk, 2025).

- Old crash footage from Budgam of 2019 Mi-17 V5 (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025a), Pune 2014 Su-30MKI (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025b) and 2019 image of China Daily's fake jet crash report (TOI News Desk, 2025b).

- Similarly, videos from Indonesia (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025c), Moscow (Khan, 2025), and the Kabul Airport blast (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025d), were misattributed to suggest attacks on Indian military sites.

- Video game footages were used to simulate a rocket strike as a real Pakistani Assault on India (PIB Check Fact [@PIBCheckFact], 2025e).

- Also misused were a 2021 oil tanker explosion (Hazira Port) (TOI News Desk, 2025c), a 2024 sectarian clash at Srinagar airbase (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025f),

Misuse of Identity/Authority

Several misinformation attempts have exploited official identities to create panic or spread falsehoods.

- Fake Facebook posts were attributed to NSA Ajit Doval, despite him having no official account (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025g).

- A fabricated advisory urged citizens to stock up on essential, debunked as fake by PIB(PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025h).

- Another viral hoax involved a false letter attributed to a non-existent Army Chief, Gen.V.K. Narayan (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025i).

- Fake image claimed the government had advised disabling phone location services (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025j)

- False claim of a nationwide ban on airport entry was also circulated (NDTV, 2025), and a fake BrahMos failure letter falsely linked to DRDO scientist (Times Now, 2025)

Completely Fabricated Claims / Incidents

Multiple completely fabricated claims were circulated online during recent tensions. These include:

- A fake video of a "fidayeen" attack in Rajouri (Mishra, 2025).

- A misleading report on Delhi-Mumbai flight route closure (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025k).

- Claims of an IAF pilot, Squadron Leader Shivani Singh been captured in Pakistan (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025l).

- The destruction of the S-400 system by Pakistan (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025m).

- A video/ image/ news of fabricated strike by Pakistan on Indian Brigade HQ (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025n)

- An old video passed off as a Pakistani attack in Battal Sector (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025o).

- A fake claim of explosion near Srinagar Airport (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025p).

- A fake Pakistani appeal on financial aid(TOI World Desk, 2025).

All these were confirmed to be baseless attempts to mislead the public.

Communal or Sectarian Misinformation

- Misinformation targeting communal sentiments included a video falsely blaming Indian Muslims for a fire at Delhi Haat market, which was actually an accidental blaze on April 30, 2025((PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025q).

- Another fake video claimed an Indian drone had attacked the Nankana Sahib Gurdwara in Pakistan (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025r), an allegation debunked by PIB Fact Check as completely false and intended to incite religious tensions.

False Claims About Attack on Critical Infrastructure

- An old video from a 2021 oil tanker explosion was falsely linked to a Pakistan attack on Hazira Port.

- False reports also alleged that India attacked Pakistan's Neelum-Jhelum hydropower project, though India confirmed only terrorist camps were targeted.

- Karachi Port Trust's hacked account falsely claimed an Indian Navy strike.

- Other fake news included a cyberattack on India's power grid claiming that it caused 70% of it to become dysfunctional (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025s).
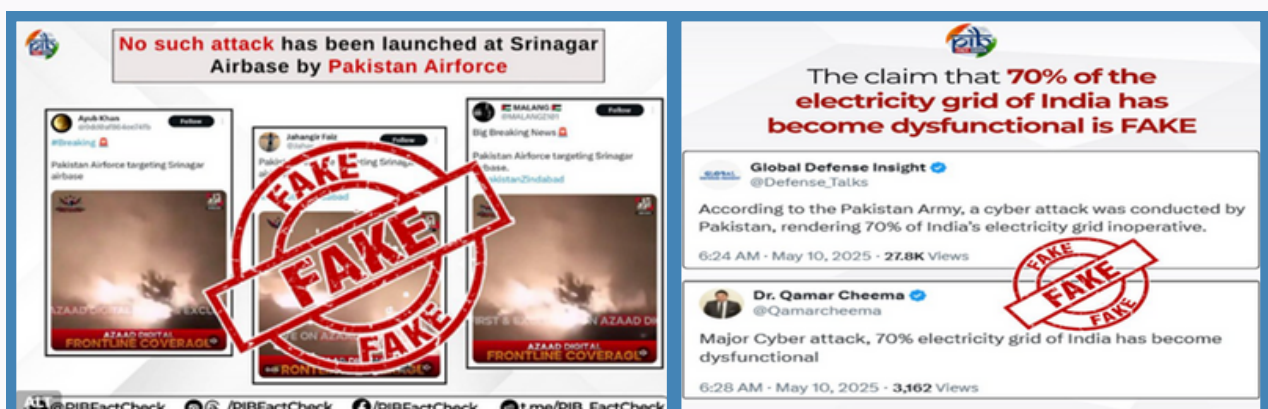
Misreporting by Media Outlets

Several Indian media outlets, including CNN News18, OneIndia, Sudarshan News, ABP News, and NDTV were found spreading false information during heightened India-Pakistan tensions. They falsely reported an Indian drone strike on Islamabad and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's surrender(Boom, 2025), a Pakistan military coup involving the resignation of Army Chief Asim Munir(Boom, 2025), and misrepresented footage of Israel's Iron Dome as Indian drone interceptions over Jaisalmer(Boom, 2025). All these claims were debunked by fact-checkers and lacked any official or credible confirmation.

