Weaponizing Information: The Rise of Social Media Manipulation in Nepal

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Abstract

The internet presents considerable challenges to democratic processes, particularly through social media platforms such as Meta and Twitter. These platforms frequently create environments where users are confined to echo chambers, thereby reinforcing homogeneous viewpoints and exacerbating societal divisions. As of May 2024, approximately 15.4 million individuals in Nepal were reported to be online, with 13.5 million engaging in social media activities—representing 49.6% of the population—through various forms of content that express both personal and collective experiences. A 2020 report from the Pew Research Center highlights that 64% of American adults perceive that misinformation significantly muddles public comprehension of contemporary issues. This phenomenon of echo chambers not only distorts public sentiment but also aids in the proliferation of conspiracy theories through algorithmic recommendations, thereby eroding constructive discourse across differing ideological perspectives. In Nepal, significant events have triggered the dissemination of damaging rumors on social media, which are often weaponized for personal vendettas. This study examines these incidents as a particular case and aims to confront the perils linked to the manipulation of information. To investigate the exploitation of viral content that caters to entrenched interests and deepens societal rifts, the research employs case studies, narrative inquiry, and content analysis. It underscores the pressing necessity for legislative reforms, improved enforcement mechanisms, and proactive engagement from stakeholders to foster the ethical and equitable utilization of social media for the greater good of society.

Keywords: weaponizing information, social media, fake news, echo chamber, narrative inquiry

Introduction

"Weapons" refers to information deliberately used as a powerful tool to achieve specific goals. The intentional deployment of misinformation, skewed propaganda, and cyber warfare to distort reality and undermine information systems is referred to as "weaponization." This strategy is utilized in various domains, including social, political, military, and economic spheres, with the aim of swaying public perception and eroding trust. The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines weapons as tools employed to inflict harm on individuals or groups. When social media platforms are leveraged to disseminate false information or suppress specific perspectives, the foundational integrity of democracy may be jeopardized, even though these platforms play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and mobilizing individuals in modern society. Karki (2024) characterizes cyber-lynching as the phenomenon where satirists are compelled to retract their statements and issue apologies, while populist figures around the world exploit the internet as a tool for intimidating their adversaries. Recently, individuals such as Rabi Lamichhane, Harka Sampang, and Balendra Shah have exhibited a troubling indifference and complacency towards these issues. Targeted communication has the capacity to influence beliefs and behaviors, thereby deepening societal rifts and conflicts, a dynamic often referred to as the "echo chamber" effect. The concept of "winning without fighting" is frequently linked to Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher who lived approximately 2400 years ago (Forno, 2018). The weaponization of information involves spreading misleading content to shape public opinion, incite conflict, or undermine trust in institutions. With social media's role in communication, this practice raises serious concerns about discourse authenticity and societal unrest. The intersection of technology and information warfare underscores the need for regulatory measures to protect democratic processes and enhance public awareness. Tactics such as disseminating misinformation and propaganda can significantly undermine a nation's defenses and foster discontent among its populace.

A study carried out in 2018 by Mercy Corps in partnership with the UN Human Rights Council found that political subversion and manipulation can distort electoral campaigns, shape media stories, stifle opposition, and jeopardize the integrity of democratic rule. The tactics utilized in this situation involve creating fake stories, utilizing deceitful account managers, and spreading false information on social media

channels. A probe revealed that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was using Facebook to push his political goals and suppress dissenting voices.

Ward (2018) states that ISIS effectively used social media to attract around 40,000 members from 110 countries, showcasing the group's innovative strategy. The increased availability of the internet in areas like Africa and the Middle East has broadened the number of people able to back ISIS, making it easier to recruit through social media and help regain lost land. Additionally, political bodies and governing bodies often use social media to spread false information, promote propaganda, and share conspiracy theories, leading to increased division and a decrease in public trust in official organizations. To address these difficulties, Twitter made a significant move in the summer of 2024, suspending approximately 70 million fake accounts, revealing various deceitful social media identities, including a fake Chicago Daily News profile. The impact of cognitive biases on how the public perceives highlights the importance of possessing critical thinking skills to protect against such manipulative strategies.

