Evolving Role of Social Media in Disseminating Political Misinformation: Evidence from the 2019 and 2024 Indian General Elections

Ritesh Gautam[1]* | Dr. Huma Parveen[2] | Shahbaz Khan[3]

[1,3]Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

*Corresponding Author: ritesh_gautam@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The role of social media platforms in information sharing and consumption has evolved over the years. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have fundamentally changed the political landscape in unprecedented ways. In 2024, elections were held in more than 60 countries worldwide, including general elections in India. Mainstream media (newspapers, radio, and television) in India is still a source of news and information, but social media is rapidly replacing it as the primary news source. Many studies have revealed that misinformation and fake news significantly impact electoral behaviour. The use of social media news directly affects offline political engagement and indirectly influences online political participation. One of the main aims of this study is to evaluate the evolving role of social media platforms in the 2019 and 2024 Indian General Elections. This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with media professionals (12 interviews) to investigate the evolving role of social media platforms in the dissemination of misinformation during these elections. These professionals came from diverse organizational backgrounds, including academia, fact-checking, PR, journalism, and artificial intelligence (AI). Thematic analysis using grounded theory principles was employed to analyze the interviews to identify emerging patterns and themes. The study found that dependence on social media platforms (multiple sources) has increased for news and information in recent years. However, the volume of hate speech on the issues of religion, community, and individual targeting has increased between 2019 and 2024. The use of AI has also emerged in the 2024 general elections for content manipulation and fabrications. However, the study observed that fact-checking organizations and regulatory bodies made many efforts to combat misinformation and fake news. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the evolving role of social media platforms in contemporary political scenarios.

Keywords: Fake News, Misinformation, Social Media Platforms, Indian General Election, Artificial Intelligence, Fact-Checking.

Introduction

Social media platforms have significantly transformed how people communicate. Currently, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube have emerged as major sources of news and information. Theseplatforms have transformed information into a more interactive, instantaneous, and dynamic form of communication (Dalal and Nancy). The convergence of technologies, proliferation of social media platforms, and viral nature of political content have significantly transformed the information ecosystem in India and across the globe. However, these platforms have become a source of political misinformation by spreading false or misleading content that influences public opinion during elections (Roy et al.). Many studies have observed that fake news and misinformation are mostly shared on social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter play key roles in disseminating misinformation because they do

not verify information spread on their platforms. Social media facilitates two powerful forces that perpetuate the reach and spread of fake news. One of these is filter bubbles, which algorithmically work behind the scenes of social media sites. Another is personalized echo chambers, because social media provides an opportunity for users to follow like-minded people (Rhodes). Studies related to the 2019 general elections illustrate that not only social media platforms like WhatsApp spread much of the misinformation, but it also spread online through legitimate entities (Akbar et al.). However, the number of Internet and social media users has increased significantly since 2019. Statistics show that internet users have increased from 41% (560 million) to 55.3% (806 million) and social media users have increased from 23% (310 million) to 33.7% (491 million) of the total population (Kemp). In terms of platform Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have emerged as widely used social media platforms In India (StatCounter). Therefore, the growth of the Internet and social media has given an impetus to ease news and information sharing among users.

Studies on social media have revealed that the nature of the medium allows users to disseminate content without any restrictions and checks, making it difficult to trace the origin of misinformation. The viability of information exchange on social media has led to the rapid spread of political misinformation on these platforms, ultimately blurring the lines between news and opinion (Akbar et al.). Researchers have observed that the unchecked and morphing nature of misinformation and disinformation on social media is the biggest threat to election integrity. Election trends in the last decade across the globe indicate that cyber criminals, public and private political actors target democratic processes. This has been done to manipulate information and public opinion or even destabilize democratic institutions. However, the use of AI-generated content in electoral campaigns poses a significant threat to the information ecosystems. Such content is labelled as authentic and misleads voters on a large scale (Dad and Khan). Therefore, it has been observed that in the recent times the emerging role of social media in political campaigning poses a greater threat to free and fair elections. This study also attempts to analyze the evolving role of social media platforms in disseminating misinformation during the Indian general elections (2019 and 2024). This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with media professionals (12 interviews) to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did political misinformation on social media differ between the 2019 and 2024 Indian general elections?