Propaganda and Psychological Operations

Several false narratives were circulated as part of propaganda and psychological operations.

- A staged video falsely claimed the Pakistani Army destroyed an Indian post manned by the non-existent "20 Raj Battalion" (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025t).

- Another old video misrepresented Indian Army recruits' emotional reactions as soldiers abandoning their posts (PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025u).

- Similarly, a 2019 clip of Pakistani troops waving a white flag was falsely presented as the Indian Army surrendering (PIB Fact Check[@PIBFactCheck], 2025v).

Additionally, a baseless claim alleged that Ambala Airbase was used to strike Amritsar(PIB Fact Check [@PIBFactCheck], 2025w), all forming part of coordinated disinformation efforts aimed at undermining morale and spreading confusion.

Amid escalating India-Pakistan tensions, platform and cyber-related misinformation spiked. On May 8, 2025, the official Karachi Port Trust X (formerly Twitter) account falsely claimed an Indian Navy strike had caused severe damage to the port, later confirmed as a result of a hack (The Economic Times, 2025). In a related move, Pakistan unblocked access to X after over a year of suspension, aiming to enable its population to engage in the ongoing "narrative war" with India. The restoration, confirmed in a Senate IT Committee meeting, reflects strategic platform use to shape public discourse during conflict(SAMAA, 2025).

Misinformation by Public Figures

Amid rising India-Pakistan tensions, Union Minister Kiren Rijiju shared a false claim on social media suggesting that the Indian Navy had attacked Karachi. The post was based on unverified reports and likely originated from fake accounts. Upon realizing the misinformation, Rijiju deleted the post and urged the public to remain cautious and rely only on verified information(V. Mishra & Mishra, 2025).

GOVERNMENT ADVISORIES

Recognizing the gravity of the information and psychological warfare during recent conflict, the Indian government undertook a robust and coordinated response to contain and counter the spread of falsehoods. At the forefront of this digital defense was the Press Information Bureau's Fact Check Unit (PIB FCU), which became a critical force in combating misinformation. Since Operation Sindoor began, the PIB FCU issued at least 18 rebuttals across social media, directly addressing viral fakes. One such video falsely claimed that a brigade headquarters of the Indian Army had been destroyed by Pakistan-a claim PIB swiftly debunked with counter-evidence. In another widely circulated hoax, a fake advisory urged citizens to stockpile ₹50,000 in cash, fuel their vehicles, and secure two months' worth of medicines. Shared rapidly across platforms like X and WhatsApp, the false advisory triggered panic buying in cities such as Chandigarh, Mohali, and Bengaluru, creating artificial shortages and inflating prices-disproportionately affecting lower-income groups.

Simultaneously, the government launched a social media crackdown, targeting malicious narratives that sought to destabilize the nation during this sensitive period. Over 8,000 X accounts were blocked after being identified as disseminators of fake news and anti-national propaganda. Many of these were linked to terrorist organizations like The Resistance Front (TRF), known for weaponizing misinformation to provoke communal tensions. Under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued takedown directives, which platforms like X complied with by removing or downranking flagged content. However, this action also stirred concerns among digital rights groups about the specificity and transparency of the orders.

To bolster its efforts, the government also partnered with independent fact-checking organizations and cyber units. Also, by identifying pro-Pakistan accounts impersonating Indian military personnel, government ensured their swift removal. Meanwhile, state cyber police forces, including the Maharashtra Cyber Police, were instructed to monitor and report over 1,000 posts daily related to Operation Sindoor-forming a decentralized yet vigilant surveillance network across digital platforms. Understanding the crucial role of the press in such times, the government took a proactive stance with the media as well. On May 9, 2025, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw convened a high-level meeting with senior editors from leading media houses. He urged them to ensure that all reportage remained factual, sensitive, and responsible, with a specific caution against live or real-time coverage of defense activities. Echoing this, the PIB released detailed advisories emphasizing the importance of verifying sources and refraining from publishing unconfirmed reports, especially during national crises.

Further intensifying its digital vigilance, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting established a 24/7 Command Center dedicated to misinformation tracking. Using advanced analytical tools, the center continuously monitored various platforms and channels to identify and neutralize false narratives. This real-time surveillance allowed the government to respond swiftly to emerging digital threats, ensuring that the online space remained as secure as the physical front.

In tandem, public advisories were rolled out to directly address citizens. On May 7, 2025, the PIB officially debunked the fake advisory that had caused panic buying and hoarding. To stabilize markets and reassure the public, local governments in cities like Chandigarh, Mohali, and Bengaluru invoked emergency powers to curb hoarding and black marketing-measures that proved essential to protecting economically vulnerable communities.

The misinformation threat also had an international dimension. The government flagged and tracked over 1,000 posts daily, many linked to external sources attempting to stoke unrest. Among those targeted were foreign media accounts, including China's Xinhua News Agency and Turkey's TRT World, both of which were blocked on X for allegedly spreading misleading information and propaganda regarding the military operation. These measures formed part of a broader strategy to ensure that foreign interference did not distort public perception or disrupt national morale.


Finally, to engage the public in the fight against misinformation, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) issued a comprehensive set of cybersecurity guidelines. These included key dos and don'ts for internet users aimed at curbing the spread of fake news and maintaining digital hygiene. Dos' citizens were advised to:

- Verify all information with official government sources before sharing.
- Report fake news through WhatsApp at 8799711259 or email at socialmedia@pib.gov.in.
- Stay cyber-safe by avoiding phishing scams and suspicious links.
- Maintain digital hygiene by updating passwords and enabling two-factor authentication.
- Promote messages of peace, unity, and factual information.

