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From Smartphones to Ballot Boxes:
The Impact of Misinformation on
Indian Voters

May 2024

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Survey powered by Contrails.ai, a Bengaluru-based AI startup solving for Trust and Safety

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Executive Summary

This report is an empirical examination of the impact of misinformation in the news on Indian voters. It is based on an extensive primary survey of 5,837 individuals from diverse regions across India. The ongoing General Elections are expected to engage more than 700 million voters, including 101 million first time voters. Therefore, our analysis hones in on the impact of misinformation particularly on young voters.

Beyond the Indian electoral landscape, parliamentary elections are slated in over 60 other countries this year including seven of the world's most populous countries. Politicians worldwide are leveraging the internet and social media to engage directly with voters. While this helps to make election campaigns more efficient and targeted, it comes at the cost of rampant misinformation, given the competitive nature of elections. Our findings are likely relevant for research in other democracies grappling with similar challenges.

We recognise there are several harms related to misinformation, not limited to influencing voting behaviour, such as manipulation of general beliefs, impact on spending behaviour, and so on. Therefore, the underlying survey for this report was designed to accommodate: (a) an approximately even gender distribution, (b) coverage of all states to capture regional heterogeneity, and (c) perspectives of people with higher education who are likely more aware of the diverse aspects of misinformation.

Many India's first-time voters have grown up with social media and communications applications. Political parties are naturally keen to capitalise on their online footprint. But the spectre of misinformation looms large in this landscape manifesting through memes, misattributed content, fabricated websites and sophisticated deepfakes (Helmus 2022).

Our analysis focusses on seven critical aspects of misinformation in the news: its sources, extent, impact, spread, target, verification and identification. Our key findings are:

- There are four distinct groups of respondents: (a) existing voters who intend to vote in the future (40 percent); (b) existing voters uninterested in voting in the future (9 percent); (c) first-time voters who intend to vote in the future (34 percent); and (d) first-time eligible voters disinterested in voting (17 percent). These groups had varying degrees of civic awareness.
- Almost as many people rely on the internet for news as those who do not. A majority directly (as messages or forwards) or indirectly (via news feeds) depends on social media and news curation apps for information.
- Predictably, misinformation reduces news consumption, and negatively impacts voter turnout. But a counterintuitive discovery surfaced: those with a high preference for political news are less likely to vote, hinting at a direct link between news consumption and voting.
- The discouraging effect of news is more pronounced among experienced voters compared to first time voters.
- Seventy percent of respondents think the level of misinformation has increased with the rise in internet usage.
- While only 15 percent immediately share internet-sourced news, social networking platforms and websites amplify the reach of such misinformation. Only 28 percent never partake in such sharing.

- Our survey also revealed demographic patterns in misinformation-targeting: the digitally literate urban young with university degrees are more susceptible, within the overall scope of the survey which is designed to capture those with higher education. Similarly, women emerge as more frequent targets of misinformation than men. Excess targeting (relative to the baseline) in each of these cases ranges between 15 and 24 percent. Influencing voting behaviour is the main reason for this targeting pattern, while other drivers such as influencing general ideology or beliefs, spending behaviour, social standing, and communal and religious sentiment closely follow.
- Sixteen percent of respondents admitted to not verifying news, making them more susceptible to misinformation. Fifty-four percent turned to sources such as social media and search engines, while 30 percent, a minority, used traditional sources such as newspapers, research articles, and displayed a higher resilience to misinformation. Respondents also verified political news more often than news about sports, religion, economics, law and order, and world affairs.
- Despite efforts, verifying and identifying misinformation remains a formidable challenge for at least 21 percent of voters. This task is further complicated by the intricate web of social networks, such as the users of social networks propagating misinformation through memes, bot accounts and other deceptive means.

Our findings suggest an urgent need to combat misinformation. While regulatory measures may curb its spread, they must be balanced against Constitutional freedoms of speech and expression. Unchecked misinformation poses risks of political, social and economic instability, while excessive control erodes democracy.