Shrestha (2077) emphasizes the escalating challenge of tackling false information in Nepal, a problem worsened by the swift rise in internet usage. The Nepal Telecommunications Authority states that around 23.9 million people, equivalent to 80% of the population, can use the internet, with over 10 million regularly using Facebook. "Fixed information" is described by Margaret Rouse, a distinguished researcher from America, as convincing material crafted to influence underrepresented perspectives. In this situation, cybercriminals use data to influence the thoughts and beliefs of the public. Sharma (2079) warns about cognitive hacking, which is utilizing data to promote negative attitudes by exposing individuals to media violence. Successful social media tactics seek to question traditional beliefs, cultivate doubt in those in power, and incite turmoil through emotional stories that emphasize societal wrongs.

Method and Materials

The research was conducted solely through a desktop research methodology, prioritizing a qualitative research design. This method focused on the use of secondary data and information derived from pre-existing sources, presenting a more economical option compared to traditional field research. The investigation predominantly drew upon readily available publications, reports, and datasets, which were accessible via digital

archives, libraries, and online academic journals. To explore the effects of controversial and misused viral or trolling queries and statuses on social media platforms, the study effectively utilized a combination of case study methodology, narrative inquiry, and content analysis techniques.

Purpose of the Research

The study aims to create and evaluate theories about the impacts of social media, to reveal potential trends, outcomes, or connections for future analysis. One suggested theory suggests that interacting on social media during certain events and elections greatly influences public opinion. Another theory suggests that false information spreads further on social media platforms in comparison to traditional media sources. Furthermore, another theory suggests that people's emotional responses to intentionally crafted social media content can be measured, resulting in social polarization and heightened levels of stress. Contemporary examples from diverse fields like politics, society, culture, religion, economics, and sports are utilized to examine these hypotheses.

Findings and Discussion

The impact of mass media on global society is extremely significant. Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message" is still applicable, given the significant influence of social and digital media on public perception. Despite this, the rapid spread of unconfirmed data on social problems via these platforms has made it easier for misinformation to spread, leading to increased political divisions and the rise of extremist groups worldwide. This occurrence has led to the growth of populist groups in established democracies and has been associated with an increase in political violence in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India. Social media and digital technology play a vital role in promoting division and extremism, with government worldwide frequently using propaganda and misinformation tactics to influence public opinion and maintain control over their populations.

Case 1

Regarding the Halting of Trump's Account

Photo Source: BBC onlinehttps://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55597840/

On January 8, 2021, Twitter and Meta made a pivotal decision to suspend the account of then-US President Donald Trump. This action was prompted by the spread of violent, ambiguous, and provocative content on their platforms. Twitter's choice to impose a permanent ban on President Trump sent a clear message about the unacceptability of behavior that could incite violence, setting a new standard for social media conduct. Trump's use of these platforms, marked by his criticisms of opponents, the spread of misinformation, and updates about his presidency, ultimately led to this significant measure. The ban received substantial support, with many calling for limitations on his inflammatory statements. The companies indicated that the decision to suspend the @real Donald Trump account was grounded in a thorough examination of recent tweets and their contextual ramifications, highlighting apprehensions regarding violence and incitement. The statement clarified that the prohibition would persist until November 2022. Social media platforms are instrumental in influencing public perception and opinion. However, the dissemination of misinformation can profoundly affect voter beliefs, public sentiment, and electoral participation.

A 2017 study by Prier examined how Twitter trolls affected the 2016 US presidential election, revealing that anonymous users engaged in character attacks and spread false information. Foreign actors, like Russia, have also exploited social media to interfere in elections. Additionally, claims of pro-Trump trolls and automated accounts

from Macedonia suggest manipulation of public opinion. A study by Shrestha (2018) found that false political news has a greater impact than other news types, threatening to deepen societal divisions as rival groups exploit misinformation. The spread of fake news during elections is particularly concerning, as it can confuse voters about legitimate candidates and undermine democratic integrity.

Case 2

Trump Dealing With Numerous Legal Challenges

Photo Source: Reutershttps://www.reuters.com/world/us/spotlight-trump-supporters/

In the course of his presidential election campaign, Donald Trump denounced the mainstream media as "fake" and effectively leveraged the internet as a pivotal instrument in the 2016 election. His tenure was characterized by a pervasive negativity directed at him and his supporters across social media platforms. However, the Capitol riot in January 2021, which sought to reverse the outcomes of the 2020 election, led to significant legal consequences for Trump and underscored the perilous nature of social media algorithms that promote emotionally charged content, thereby exacerbating division and creating echo chambers. This event serves as a stark illustration of how populist movements can threaten democratic processes through acts of violence. Sunstein (2018) notes that while the internet can enhance democracy by facilitating information sharing, it also poses risks related to fake news and insular online communities.