Conversely, citizens were strongly advised not to:

- Share unverified content regarding troop movements, military actions, or emergency protocols.
- Spread incendiary or communal content that could incite violence or public panic.
- Engage with propaganda, deepfakes, or AI-generated misinformation, particularly from dubious or foreign sources.
- Impersonate official government or defense personnel online.
- Consume or disseminate Pakistan-origin content, in line with government advisories.

Through this multifaceted and deeply coordinated strategy, the Indian government aimed to ensure that truth, stability, and national unity prevailed-both on the ground and in the digital skies above-during one of the most crucial military operations in recent history.
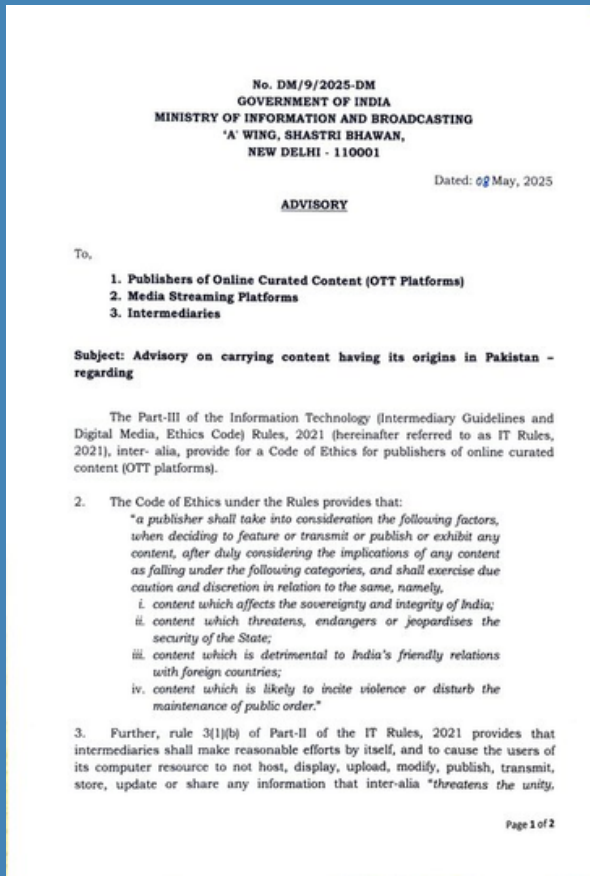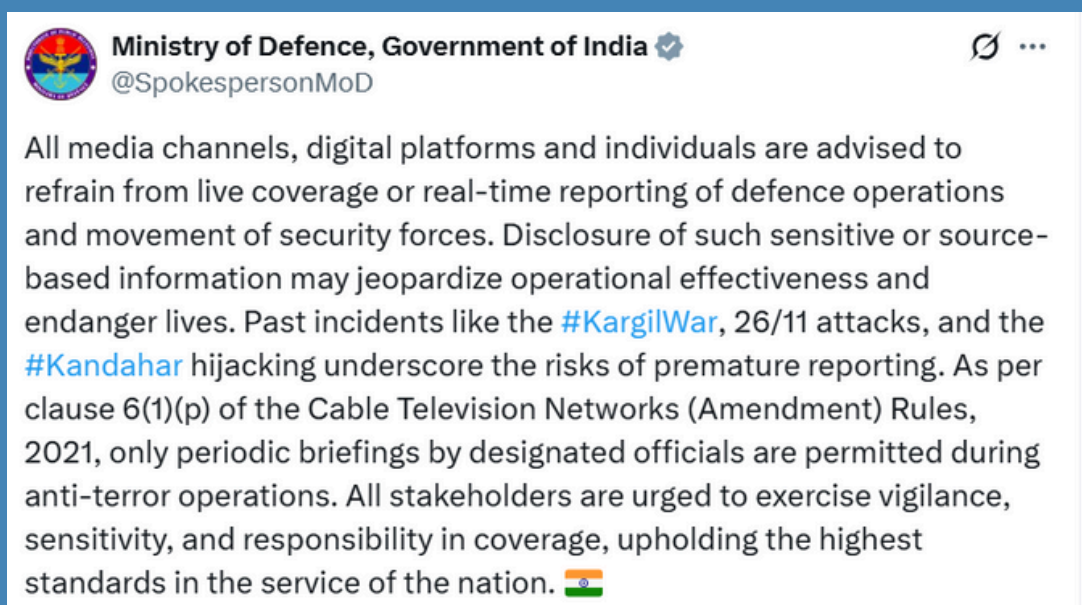
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The role of social media platforms in managing misinformation during the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, particularly following the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22, 2025, and India's retaliatory Operation Sindoor, was pivotal yet highly contested. Platforms such as X, Meta (Facebook and Instagram), and YouTube faced intense scrutiny and legal mandates from the Indian government to curb disinformation, while grappling with challenges of scale, cross-border propaganda, and free speech principles. Operating under the ambit of India's Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021, these platforms were compelled to act swiftly or risk losing safe harbor protections, which shields them from liability for user-generated content. This section outlines the key steps taken by these platforms to address misinformation during the crisis and provides a comparative analysis of their effectiveness, drawing insights from the India-Pakistan disinformation war and the strategic lifting of Pakistan's X ban.