For example, Fujiwara et al. (2021), Jones et al. (2017) and Reveilhac and Morselli (2022) highlight the impact of social media (Twitter, now X) on voting behaviour in the US lowered the Republican vote share in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, with voter persuasion rates of 8.6 to 9.4 percent, respectively. A similar result on social networks affecting voting behaviour is also noted. In electoral democracies, misinformation can erode confidence in the political system and civic engagement (Sanchez and Middlemass 2022).

A large share of potential voters expressed disillusionment with the electoral process due to misinformation. To rekindle public trust and engagement, regulations alone may prove insufficient. Social media and other new media services must shoulder enhanced accountability to mitigate misinformation.

Evidence suggests empowering individual voters, or encouraging users to critically evaluate news accuracy, reduces susceptibility to manipulation (Pennycook and Rand 2021, Magda and Christos 2022). Tackling misinformation without undermining individual or business freedoms requires a greater focus on public education, analytical thinking and the development of robust mechanisms to ensure news reliability (Bago et al. 2020, Sindermann et al. 2020, Bertolotti et al. 2023, Acemoglu et al. 2021, Majerczak and Strzelecki 2022).

Efforts by tech companies to refine their recommendation and curation engines (Bucher 2018, Acemoglu et al. 2021, Pennycook and Rand 2021) are just as important. A combination of measures incorporating these strategies can bolster individual decision-making, particularly considering the challenges highlighted by this survey which also reveals there was a desire to verify news, but voters found it hard to do so.

This report takes a holistic view of misinformation in the Indian electoral context, offering insights beyond conventional research focussing on narrower content categories (Al-Zaman 2021) and sources (Neyazi et al. 2021, Kanozia et al. 2021). By exploring psychological intentions, reliability, identification, verification, distribution, impact and target demographics, we have contributed to a nuanced understanding of the challenges of fair elections.

Introduction

Around 603.7 million votes were cast at the last Indian General Elections, in 2019, representing a voter turnout of 67.11 percent (Ramani 2019). If this turnout share is unchanged, nearly 101 million new votes are likely to be cast in the 2024 General Elections – which is third only to the number of votes received by the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) (~229 million) and the Indian National Congress (INC) (~119 million) in the 2019 general elections (Shukla 2023, Election Commission of India, n.d.). Political parties are naturally keen to exploit these swing voters. This translates to strategically choosing the type of information political parties share about (a) the policy landscape, (b) their own positions, and (c) the relative positions of rivals (Grossman and Helpman 2020). Consequently, campaign tactics often include dissemination of inaccurate, false and misleading information (Osman 2024). Such information is commonly referred to as misinformation, when it is spread regardless of whether there was intent to mislead or not. Misinformation can also, in some cases, be characterised as disinformation when it is intended to deceive or mislead.

Against this backdrop, our report sheds light on seven facets of misinformation: source, reliability, identification, verification, dissemination, impact, and target. The word 'misinformation' in this report, refers to incorrect information of any kind, including disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, etc.

Most people eligible to vote in 2024 often get their news and views on social, political and economic issues from new media. News consumption online, especially on social media services has overtaken traditional media (Aneez et al. 2019). Political parties are aware of this. They spent more than INR 53 crore (~USD 6.6 million) on social media campaigns to influence voters in the 2019 elections. The BJP and INC ran more than 2,500 ads each on Meta alone during the previous election cycle (Hindu 2019). This heightened news creation, promotion, and consumption also gives rise to misinformation and related concerns. Madhavan (2019) reports that during the last elections, around 50,000 fake news posts were published and shared over two million times. The prevalence of misinformation in political campaigns is a global trend, and one that is perhaps most analysed in the American political context. Guess et al. (2018) estimate that one in four Americans visited a fake news website in the six weeks leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, while around 14 percent reported social media as their primary news source (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