Kandel's 2080 research highlights the troubling use of social media for dehumanization and disinformation. A 2019 Mercy Corp study showed how President

Duterte of the Philippines uses Facebook to sway public opinion. Handlin (2014) argues that the rise of polarized populism in South America has led leaders to exploit leftist movements for divisive agendas, with countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador facing political turmoil. In Nepal, social media's influence is seen as powerful as nuclear capabilities. Karki (2024) discusses the rise of populism in Nepal, noting independent mayors and new political figures like Rabi Lamichhane and CK Raut, who effectively use social media to express public discontent with the political status quo.

Case 3

Tara Baral's Offensive Remarks About the US Ambassador

Source: Ratopati Online Newsportal
https://www.ratopati.com/story/429268/cricket#images/

On June 19, a public demonstration led by Tara Baral saw social activists igniting an image of the US ambassador, alleging that the embassy had denied Sandeep's visa application. A prominent Nepali digital creator subsequently released a video lasting 3 minutes and 68 seconds, which captured the activities of Baral's group and garnered significant engagement, including 119 comments, 67,000 shares, and 39,600 views. Within the video, members of Tara Baral's team expressed their frustration regarding various serious accusations, while the audience's responses reflected a range of opinions. The cyber division of the Nepal police reported that activist Tara Baral was detained for five days in May 2024 as part of an investigation into possible character defamation. Nepal's strategic geographical position makes it susceptible to external influences, as

foreign entities can leverage social media to advance their interests and sway local political dynamics. This interference presents a considerable threat to Nepal's sovereignty, especially amid escalating internal conflicts.

In the context of India, Dhruv Rathi has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the democratic landscape, emphasizing the shortcomings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and evaluating the media's handling of election coverage. As noted by Paudel (2081), the rise of educational content on digital platforms has significantly enhanced YouTube's influence. Rathi's political commentary, which has garnered an audience of over 20 million followers, serves to educate the public about governmental corruption and influences societal perceptions. In Nepal, the utilization of social media is intricately influenced by a variety of factors, including political, economic, religious, ideological, and strategic elements, reflecting a complex interplay of power relations and technological advancements. Furthermore, the manipulations at play, which encompass a comprehensive strategy involving technology, regulatory frameworks, and societal readiness, are crucial to understanding this dynamic. Kainai (2077) observes that, despite the pervasive presence of social media, it has not consistently led to an enhanced public comprehension of issues.

Case 4

Social and Racial Segregation Related to Cricketer Sompal Kami

Source: Social media platforms
https://www.facebook.com/reel/976077484523448/

Nepal is characterized by its rich tapestry of cultures, comprising a diverse social framework that includes numerous ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities. The role of social media in this context can be detrimental, as it has the potential to intensify existing conflicts through the dissemination of hate speech, bias, and propaganda aimed at particular ethnic or social groups. Prior to the 2024 Cricket World Cup, a case of racial discrimination against Sompal Kami at the Pashupatinath temple in Texas during a puja on June 22 was foreseen and posted on social media. This post promptly generated a series of derogatory remarks with the intention of stirring up inter-caste conflicts and disrespecting Brahmins. The priest, participating in tikka and blessing off Benkler, et al, 2018 and Pariser, 2011, claims that people are primarily exposed to information that validates their political beliefs and tend to ignore those with opposing views, partly because of search engine optimization algorithms creating "filter bubbles" and encouraging content creators to share exaggerated and highly politicized material.