Content Moderation on X (Formerly Twitter)

Case of Pakistan's X Ban and Its Lifting

Pakistan had banned X on February 17, 2024, post its contentious February 8 election held last year citing national security due to anti-state content. This was a measure to curtail down allegations of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)'s vote-rigging claims and separatist propaganda which was gaining traction online (Sharma, 2025).The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority enforced the ban, alleging X's non-compliance with content removal directives, forcing users to use VPNs. However, on May 7, 2025, right amidst heightened India-Pakistan tensions, the ban was lifted. This has been widely viewed as a measure to counter India's digital narrative and amplify Pakistan's messaging. This strategic move was an attempt at leveraging X for propaganda, complicating India's efforts to control cross-border disinformation (France24, 2025).

Key Steps Taken

1. **Enforcement of Misinformation Policies:** X enforced its community guidelines, which prohibit content that misleads or incites panic. Users reported posts as 'misleading or false,' triggering automated and human reviews. During Operation Sindoor, X targeted posts with fake videos, such as those falsely claiming Pakistani attacks on Srinagar Airbase using unrelated 2024 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa footage. Contents were removed, labelled as disputed, or down ranked in feeds to reduce visibility (The Hindu Bureau, 2025).

2. **Content Moderation and Review:** To manage the overwhelming volume of posts, X relied on automated systems to flag suspicious activity (e.g., mass posting by new accounts) and used human moderators for more complex evaluations. For instance, debunked claims about the destruction of an Indian Army Brigade Headquarters were removed following fact-checks by the Press Information Bureau (PIB). Hashtags like #OperationSindoor, which generated over 885,000 posts, were closely monitored (Chaturvedi, 2025).

3. **Collaboration with Fact-Checkers:** X indirectly collaborated with fact-checking organizations like PIB Fact Check and Alt News.

PIB issued several rebuttals on X, debunking claims such as Pakistan shooting down an Indian Rafale jet. Alt News flagged pro-Pakistan accounts posing as Indian military personnel, aiding X's moderation (Subramaniam, 2025). While not explicitly stated, contents flagged by these credible sources might have aided content review and removal.

4. **Account and Content Blocking**: Following Indian government directives, X blocked over 8,000 accounts spreading disinformation, including pro-Pakistan propaganda from handles linked to Chinese state media such as Xinhua News Agency and Global Times (The Hindu Bureau, 2025). This included content featuring fake news and fake public safety advisories. A multi-agency mechanism involving the Ministries of Home Affairs, Information & Broadcasting, and Electronics and Information Technology was instrumental in identifying such posts, handles, and groups. These were flagged on social media platforms for swift action, ensuring a coordinated response to disinformation amplification (Vishnoi, 2025).

Content Moderation on Meta (Facebook and Instagram)

Key Steps Taken

1. **Enforcement of Community Standards:** Meta removed or downranked content that violated its misinformation policies. During the conflict, this included videos misattributed to Operation Sindoor, such as Gaza conflict footage presented as Indian airstrikes (Vishnoi, 2025). User reports and automated systems flagged such content for review.

2. **Government-Directed Takedowns:** On May 7, 2025, Meta banned a prominent news page on Instagram at the request of the Indian government, signaling compliance with official directives. Similar actions were likely taken against pro-Pakistan pages across Facebook and Instagram (France24, 2025).

3. **Content Moderation:** Meta employed automated flagging and human moderators to manage misinformation. While specific details are limited, its approach mirrored X's, prioritizing content flagged by credible sources like PIB (Subramaniam, 2025)

Content moderation on YouTube

Key Steps Taken

1.**Content Removal and Channel Bans:** The Indian government banned 16 Pakistani YouTube channels prior to Operation Sindoor for spreading provocative content linked to the Pahalgam attack, signaling YouTube's role in content moderation (DD News, 2025). During the conflict, YouTube removed videos falsely tied to Operation Sindoor, such as old footage repurposed as current events.

2. **Automated and Human Moderation:** YouTube intensified its use of automated flagging to detect suspicious content and human moderators to review nuanced cases, ensuring compliance with government directives (The Economic Times, 2025).

ANALYSIS

The effectiveness of content moderation across social media platforms during Operation Sindoor varied, reflecting different approaches to enforcement, compliance, and transparency. Meta complied with government takedown requests, aligning its actions with India's IT Rules, 2021. This responsiveness enabled the rapid removal of misleading content, especially around key events. However, Meta provided limited transparency regarding its moderation processes, making it difficult to assess the full scale of actions taken. The ban of certain religious news pages raised concerns about potential overreach and bias, which could undermine user trust (France24, 2025). Furthermore, Meta's automated systems likely struggled with the nuanced geopolitical context of India-Pakistan tensions, necessitating significant human oversight to prevent mislabelling of legitimate content. While effective in reducing the visibility of misinformation, Meta faced challenges in balancing compliance with the principle of free expression.

YouTube's approach was marked by pre-emptive channel bans and prompt content removals, particularly against Pakistani channels accused of spreading provocative material linked to the Pahalgam attack. These actions were aligned with India's national security priorities. However, reliance on automated systems raised the risk of over-flagging, potentially leading to the removal of legitimate content. The lack of public data on YouTube's moderation efforts during the operation further limits a comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness. Moreover, the challenge of detecting repurposed or old footage repackaged as current events revealed limitations in its AI-based moderation, underscoring the need for improved content analysis capabilities.