Recent research points to two additional reasons for the uptake and spread of misinformation based on homophily in social networks: people's tendency to seek out or be attracted to others who are similar to them (Sunstein 2018, Lazer et al. 2018, Guess et al. 2018, Levy 2021, Acemoglu et al. 2021). First, homophily creates echo chambers that require less discipline when sharing content. This is because social media allows individual users to decide for themselves who and what they listen to. This incentivises sharing content with like-minded people. Homophily also leads to the characteristics of a 'small world' in social networks, which refers to the fact that people's direct and indirect connections make the dissemination of information smooth and fast (Jackson 2006, Davidsen et al. 2018, Boguñá et al. 2020). Several studies suggest that the strength of clustering,' or grouping) in these networks is more than 100 or even 1,000 times the strength in a random distribution of people (Èbel at al. 2003, Jackson 2006).

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[1] Swing voters are those who do not have allegiance to a particular candidate or party and can go either way (Mayer 2012).

Misinformation leads to the lemon's problem (i.e. the adverse selection problem) as many individuals believe the false claims they encounter (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016, Anthony and Moulding 2020). A possible worrying side-effect of misinformation (disinformation in particular) is that it can disorient individuals from the election process (Walter and van der Eijk 2019). Some recent evidence also suggests that misinformation on social media has impacted people's ability to make critical decisions such as receiving vaccinations against COVID-19 (Pennycook et al. 2018, Pennycook et al. 2020), following prescribed treatment plans (Ismail et al. 2022), and the efficiency and promptness of rescue and relief efforts during a disaster (Muhammed and Mathew 2022).

While these issues are well documented in western literature, there is a need to study the new information environment in India. The spread of harmful information and the ability to create it has grown exponentially. Deepfakes, a form of synthetic media, are a key example of the threat arising out of the use of compelling but manufactured audio-visual content (Diakopoulos and Johnson 2020). They not only destabilise news reporting by fabricating evidence, but also distort or manipulate the existing information environment and create mistrust. In the context of voting, deepfakes can soften or smear a candidate's image, steer voters away from or towards a candidate, or nudge them to avoid the polls altogether (Swenson and Chan 2024). Recent events like the circulation of 2024 US Presidential nominee Donald Trump's photographs with Black supporters, a demography crucial for winning the election (Spring 2024) and a video of Moldova's pro-Western president throwing her support behind a political party friendly to Russia (Wesolowsky 2024) show how insidious deepfakes are in the electoral context.

Tackling misinformation and its spread without undermining the freedom of the internet and media requires educating the public on analytical thinking and reasoning (Bago et al. 2020, Sindermann et al. 2020, Bertolotti et al. 2023), a robust mechanism to ensure the reliability of news (Acemoglu et al. 2021, Majerczak and Strzelecki 2022) and proactive efforts by technology companies (Bucher 2018, Acemoglu et al. 2021, Pennycook and Rand 2021). Our survey suggests that future interventions must strengthen individuals' agency in making decisions. There is already evidence that the degree of such agency, including a nudge to social media users to think about the accuracy of news, reduces manipulation (Pennycook and Rand 2021, Magda and Christos 2022).

The survey is designed to assess the sources of news consumption, the time spent on it, news preferences: whether political, sport, etc. We highlight the spread and main targets of misinformation and also discuss the means of verification and identification of misinformation. Further we explore the impact and targets of misinformation and, finally, the attempts at regulating misinformation in India and the world.

Survey Design and Profile of Respondents

The survey was designed to capture several aspects of misinformation in the news, as listed below.

- *Source of news consumption, preference for different news categories and time spent:* Here, respondents were asked about their preference for different news sources, their preference for different news categories such as political, sports, financial or economic and religious, and the amount of time they spend consuming news each day.
- *Perception on misinformation in the news and its targets:* Here, respondents were asked to rate five different news categories – political, economic or financial, sports, religious, and international relations and law and order – based on the extent to which they believe misinformation is present in these categories and the likely purpose of such incorrect information.
- *Perception of the spread, impact and targeting of misinformation in news: In* this block, respondents were asked about the frequency of forwarding potentially incorrect information. Additionally, they were also asked whether they believe that misinformation is spread differently depending on gender, place of residence, age group, digital literacy and level of education.
- *Verification and identification of misinformation in news:* In this block, respondents were asked about the difficulty or ease of identifying misinformation in news and the mechanisms they use to verify it.