RQ2: How do media professionals perceive social media's role in political misinformation during the 2019 and 2024 Indian general elections?

Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative research approach to provide a holistic view of misinformation and fake news during the Indian general election.

Literature Review

In contemporary times, social media platforms play a significant role in disseminating news and information during elections. However, studies have indicated that these platforms have become major sources of misinformation and fake news. Misinformation refers to the false presentation of information intended to deceive people. The term is used as an umbrella term for all forms of false information disseminated in a communication context, including but not limited to fake news, memes, disinformation and deepfakes. The widespread proliferation of misinformation and fake news raises concerns about political falsehoods that ultimately undermine political processes (Liu and Kuru). In the political context, misinformation not only influences the behavior of voters but also impacts political divisions and reduces trust in the government (Wang et al.). One of the major reasons for the rapid dissemination of misinformation is the proliferation of digital technology, which has reshaped every aspect of society. Conversely, the evolving role of social media platforms is crucial, as these platforms are becoming the primary sources of news and misinformation. These platforms have easily become vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation, significantly altering user interactions (Neyazi, Nadaf, et al.). Thus, social media platforms have altered the way people perceive news and information.

Researchers believe that it is difficult to correct misinformation and minimize its effects, but its presence weakens the value of factual information. Political misinformation is one of the most common types of false information that spreads on social media, and most of it is related to the electoral process. During elections, most fake news ranges from altered facts about the personal lives of politicians to the integrity of the electoral process. Misinformation related to polling data, election officials, and voter turnout also spread during the election cycle (Salomi). Several studies have reported that social media

platforms play a crucial role in the dissemination of false information during election campaigns. Social media and AI tools have accelerated information sharing faster than ever before. However, this speed comes at the cost of the spread of fake news and misinformation on these platforms (Wei et al.). Many studies have suggested that the technological convergence of media platforms has encouraged participation and engagement among citizens. Therefore, the multiplication of information channels, such as social media, blogs, and mobile apps, has collectively made it easier to spread misinformation and fake news. The debate on the role of social media in spreading misinformation intensified after the 2016 US elections. This is because participation and manipulation are directly linked to social media (Neyazi, Kalogeropoulos, et al.).

In the Indian context, studies have revealed that most misinformation is spread in communal, casteist, and hyper-nationalist forms. Studies based on the 2019 Indian general elections show that political actors across all major parties exploited platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to circulate misleading content. However, researchers have highlighted that owing to advancements in technology and the proliferation of closed networks (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram), it has become difficult to detect and correct false information on these platforms (Roy et al.). Therefore, the literature review shows how the evolving role of social media platforms and technological convergence plays a crucial role in the dissemination of fake news and misinformation during elections.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to answer the research questions (RQs) and investigate the evolving role of social media platforms in disseminating misinformation during the 2019 and 2024 general elections in India. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding by closely examining people's words, actions, and records (Maykut and Morehouse). The study employed in-depth interviews with media experts to gain insights into and opinions on the topic under study. In this study, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted, acknowledging the multiple subjective realities of the phenomena under study.Interpretive social science traces its roots to Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey. The study of political misinformation is complex and multifaceted. After analyzing the complexity, a qualitative research method was adopted. Qualitative research uses an inductive (specific to general) approach to contextualize the study in detail, with the researcher's viewpoints and interpretations as part of the results(Rosenberry and Vicker). An inductive approach is a bottom-up method that begins with detailed observations to generate broader ideas or perspectives on the subject. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm aligns with the qualitative approachto helpunderstand the complex and socially constructed nature of political misinformation.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine political misinformation that spreads on social media during general elections. Data were collected using in-depth interviews (12 interviews) with media experts to explore the phenomenon of political misinformation by examining their perspectives.In this study, expert interviews were conducted to understand complex phenomena, such as political misinformation, because such interviews (with experts) provide valuable insights and professional perspectives on the issue(Bogner et al.). The expert interview method allows researchers to access expert knowledge, validate findings from other data sources, and gain insights(Flick). The data collected using this methodwere analyzed using the grounded theory method of thematic analysis with the help of MAXQDA software to identify the key themes and categories.