X (formerly Twitter) adopted a proactive approach by enforcing its misinformation policies and indirectly collaborating with fact-checkers such as PIB and Alt News. This helped curb high-profile false narratives, including claims about attacks on Nankana Sahib gurdwara and fabricated military operations. The platform's decision to block over 8,000 accounts, many tied to coordinated disinformation campaigns, contributed to disrupting the spread of fake content especially following the lifting of Pakistan's X ban, which led to a surge in cross-border propaganda. However, the scale of misinformation remained daunting, with over 885,000 posts under #OperationSindoor and another 215,000 under #IndiaPakistanWar, placing enormous pressure on X's moderation capacity (The Economic Times, 2025) Compounding this challenge were X's recent changes favoring community-based moderation, which raised concerns about consistency and reliability in flagging false content (Kugelman, 2025). Notably, while X stated it did not support the Indian government's directive to block certain accounts on free speech grounds, it ultimately complied with official orders, reflecting the tension between platform autonomy and regulatory compliance (The Hindu, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS

Psychological Pressure

Social media platforms have been the focal point of the misinformation circulation during the period of crisis. In fact, traditional media despite multiple contents verification mechanism fell prey to such misinformation and ended up broadcasting it. These narratives exploit cognitive vulnerabilities, particularly motivated reasoning where individuals accept emotionally charged, confirmatory information over verified facts. They are designed to overwhelm civilian and even military audiences with a barrage of falsehoods, triggering psychological stress and operational uncertainty.

Several studies suggest that human decision making is severely impacted under stressful conditions (Porcelli & Delgado, 2016). The Indian Armed Forces, especially personnel deployed along the LoC, face a two-pronged burden: the physical threat of cross-border hostilities and the psychological disruption caused by falsified claims. Demoralizing narratives, such as fabricated claims of Indian surrender at Chora Post (amplified by Pakistan's Minister Attaullah Tarar), erode confidence among troops and civilians alike, risking disunity and strategic disadvantage.

This not only impacts decision-making by the military or those fighting on the ground but also affects civilians who follow updates on social media. For example, a false advisory claiming that people should keep ₹50,000 in cash, along with rice, pulses, and other essentials at home, led to panic buying and hoarding of essential commodities in several parts of the country. This, in turn, forced government officials to issue clarifications, debunk the claims, and inform about the existing buffer stocks of essential goods in the country.

Strategic Security Disruptions

Disinformation can directly disrupt military coordination and decision-making. For instance, a false report claiming Pakistan had downed five Indian aircraft, including advanced Rafales, created diplomatic confusion. With India refraining from immediate public comment and conflicting U.S.-France assessments circulating online, adversaries exploited the uncertainty to challenge India's credibility. The news has been picked up and circulated by many global media networks including Reuters and CNN which was later found to be false.

Misattribution on social media under the hashtag #OperationSindoor misled millions, distorting the public understanding of India's tactical moves and risking escalatory misinterpretations abroad. The security establishment's challenge lies not only in countering threats but also in maintaining narrative control.

Political Implications

Televised warmongering, particularly by prominent news outlets, may intensify the psychological pressure on policymakers to undertake a reactionary approach. For instance, popular news channel 'Aaj Tak' aired a story that Pakistan's military was "decimated" during Operation Sindoor. Such inflated rhetoric when repeated escalates public expectations of military escalation and may pressure political leadership to adopt a more aggressive stance. This pattern mirrors similar false Pakistani claims such as Defence Minister Khawaja Asif's now-retracted assertion of capturing Indian soldiers. This incident demonstrates how disinformation thrives in a tit-for-tat media environment, where truth becomes secondary to nationalistic spectacle. More dangerously, adversaries have weaponized disinformation to sow communal discord within India. By targeting India's pluralistic fabric, such messaging attempts to weaken internal cohesion and divert security attention from external threats to imagined domestic ones. This tactic may not only destabilize societal harmony but also risks undermining long-term inter-community trust.

Furthermore, from a geopolitical perspective, the transnational consequences of disinformation are deeply concerning, particularly during periods of heightened conflict. Fabricated claims of decisive military victories often without credible evidence have become a common feature of information warfare. While Indian civil and military leadership has largely maintained a measured and professional stance in conveying official positions, the same cannot be said for counterparts across the border. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, for instance, has publicly retracted multiple statements, highlighting a deliberate strategy of sowing confusion through false narratives. Such tactics are emblematic of an ongoing psychological and propaganda battle, aimed at distorting truth, manipulating public perception, and influencing international opinion. These disinformation ploys not only undermine diplomatic credibility but also carry the risk of triggering unintended escalations in an already volatile regional security environment.

Media Jingoism and Its Strategic Consequences

In times of conflict, the news media's jingoistic posture and tendency to prioritize sensationalism over verified reporting especially by mainstream outlets has turned prime-time television into an arena for militaristic bravado rather than strategic clarity as mentioned earlier.
From a psychological operations standpoint, jingoistic coverage amplifies disinformation, which may can spiral into diplomatic crises.