Case 5

The Stunt Skills of Parliamentarian Gynendra Shahi

Source: Social Media Platforms

https://www.facebook.com/share/v/hhLgtTN3sMAKMjsu/

Social media has turned into a platform where users post a video of Federal Member of Parliament Gyan Bahadur Shahi fervently expressing his support for Sandeep, whose visa application was denied due to a background check involving an unrelated incident, outside the parliament. Reports have indicated that while serving as a member

of parliament, MP Shahi posed as a stuntman, publicly voicing disapproval of the nation's international strategies and joining in on chants that mocked these tactics. This scenario prompts inquiries into the intentions of both the foreign minister and the implicated minister. MP Shahi said that rejecting Sandeep's visa is an insult not only to him but to all citizens of Nepal. A video from Citizen HD News Media about this topic ignited a significant response on social networks, garnering strong support for Shahi's position. The React video, lasting five minutes and ten seconds, received a positive response with 31.3 thousand views, 246 shares, and 148 comments. Studies indicate that misinformation on social media platforms can impede adolescent growth, resulting in societal chaos within a matter of minutes. A 2021 study conducted by Kubin and Sikorski revealed that social media worsens ideological differences by causing polarization among users when they are exposed to negative tweets and retweets from politicians.

Case 6

Attorney Swagat Nepal's Unsubstantiated Claim

Source: Social Media Platforms https://www.facebook.com/leadernepaal/videos/

During the discussion, a key figure expressed dissatisfaction with the US Embassy's second rejection of Sandeep's visa application. Recorded segments totaling 38.4K were preserved. Legal expert Swagat Nepal claimed that Nepalese individuals must pay 330 million rupees daily to travel to the US, though he provided no evidence. He attributed Sandeep's visa denial to his courage and pessimism, causing confusion among the Nepalese public and straining diplomatic relations. He also noted that Nepali officials were largely unaware of US citizens' arrivals until US military personnel came with SLR cameras for the MCC. The Nepal Cricket Association did not respond to

inquiries about assisting Sandeep. The prevalence of gossip highlights a troubling disregard for fact-checking, raising concerns about social media's role in boosting television ratings. A diligent lawyer's role in addressing public allegations is crucial, as media statements often lack weight in a society with low moral standards and accountability. Misunderstandings about press freedom in the Nepali Constitution allow digital media to profit regardless of public sentiment.

Using information as a weapon can restrict freedom of speech by instilling fear and encouraging self-censorship. Certain interest groups use social media for the purpose of attacking, spreading rumors, creating cyber groups, and distributing harmful content. This conduct has the potential to create a hazardous environment of unawareness and doubt, affecting the community, the country, and the younger generation. Karki (2024) contends that in Nepal, as well as in other regions, these behaviors function as a caution to both existing political parties and emerging ruling classes. Following a tumultuous journey to authority, the majority of populist leaders ultimately diminish in impact. Leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Modi have shown that nationalism, persecution of minorities and migrants, hate speech, and xenophobia are not viable long-term tactics.

Case 7

Mayor Balen's Allegation Against CPN UML Leader KP Oli

Balen ✓
21h · 🌐

१० हजार करोड को कान्ड लुकाउन अर्को कान्ड गरेर जनता नझुक्काउनु होला माननीय केपि ओलीज्यू ।

झापा गिरिबन्धुमा बैना लिनेहरूलाई "दुई वर्षभित्र गिरीबन्धुकै जग्गा दिलाउँछौं " भनेर थम्थमाउनु भएछ   । गिरीबन्धु चिया बगानको जग्गामा गर्न खोजेको नीतिगत घोटलामा तपाईको सहभागिताको इतिहास हेर्दा त्यहाँ तपाईलाई नभनी पात पनि हल्लन्छ भन्ने लाग्दैन ।

यहि १० हजार करोडको काण्ड लुकाउन र जनतालाई भुलाउन राज्यको सम्पूर्ण शक्ति लगाएर न्युरोडमा हामीले बनाउन लागेको फूटपाथ फेरि सडक बनाउनु थाल्नु भएछ ।

अब बल्ल देश बन्ने भएछ । आफ्ना कर्तुत लुकाउन र विषयान्तर गरे पनि काम हुनु राम्रो हो । तपाईको शक्तिले अब रिडरोड बनाउनु, बुटवल चितवन बाटो बनाउनु, यस्ता धेरै आयोजनामा लगाउनुहोला । हामी साथमा छौं ।

अनि समयमै गिरिबन्धुमा पीडितको बैना फिर्ता गर्नु होला । नत्र कोही साँच्चैको नयाँ आउला र फाइल पल्टाउला । हुन त, पहिले पनि जेल बस्नु भएको हो । धन्यवाद ।