A total of 5,837 people from across the country participated in the survey, with the most participation coming from the National Capital Region (13.8 percent), followed by Madhya Pradesh (11.8 percent) and Haryana (8.2 percents). The north-eastern states (Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram), account for the lowest participation, ranging between 0.2 and 0.35 percent. The survey was conducted online between January and February 2024. The underlying survey for this report was designed to accommodate: (a) an approximately even gender distribution, (b) coverage of all states to capture regional heterogeneity, and (c) perspectives of people with higher education who are likely more aware of the diverse aspects of misinformation.

Figure 1 shows the profile of the respondents. There is a near equal distribution of men and women, with most of them being between 18 and 25 years old. In addition, nearly seven out of 10 respondents have a graduation degree or above, suggesting that they are likely to be well informed about the various aspects of misinformation –an important consideration for the current study. Finally, two out of every three live in their constituency (i.e. they are not migrants), implying that they are aware of the local political environment. Overall, the sample represents an educated mass from heterogeneous age groups and locations and has an even gender distribution.

Figure 1: Profile of Respondents
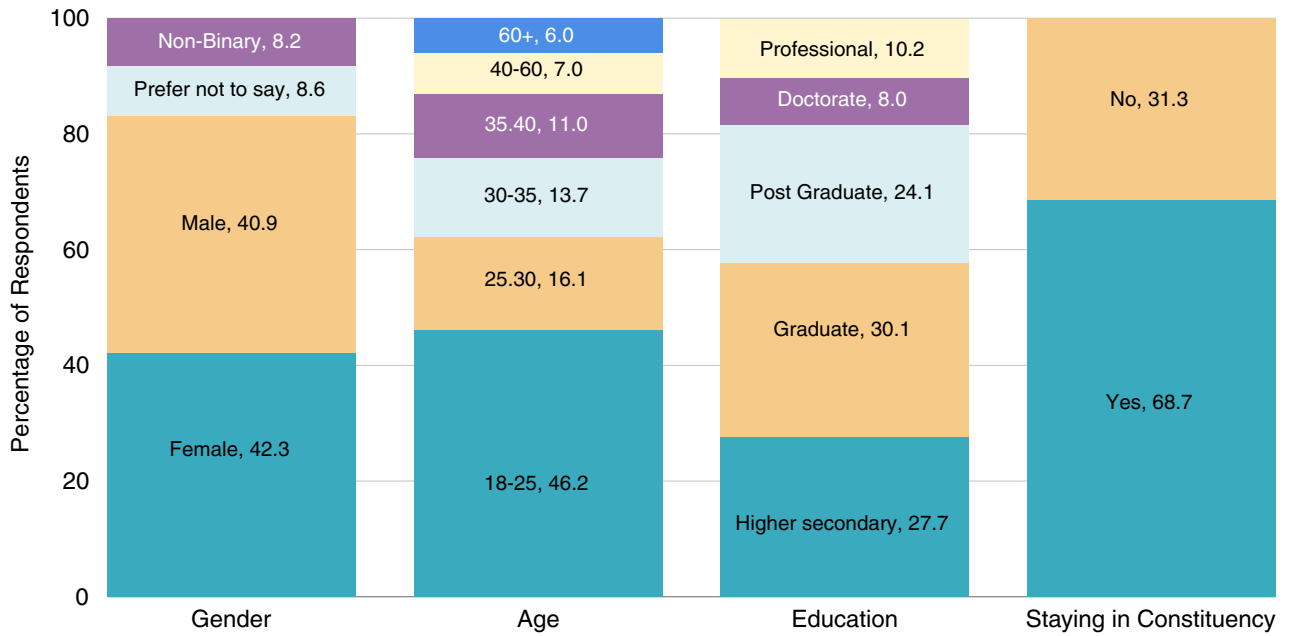
Notes: The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 2: Voting Status of Respondents
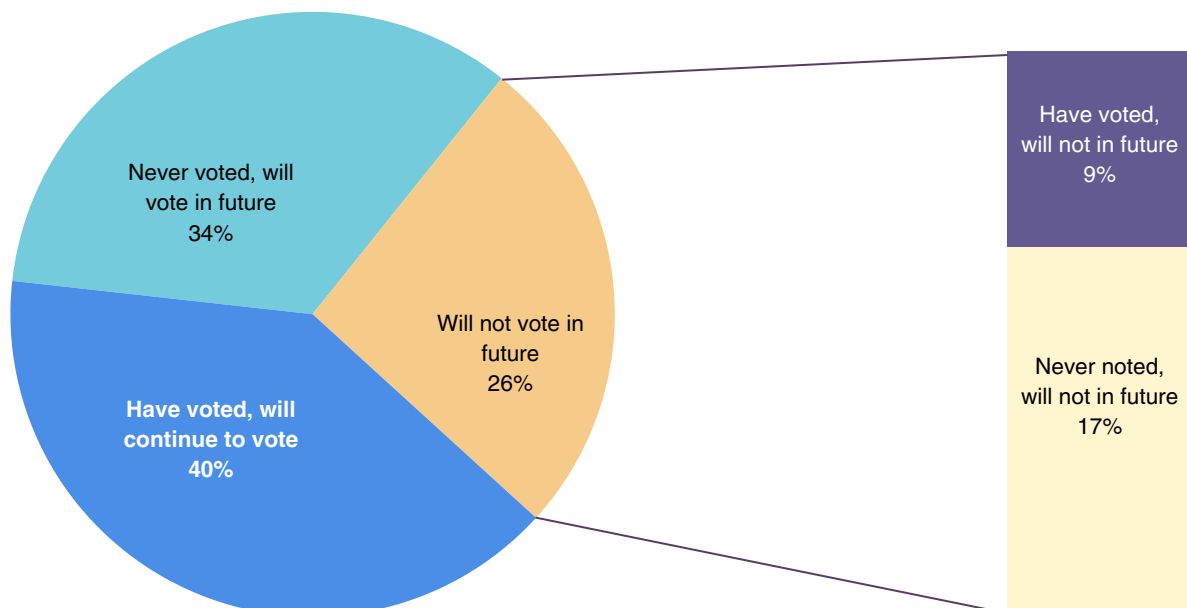