When Indian media outlets uncritically relay or embellish unverified reports such as fabricated footage of Pakistani casualties or doctored visuals from unrelated conflicts, they blur the distinction between propaganda and journalism, undermining India's credibility internationally. Furthermore, this warmongering rhetoric may foster societal polarization, inflaming nationalist sentiment and enabling the political instrumentalization of war. Coverage that frames the conflict as a civilizational or religious crusade particularly with respect to Kashmir may fuel communal tensions, potentially inciting violence and radicalization within India's own borders.

From a security perspective, media jingoism compromises operational secrecy, prematurely revealing troop movements, tactical plans, or fabricated leaks that the adversary can exploit. In a digital ecosystem where information spreads instantly, loose narratives can become liabilities, impacting troop morale, mission effectiveness, and diplomatic manoeuvrability.

Implications for Military Readiness and Civil-Military Coordination

Military operational efficiency depends on clear situational awareness. When fake narratives such as reports of Pakistani airstrikes on Srinagar air base (actually repurposed footage from 2024 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa riots) spreads unchecked, they can prompt misplaced narratives and public readiness. Misreporting also risks poor coordination with civil administration in border zones. Moreover, military credibility is compromised when fake news goes viral before official communication catches up. Even though Indian agencies like PIB Fact Check and Alt News have debunked numerous falsehoods, the lag between rumour and rebuttal leaves a window for strategic damage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The rapid circulation of misinformation, disinformation and fake news especially during sensitive scenarios such as cross-border conflicts or public health crises poses a serious threat to social stability, democratic discourse, public safety, decision making and national security. During recent India-Pakistan tensions, fake news spread rapidly across social media and mainstream news channels alike, distorting public perception and undermining public trust. To address this growing challenge, we present a set of policy recommendations informed by a range of academic and policy studies, largely based on the Misinformation Recognition and Response Model. These recommendations are intended to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing misinformation across cognitive, social, and systemic dimensions. We believe a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is essential to effectively mitigate the proliferation and impact of false information. The following recommendations begin at the individual level which besides being the primary target of misinformation is also the first and most crucial line of defense. Further, we have provided a set of recommendations for the institutional level, addressing the roles and responsibilities of media organizations, social media platforms, educators and academic institutions, as well as policymakers, in controlling the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and fake news.

For Individuals: Building Cognitive Immunity

In the digital information age, individuals are no longer just passive recipients of information; they are also distributors and interpreters. This central role makes them both highly vulnerable to misinformation and critically important in stopping its spread. Studies have underscored that individual recognition of misinformation is shaped by dispositional factors (e.g., media literacy, cognitive style, ideological leanings) and situational factors (e.g., topic familiarity, message format, emotional context). Therefore, a key pillar of any misinformation mitigation strategy must involve equipping individuals with the knowledge, tools, and critical thinking capacities needed to navigate today's complex media environment. This requires not only formal education but also lifelong learning interventions that foster habits of scepticism, encourage diverse media consumption, and enable effective resistance to persuasive but misleading content. The following actions are essential to empower individuals as frontline defenders against falsehoods.

Enhance Media and News Literacy

- Integrate news literacy training through community workshops, school curricula, and online learning platforms to foster informed media consumption habits (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019).

  - Encourage the routine use of independent fact-checking platforms like Fact Check Unit, Boom Live, PolitiFact, and Snopes, which play a crucial role in intervention messaging.

Develop Critical Thinking and Resistance Strategies

- Promote reflective thinking and scepticism by encouraging individuals to question the accuracy and intent behind emotionally charged or ideologically consistent content (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

- Introduce simple public awareness campaigns with prompts like "Pause Before You Share" to nudge deeper engagement (Pause Before Sharing, to Help Stop Viral Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation, 2020).

- Educate individuals on effective resistance strategies such as counterarguing by challenging claims, avoidance by choosing not to engage or through source derogation i.e., critiquing the motive or credibility of the source. These measures are supported by framework on cognitive coping mechanisms (Jacks & Cameron, 2003).

Diversify Information Sources

- Media campaigns and educational initiatives must be launched that promote intentional exposure to a range of credible sources, including those with differing ideological, linguistic, and geographical perspectives (Vraga & Tully, 2021).

- Practices that challenge confirmation bias and reduce reliance on echo chambers must be encouraged. This will help foster openness to corrective messages and improve misinformation recognition, particularly in politicized contexts (Edgerly et al., 2019).

For Media Organizations: Restoring Trust and Accountability

Media organizations are the architects of public discourse. In today's hyperconnected world, they not only inform but also influence how facts are framed, interpreted, and acted upon. However, the same platforms and practices that build democratic societies may also serve as conduits for misinformation whether through inadequate fact-checking, sensationalist reporting, or failure to distinguish opinion from verified news. It must be noted that message characteristics such as source credibility, delivery format, and perceived intent critically influence whether individuals recognize or fall prey to misinformation.

As trust in media institutions wavers, and as misinformation increasingly masquerades as legitimate journalism, it becomes imperative that media outlets uphold the highest standards of transparency, integrity, and accountability. In light of these challenges, media organizations should consider the following measures:

Institutionalize Credible Reporting Standards

- Adopt clear labelling protocols to demarcate news, opinion, sponsored content, and native advertising, reducing audience confusion and aligning with the acknowledged insights on covert persuasion and source misidentification (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2020).

- Move away from false balance reporting especially on scientifically settled issues or verified facts and instead emphasize evidence-based, explanatory journalism that helps audiences understand context and credibility (van der Linden et al., 2015).