👍❤️ Ramesh Khadka, Himesh Panta and 242K others   43.9K comments   17K shares

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ➤ Share

Photo Source: Social Media Platforms
*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y3pymAsxgI/*

Balendra Shah, the mayor of Kathmandu Metropolis, has sparked significant debate due to his controversial social media posts targeting political rivals. He has faced baseless accusations of inconsistency, notably calling on CPN UML leader KP Oli to return 10,000 crore Nepali rupees linked to a land scandal, warning of potential legal consequences. Despite societal uncertainty, many support Balen, viewing him as a populist figure. Oli's harsh treatment of Balen has inadvertently boosted his popularity by deepening societal divisions. In just 21 hours, Balen's posts received 43.9k responses, 242k status points, and 17k shares, reflecting strong social media engagement. His dynamic content may position him as a challenger to the status quo. Balen effectively maintains voter support through collaborations with YouTubers and by promoting bold actions, while also using social media to spread conspiracy theories and narratives that resonate with the public in Nepali politics.

Kandel (2080) reported that political parties in Nepal began incorporating social media into their election campaigns during the 2070s. Social media had become a crucial part of election strategies by the year 2074, often disregarded by traditional media. It represented the first instance of using networks to shape voter opinions, as "leading parties" controlled access and kept out "major parties."

Case 8

Religious Riots Instigated by Social Media Stunts

Source: Social media platforms
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5YzY57mudE/
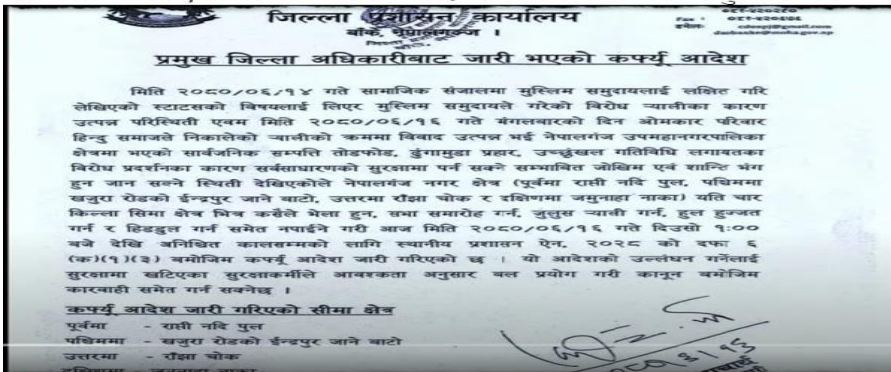
The October 14, 2023, incident in Nepalgunj involving the Muslim minority highlights the dangers of social media misuse. Tensions escalated after a provocative anti-caste post emerged during a dispute over a Ganesha statue's removal, leading local authorities to impose a curfew due to violence. The elected ward chairman was accused of spreading misinformation, while a video showed Hindu leader Srinivasa Acharya threatening violence during a protest over alleged cow strangulation, further heightening communal tensions. This case demonstrates how individuals exploit social media to incite religious intolerance and division among communities. While tea shops serve as hubs for discussion and bonding, the government must clarify regulations regarding social media use. Baral (2080) suggests guidelines to combat cyberbullying, misinformation, and threats against women, proposing penalties of up to Rs 5 lakh for offenders and defining hate speech as language that incites social unrest, with compliance required for clauses 20-42 that ban offensive content and unlawful activities.

Khan (2018) highlights the research conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute on online political conversations through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. He points out that these discussions often lead to surveys influenced by "intentional propaganda" created by bots, presenting a possible threat to democracy. The study carried out by Rutenberg and colleagues (2024) also highlights Kate Conley's remarks on the Department of Defense's efforts to address threats from foreign entities. Managing online dangers domestically has become more challenging, particularly with the latest developments from Facebook and YouTube. Examples include spreading a message that divides, undermining trust in democratic institutions, inciting resistance from institutions, and hacking political campaigns. In May 2024, a report from the cyber division of the Nepal police indicated that activist Tara Baral was held in custody for five days during an inquiry into purported character defamation. The Electronic Transactions Act 2063, the Criminal Code 2074, the National Cyber Security Policy 2080, the Guidelines for the Use and Regulation of Social Networks 2080, and the Constitution 2072 collectively prohibit violations of privacy.