Experts were selected through purposive identification of media professionals with specialized knowledge related to misinformation and political communication. Experts from six specific areas were targeted to ensure a comprehensive professional perspective on the topic. These experts came from diverse organizational backgrounds, including academia, fact-checking, PR, journalism, and AI. Experts were identified through professional networks, organizational websites, and referral recommendations. Initial contact was made through mobile phones and emails, explaining the purpose of the research, interview details, and assurances of anonymity (i.e., confidentiality). Therefore, experts were selected and recruited on a purposive basis to gain a holistic understanding of the study topic.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with each session lasting approximately (average time).Semi-structured interviews are usually based on a pre-established set of questions asked by the respondents. There is much greater flexibility in asking questions in semi-structured interviews(Brennen). All interviews were conducted after the election results over four months, from June 2024 to September 2024, based on expert availability. The interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the participants for further data analyses. Furthermore, each expert was assigned
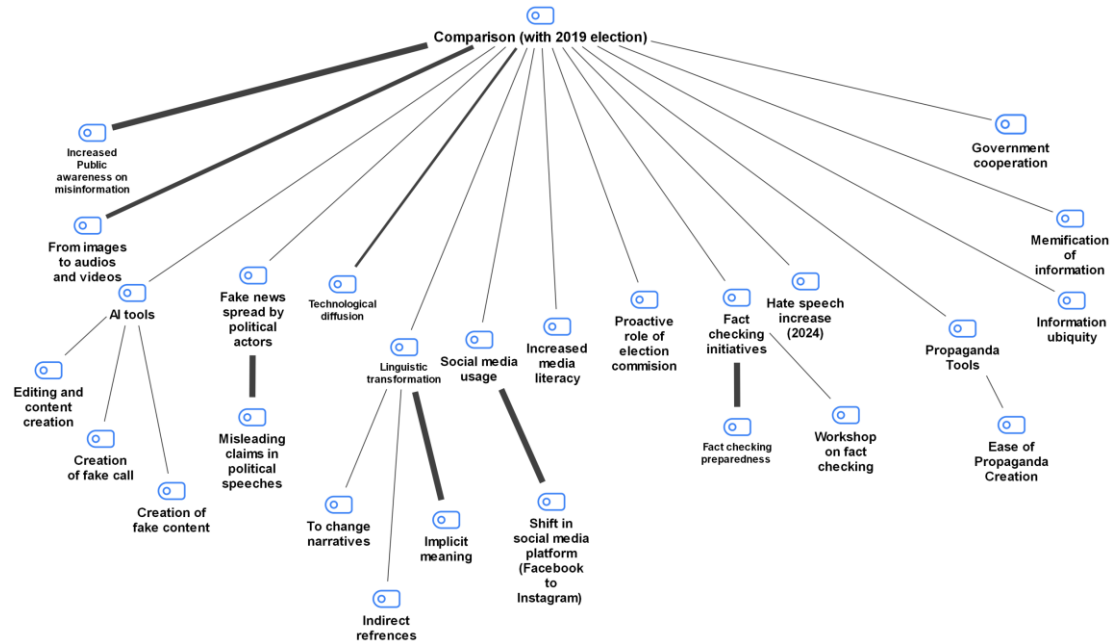
a unique identity (E1-E12) to ensure anonymity while mentioning their quotes and excerpts for specific insights during data analysis. Thematic analysis using grounded theory principles was employed to analyze the interviews to identify emerging patterns and themes. The grounded theory method was first introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1960). Therefore, a qualitative research approach was adopted to provide a holistic view of the issue of misinformation and fake news during Indian general elections.

Data Analysis and Results

As mentioned earlier, this study used a qualitative research approach to examine political misinformation through social media during the Indian general elections. The aim was to contrast the 2019 and 2024 elections in terms of the usage of social media platforms and their role in content sharing and generation. The role of social media platforms in information sharing and consumption has evolved significantly in recent years. Interviews with experts indicated that dependence on social media for information has increased since 2019. Furthermore, the word cloud (based on interview transcripts) indicates the diverse interpretations of elections in India, as articulated by media experts.