Amplify Pre-bunking and Debunking

- Establish dedicated sections or recurring segments for myth-busting, prebunking, and fact-checking especially during elections, crises, or national security events (Ecker et al., 2022).

- Use evidence-informed correction strategies, such as: Simple textual corrections backed by expert consensus, or Strategic use of storytelling, charts, and infographics, ensuring these tools are employed for clarity rather than distraction, in line with nuanced guidance on message formats (Amazeen et al., 2018; Krishna & Amazeen, 2022).

- Collaborate with independent fact-checkers and academic institutions to refine and verify correction content (Amazeen et al., 2019).

Train Journalists in Misinformation Detection

- Institutionalize ongoing training for journalists on: Evaluating source credibility, detecting disinformation campaigns (including deepfakes and manipulated content) and understanding algorithmic influence on content visibility and audience behavior (Amazeen & Krishna, 2023).

- Encourage transparent journalism by embedding source motive analysis and contextual disclosure in news stories, reinforcing perceived credibility as an essential factor in managing proliferation of fake news (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008; Vargo et al., 2018)..

For Social Media Platforms: Engineering Friction and Transparency

Social media platforms have become central to how individuals consume, interpret, and share information. Their speed, scale, and personalization algorithms have revolutionized communication but they have also made platforms fertile ground for the unchecked spread of misinformation and disinformation. It has been widely reported that individuals' ability to recognize misinformation is significantly influenced by message delivery characteristics and perceived source credibility, both of which are directly shaped by platform design and policies.

Given their gatekeeping power over global discourse, social media companies must go beyond reactive moderation and assume proactive, systemic responsibility. They must engineer friction to slow the viral spread of misinformation, introduce transparency into how content is curated and prioritized, and provide users with the tools and context needed to make informed judgments. These measures are not merely technical upgrades rather they are civic imperatives. As primary dissemination vectors, platforms must take systemic responsibility and act proactively by incorporation the following recommendation:

Algorithmic Accountability and Content Moderation

- Refine content ranking algorithms to account for source credibility, past behavior, and verification status, ensuring that trustworthy sources are prioritized in users' feeds.

- Introduce down-ranking or visual labeling for content flagged as potentially misleading or originating from known disinformation actors, in alignment with research findings that source perception directly influences recognition and trust (Sterrett et al., 2019).

- Implement "virality circuit breakers" that temporarily slow the sharing of unverified high-velocity content during emergencies or sensitive geopolitical moments.

Embed Corrective Interventions

- Automatically attach prebunking as a forewarning and debunking as a corrective message to content that matches patterns of known misinformation narratives.

- Design visually engaging, evidence-based corrections for example, interactive cards, short videos, expert commentary, that accompany flagged content without reinforcing it (Amazeen et al., 2018).

- Customize interventions based on regional context, language, and misinformation typology.

Enhance User Tools for Verification

- Provide users with on-platform fact-checking aids, including direct links to verified sources, embedded context cards, and explanations on "Why you're seeing this" for content appearing in feeds (Vraga et al., 2020).

- Introduce pre-sharing friction mechanisms, such as prompts that ask users to read or verify content before reposting, leveraging established insights that recognition reduces impulsive sharing behavior (Tandoc et al., 2020).

Promote Transparency

- Publicly disclose content moderation policies, including how algorithms rank, recommend, and suppress content, the rationale behind moderation decisions, especially in politically or socially charged contexts(Thorson & Wells, 2016).

  - Collaborate with civil society organizations, researchers, and independent oversight boards to ensure that content policies are fair, evidence-based, and adaptable to emerging threats.

  - Release regular transparency reports with detailed data on misinformation takedowns, correction reach, and user engagement with fact-checks.

For Educators and Institutions: Creating Critical Thinkers

In the long-term battle against misinformation and disinformation, education remains the most powerful and sustainable line of defense. As young people increasingly consume news and information through digital channels, often outside traditional gatekeeping structures, the responsibility of educational institutions has never been greater. Dispositional factors such as cognitive ability, media literacy, and motivation significantly influence whether individuals can identify and respond effectively to misinformation.

Schools, colleges, and universities are uniquely positioned to instil lifelong habits of critical inquiry, scepticism, and civic responsibility. However, this requires moving beyond rote instruction and adopting interdisciplinary, applied approaches that mirror the complexity of real-world information environments. Educators must also empower students to recognize persuasive intent, evaluate credibility, and resist manipulation skills that are foundational for resilient democratic societies. To this end, the following measures are recommended for educators and educational institutions:

Integrate Media and Digital Literacy into Core Curricula

- Embed media and information literacy modules across subjects from social science and language arts to computer studies (Vraga & Tully, 2021).

- Teach students to assess source credibility and bias, distinguish fact from opinion or propaganda, and identify persuasive framing techniques, aligning with emphasis on message characteristics and informational problem identification. Hence, promoting a thoughtful engagement and better misinformation detection.

- Use current misinformation case studies including viral hoaxes, political memes, manipulated videos to allow students to practice evaluation and correction in real-world scenarios (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019).

Training Educators and Researchers

- Train future educators and researchers to understand how platform algorithms, message virality, and audience targeting contribute to the spread of false information that are crucial to developing situational awareness (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

For Policymakers: Framing Systemic Safeguards

Finally, policymakers play a pivotal role in shaping the structural conditions that either allow misinformation to thrive or contain its spread. While individual and institutional responses are essential, system-level safeguards in the form of regulation, funding, and public communication strategies are necessary to protect the integrity of the information ecosystem. The recognition and response to misinformation are deeply influenced by factors such as message structure, perceived credibility, and exposure dynamics, many of which are shaped by policy decisions.