Delaney (2021) found that social networks are essential in democratic politics, creating echo chambers. These echo chambers seem to exacerbate the polarization of current beliefs. The exclusive danger to democracy is not only isolating particular instances. How can businesses and political activists use social media to achieve their goals? Additionally, how did Cambridge Analytica exploit social media data, and what

methods were used to collect and apply this information? Understanding these aspects is vital for grasping how entities like Cambridge Analytica leveraged social media for political influence and profit. The strategic use of social media also increases risks of cyberattacks, terrorism, and espionage, threatening national security. Malicious actors can exploit these platforms to spread ideologies and conduct illegal activities, prompting governments to enact legislation for protection. As reported in DataReportal 2024, approximately 4.48 billion individuals worldwide engage with social media, representing 50% of the global population. The total number of internet users globally exceeds 4.66 billion, with a significant number participating on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. In Nepal, the increasing prevalence of social media has given rise to various ethical and legal issues, notably defamation and misinformation, as evidenced by the 6,956 cyber complaints filed during the fiscal year 2079/080. As of May 2024, Datareportal reported that approximately 15.4 million people, or 49.6% of Nepal's population, had internet access.

In Nepal, social media has become an integral part of everyday life, with around 13.5 million users, accounting for 43.5% of the population, actively participating on various platforms. The user demographic primarily consists of individuals aged 13 to 44, with a significant male representation of 56.4%. Facebook is the most widely used platform, engaging 43.5% of the population, and among its users, 57.7% are aged 13 and older, making this age group the largest demographic segment. Messenger also enjoys considerable popularity, with a usage rate of 70.5% across the population.

The rising engagement with platforms like Facebook Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter indicates a growing trend of individuals expressing their opinions openly. However, the misuse of social media can stifle dissenting voices. Silwal (2079) points out that the Press Council of Nepal has directed the Nepal Police (Cyber Bureau) to investigate and take action against 34 YouTube channels for sharing inappropriate content not affiliated with any media organization, leading to charges against 14 officially registered channels. The ban on TikTok in Nepal has faced criticism for violating media freedom and the right to free expression. As governmental structures weaken, public trust in democratic principles seems to strengthen; however, it is crucial to understand that authority does not grant an unrestricted right to free speech. In November 2023, the government implemented a ban on TikTok to uphold national laws and constitutional values, including restrictions on insults and offensive language as

specified in the National Criminal Code of 2074. Upreti (2080) notes that cybercrime affects 14 individuals every second, with one in ten people worldwide impacted, according to the Telegraph. Research by the Internet Crime Complaint Center has identified 79 different types of cybercrime globally.

Conclusions and Implications

To address legal challenges, the government must collaborate with law enforcement and social media platforms for effective enforcement, reduce misuse, and establish strong legislation. This partnership highlights the need for legislative reforms, better enforcement, and stakeholder engagement to promote responsible social media use. Since 1963, Nepal's media landscape has evolved, but declining public trust in media threatens democracy. Cyberspace security relies on user awareness, emphasizing the need for an informed populace for a healthy democracy. Forno (2018) describes the use of online platforms for espionage and misinformation as "hybrid warfare," blending military tactics with intelligence operations. In Nepal, content creators exploit this by sharing provocative imagery for personal gain. Baral (2080) states that networks with over 100,000 users must register, facing penalties up to 2.5 million for non-compliance. Platform operators must also remove specified content promptly, risking fines up to 1 million from the Ministry of Communications. While South Asia Check and Nepal Fact Check have verified some information, they haven't identified specific weapons. The younger demographic often takes public data at face value, raising concerns.

In Nepal, social media platforms significantly influence the development of international norms, the advancement of democratic principles, and the fostering of a respectful digital atmosphere. It is imperative for governmental bodies, civil society organizations, and specialists to collaborate in combating misinformation and manipulation in order to safeguard the tenets of free speech and expression. Normative acts related to social networks can promote truthfulness, cultural values, and human dignity while also causing challenges in verifying authentic content and maintaining public trust. Conspiracy theories thrive due to recommendation algorithms creating echo chambers. The emergence of deepfakes, enabled by AI advancements, spreads misinformation through realistic fake content. To combat social media polarization, media literacy and algorithm transparency must be prioritized by politicians, platforms, and civil society.

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