Figure 1

- **Word Cloud**

Each word or phrase in the cloud represents the frequency and importance of a particular theme. It also offers insights into public discourse surrounding the electoral process in India. The prominent terms within the word cloud likely include "misinformation", "platform", "propaganda", "social", "debunk", "fake", "fact", "Instagram", and "political content." Similarly, "video" and "fake" indicate the heightened use of AI-generated audio, video, and images in elections. Words such as "platforms", "fake" and "media" dominate the spread of misinformation in elections. Furthermore, checks and awareness indicate a growing awareness among the electorate, particularly among the youth, regarding their role in shaping the political landscape. Thus, the above word cloud indicates the different perspectives, concerns, and hopes expressed by media experts in relation to the Indian general elections. This highlights the role of social media in shaping political narratives and influencing electoral outcomes. Therefore, this word cloud indicates the pervasiveness of social media platforms during elections in information sharing and shaping political discourse in the present times.

- **Comparison with the 2019 general elections**

One of the main aims (RQ1) of this study was to examine the evolving role of social media since the 2019 general election. It has been observed that the significance of social media platforms has increased in recent years. Interviews with experts indicate that the use of social media, AI for content manipulation, and technological advancements (diffusion) increased in recent general elections. After

coding the data (interview transcripts), different categories emerged, which were represented through the hierarchical code-subcode model that showed each category separately.

Figure 2

Hierarchical code-subcodes model

Note. This model was generated using MAXQDA after coding.

The hierarchical code subcode model represents different categories that emerge after the systematic analysis of data. Figure 2 shows that each primary code was subdivided into several subcodes for a better understanding of each category. This enhances the analytical process, allowing researchers to navigate the complexities of qualitative information efficiently. This hierarchical framework indicates that major codes such as fake news, the role of AI, fact-checking initiatives, technological diffusion, government support, public awareness, and hate speech have increased in recent general elections. Furthermore, a few codes, such as the use of AI tools, linguistic transformation, fake news, and the use of social media, were further bifurcated to show subcodes. The width of the line in the diagram represents the frequency, which indicates the importance of a particular code. For example, fact-checking initiative codes indicate that, in these elections, fact-checking preparedness to combat misinformation and fake news has increased recently. Therefore, after data analysis (expert interviews), the following categories emerged that represent the political landscape of these elections:

Table 1: *Evolving political landscape during 2019 and 2024 general elections*

Category	2019 Elections	2024 Elections	Change Pattern
Social Media	Facebook-dominant	Multi-platform (Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube)	Platform diversification
Misinformation	Simple, easily detectable	Sophisticated, AI-generated	Technical advancement (content type)
AI Manipulation	Rare, basic editing	Deepfakes, voice cloning	Technology-enabled escalation
Media Literacy	Basic public awareness	Enhanced public education	Knowledge expansion
Fact-checking	Limited initiatives	Widespread programs	Infrastructure growth
Regulatory Responses	Reactive monitoring	Proactive prevention	Strategic strengthening

The above table shows the different categories that emerged after coding the data and represents the evolving role of the political landscape during these elections. Categories such as social media platforms, misinformation (content type), and AI manipulation indicate the increased dependence of users on multiple platforms and sophisticated use of technology for content (fake content) generation. On the other hand, categories such as media literacy, fact checking, and regulatory responses illustrate strategic measures to combat misinformation and fake news during these elections. Table 1 shows that there is easy access to information at present, and there is a shift among users in social media platform utilization and the gradual transformation of users from Facebook (2019) to platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (2024). Furthermore, the fake content observed on social media (the 2024 elections) was much more sophisticated than that of the 2019 general elections. Similarly, the use of AI for content manipulation has been observed on a large scale. On the other hand, experts observed that fact-checking organizations and regulatory bodies made many efforts to combat misinformation and fake news. Different categories emerged after coding the data (interview transcripts), which are explained below.