Governments must act not just as regulators but also as enablers of public resilience, setting standards for transparency, supporting educational interventions, and investing in evidence-based research. In a global landscape where information warfare and digital psyops are increasingly used to influence political outcomes and disrupt societal cohesion, policymaking must evolve from reactive regulation to proactive, anticipatory governance. The following policy interventions are recommended to strengthen systemic resilience against misinformation.

Enact Regulatory Frameworks for Persuasion Transparency

- Introduce legislation that requires clear labelling of all forms of paid content and persuasive communication, including native advertising, influencer endorsements, and political messaging.

- Regulate algorithmic amplification of unverified, harmful, or emotionally manipulative content particularly during sensitive periods such as elections, public health emergencies, and cross-border conflicts.

- Require transparency from tech platforms about how content is ranked and recommended, helping individuals better interpret the credibility and intent behind what they see (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Strengthen Strategic Communication Units

- A Joint Information Warfare Task Force comprising representatives from the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and key intelligence agencies should be institutionalized. This body should oversee coordinated strategic messaging, synchronize communication strategies across domains, and lead crisis-time responses. Pre-emptive dissemination of verified information during conflict scenarios will help India maintain narrative dominance and avoid an information vacuum that adversaries could exploit. Along with this, it will help maintain a single line of communication regarding conflicting information, ultimately reducing confusion and chaos among the masses.

Fund National Media Literacy Campaigns

- Allocate funding for nationwide public education initiatives, including school curriculum modules, public service announcements, and community outreach programs designed to improve media and digital literacy, especially among vulnerable or underserved populations (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019).

- Allocate funding for nationwide public education initiatives, including school curriculum modules, public service announcements, and community outreach programs designed to improve media and digital literacy, especially among vulnerable or underserved populations (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019).

- Develop prebunking campaigns to pre-emptively counter common and recurring misinformation themes such as those related to vaccines, communal tensions, or geopolitical conflicts drawing from the understanding that forewarning increases recognition and resistance (Amazeen et al., 2022).

Foster Evidence-Based Policymaking

- Support interdisciplinary research aimed at validating and operationalizing misinformation mitigation constructs, such as issue motivation, misinformation recognition triggers, and behavioural response patterns across demographic and digital contexts.

- Facilitate collaborative mechanisms between government bodies, technology platforms, academic institutions, and civil society to co-design adaptive, evidence-backed misinformation counterstrategies.

- Promote international cooperation on standards and responses to cross-border disinformation campaigns, acknowledging that influence operations increasingly transcend national boundaries (Vraga & Bode, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pak conflict presented us with a 21st-century war that was not just about the use of arms and ammunition, but also involved a complex mix of strategic diplomacy, military actions, and information warfare, including psychological operations and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. This crisis exposed a deep fault line in our digital society, where the rapid spread of information is often celebrated but also carries the potential to cause harm, social unrest, communal hatred, confusion, chaos, and panic among the masses. The problem is further compounded in a democratic society like India, where the principles of transparency and free speech must be delicately balanced against the imperatives of national security and social stability. The very openness that sustains Indian democracy also creates vulnerabilities exploitable by adversarial forces intent on sowing confusion, mistrust, and division. This tension makes any counter-disinformation strategy inherently complex and politically sensitive. It raises a pressing question: Are we adequately equipped to handle psychological operations at scale, particularly in the form of mis- and dis-information, during times of conflict when people are more vulnerable than ever?

This study finds that India needs a comprehensive strategy not only to protect its land, airspace, and sea lanes but also its information space, especially during times of crisis. The information space is uniquely vulnerable due to its easy accessibility, rapid dissemination, potential to cause significant harm, and the inherent difficulty in controlling it. The current state of preparedness is inadequate, as evidenced by instances of panic buying, hoarding of essential commodities, and the uncritical sharing of unverified information by the public.

Therefore, this study does not offer a panacea rather aims to stimulate deeper reflection and cross-sector dialogue on the tools, strategies, and values needed to combat the evolving threats of information manipulation and information warfare effectively. Whether it is through institutional capacity-building, real-time verification mechanisms, media sensitization, or citizen digital literacy, the overarching aim is to enhance societal resilience while upholding democratic values. The need is not just to react to disinformation, but to build a proactive, layered, and adaptive ecosystem that can respond to evolving threats without compromising on civil liberties. There is a need to work towards an environment where tackling mis- and dis-information is not an afterthought, but a well-designed pre-crisis strategy embedded within the broader civil defence framework. Just as physical protection is a vital component in times of conflict, the psychological dimension is equally critical and must be addressed with equal seriousness.

Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that countering information warfare and mis- and dis-information is not a task for the government alone. It requires the collective engagement of civil society, the media, academia, tech platforms, and informed citizens and MRRM plays a critical role in aligning such strategy. As India navigates an increasingly complex and volatile security environment, the integrity of its information ecosystem will remain central to its internal cohesion and international standing. The ideas explored here are intended as a starting point for dialogue, experimentation, and policymaking in an area that will only grow more critical with time. India's capacity to defend and define truth in the public sphere will be central to safeguarding its democratic values and national interest.

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