Type of Content on Social Media

Fake content has also changed since the 2019 general elections, with increasingly sophisticated fake news content observed in recent elections, which was not easy to debunk. Experts claimed that in the 2024 general elections, most misinformation spread through video content, whereas in previous polls, images were much more prevalent. However, the quality of the content (videos and images) was also very poor, making it difficult to debunk or decode. Experts have observed that audio misinformation, fake calls, or AI-generated calls (robocalls) have been prevalent in recent elections. On the other hand, there has been increase in misinformation and hate speech cases in the 2024 general elections. This can be understood through the statements made by media experts, as follows:

Videos were more prevalent during the elections. Last time, it was images; in the general elections of 2024, we did not observe many images. Different video clip formats were observed in the video content category. These videos have been edited, and the observed misinformation is out of context…So, this time, fake news was observed in the form of video-related content. (Expert E11)

Experts (fact checking) also claimed that in the 2024 elections, the quality of videos and images (fake content) was very poor, making it difficult to debunk this type of content. As cited by an expert, "People who spread misinformation sometimes tamper with the image or audio quality because they know there are fact-checkers. I think this is a significant difference. We have seen now that in 2019, maybe we used to find many clear images, but now the perpetrators of fake news have become so smart that they do not share perfect, clear images. Therefore, we cannot easily debunk this content" (Expert E11). However, there has been an increase in misinformation and hate speech cases in the 2024 general elections. One of the experts stated, "I would say that 2019 had slightly better moderation. The volume of hate speech increased between 2019 and 2024. 2024 also saw many hate speeches during the election" (Expert E4). Similarly, another expert claimed that, "there has been a very vitriolic hate speech paddled mostly by piggybacking on misinformation claims. Based on the context in which these claims are being made, they should be considered disinformation because they are intentional lies" (Expert E2).

The above excerpts and statements indicate a change in the type of content shared on social media. Video manipulation was much larger in the 2024 elections than in the 2019 general elections. Similarly, the volume of hate speech increased during these elections, thereby influencing voters.

Role of AI Tools in 2024 Elections

In the 2024 general elections, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools played a crucial role in content manipulation. AI is primarily used for voice cloning (manipulation), image creation, and cheap fake videos. It has also been observed that AI-based Robocalls are the most prevalent method of influencing voters during election campaigns. Many experts have claimed the central role of AI in the 2024 general elections. The following comments from experts clearly mention the use of AI during these elections:

As claimed by a media expert, "the 2019 election was the first to observe the rise of social media in political and election contexts. The 2024 general elections can be observed as the dawn of AI. Thus, 2019 and 2024 represent the nascent stages of social media transformation. As of 2019, we were new to the Internet, with mobile devices reaching the masses, and by 2024, we are in a different age of the Internet" (Expert E5). Similarly, another expert stated, "It can also be seen that this year, compared to the 2019 elections, there was a greater presence of AI-generated videos. In addition, the quality of most

of these videos was very low. However, several cases of cheap fakes have surfaced, primarily on social media platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, they are receiving a lot of traction" (Expert E2). These comments indicate that the use of AI was prevalent in the 2024 general elections. On the use of AI tools by common users, an expert claimed, "However, the arrival of tools, like FaceApp, is serious in that you can make a person smile while they are serious, and it was used on the spot on the wrestling athletes. Thus, they have an increasing impact. I am certain that people use tools such as the ChatGPT to create scripts. If it is used in academia, I am sure people use it to develop or polish content" (Expert E4).

This is evident from the above statements that the use of AI-based tools has been prevalent in recent elections. Although it has been noticed that the content produced by such techniques is not that sophisticated, manipulated content can be used to influence voters in elections.

Technological Transformation

Technological transformation and diffusion among social media users also played a significant role in these elections, in addition to other social and cultural transformations. An expert stated, "Compared to five years ago, it has become much easier for common social media users to create a video, edit it, or alter it" (Expert E5). During the 2024 elections, it was observed that most of the misinformation spread in videos and editing tools like *FaceApp* and *Canva*, making it easy for purveyors of fake news to create and share such videos. Media experts also expressed concerns over these tools and social media apps, which can be understood through the following comments:

Currently, we have inexpensive software devices, editing devices, and applications. Earlier, you needed Adobe and all those computer software to create or edit a video, to change anything, and to add or subtract anything. However, there are now many creative apps on your mobile phone that allow you to shoot and manipulate in any way. You can even edit it during live-streaming. This represents a change in 2024 for mobile technology. The speed of the Internet has also changed the landscape of misinformation. (Expert E5)

Similarly, another expert claimed, "Of course, there are better tools for propaganda to be created faster. Something like *Canva* was not as popular in 2019 as in 2024. Thus, things that make it easier to create visual propaganda, such as tools, have improved over the past five years" (Expert 4). Thus, all these comments and views from the experts clearly indicate that technological innovations and the diffusion of technology among social media users play a crucial role in the evolving nature of misinformation and fake news.

Media Literacy and Fact-checking Initiatives

Compared with 2019, there was much greater public awareness of misinformation among users. Many initiatives have been undertaken by fact-checking websites to educate people through workshops before general elections. One expert (fact-checker) who conducted workshops across India stated, "Awareness is at least there. This is the key difference for me because I have conducted workshops in India, in the northern part of India, and in Maharashtra. Therefore, I observed that people were at least aware. They may not be well-equipped with knowledge, but there is at least some awareness" (Expert 5). On the other hand, some experts claimed that there was less misinformation on social media than in 2019 because of the proactive role of fact-checkers and social media platforms. "The platforms were also more than prepared. Proactive at this time. Therefore, all these factors contributed to less misinformation. I cannot say misinformation-free, but relatively less misinformation," stated by an expert (Expert E7). In contrast, it has been observed that most of the misinformation shared on social media comes from previous elections. As stated by an expert, "On WhatsApp tipline, most of the misinformation that we received, I think, was already fact-checked" (Expert E7).

Thus, all these categoriesindicate the evolution of the political landscape in terms of content sharing, the role of AI in elections, and technological transformation since 2019. The analysis shows that media literacy and fact-checking initiatives play significant roles in countering misinformation. Therefore, this analysis shows the evolving role of social media in disseminating political misinformation during the Indian general elections.

Discussion and Conclusions

This section discusses the findings from the in-depth interviews conducted with media professionals. The discussion section interprets the main findings in relation to the existing literature and their implications for future practice. The findings of the study revealed that in the 2024 Indian general

elections, much more sophisticated content went viral in the form of videos and AI-manipulated audios, unlike the 2019 elections, in which images were prevalent. Audio manipulation was performed in the form of fake calls and AI-generated calls (robocalls) during the 2024 elections. However, there was an increase in misinformation and hate speech cases in 2024 compared to those in the 2019 general election. Studies indicate that the phenomenon of hate speech is not new, but digital technologies such as the Internet and smartphones have reframed it. However, new communication platforms, such as social media, have revived the hate speech problem by making it more visible, widespread, and frequent during elections (Arayankalam et al.). Another significant finding was that AI tools played a significant role in content manipulation during the 2024 elections. AI has primarily been used for voice cloning (manipulation), image creation, and cheap fake videos. The findings show that AI-based Robocalls were the most prevalent method of influencing voters during election campaigns. Many recent studies have shown that parties in Asian countries, such as India, Indonesia, and Taiwan, are using AI in political campaigns more openly than in Western democracies. Political parties across the globe are increasingly experimenting with AI in their campaigns (Rauchfleisch et al.). Although the content produced by AI techniques was not sophisticated, experts believed that AI played a central role in the 2024 Indian general elections.

The results of this study also indicate that technological innovations and the diffusion of technology among social media users play a crucial role in the evolving nature of misinformation and fake news. The significance of social media platforms has increased in recent years. These findings align with those of studies that show that social media is heavily used for political campaigning during elections because of its low cost and direct reach. Information spreads on social media much faster and further than on offline networks (Aziz and Bischoff). Most experts believe that the role of social media platforms in information sharing and consumption has evolved significantly over the past few years. This has led to an increase in misinformation and fake news during elections. In contrast, compared to 2019, there was much greater public awareness of misinformation among users. Many initiatives were undertaken by fact-checking websites to educate people through workshops before general elections. The results indicate the evolution of the political landscape in terms of content sharing, the role of AI in elections, and technological transformation since 2019. Finally, the research questions illustrate the evolving role of social media platforms in disseminating misinformation and fake news during the Indian general elections.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. This study is limited to 12 media professionals; a broader sample could provide additional insights into the topic under study. However, qualitative research designs have some limitations in terms of measuring misinformation prevalence. Future research could address these limitations by using larger samples and quantitative research designs.

Disclosure Statement

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