Notes: The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 2 shows the voting status of respondents, central to our analysis. Fifty-one percent of respondents are first-time voters, while 49 percent have voted before. Of first-time voters, nearly 7 in 10 say they will vote in the future, compared to nearly 8 in 10 of those who have voted before. Looking at voter turnout as a barometer of confidence in the democratic process, those who have voted before reveal higher confidence, ceteris paribus. This observation leads to the possibility that misinformation could be a reason for lower turnout among first-time voters – an aspect we explore in the following sections. It is worth noting that the expected voter turnout in the current sample is 74 percent, which is higher than the voter turnout in the 2019 general election, which was 67.11 percent (Ramani 2019).

There are four different groups of respondents in the survey: (a) existing voters who do not intend to vote in the future, (b) existing voters who intend to vote in the future, (c) first-time voters who intend to vote and (d) eligible first-time voters who do not intend to vote (Figure 2). This categorisation is important because individuals' motivations to vote reflect their understanding of rights and responsibilities as citizens, belief in the democratic process etc (Carswell and De Neve 2014, Hazarika 2015, Parwez 2022).

When voting is viewed as a social act, with locality, caste and class playing a considerable role in the electoral dynamics, existing voters are clearly different from first-time voters. Bhatti and Hansen (2012), for example, show that many young adults leave the family nest and have greater peer influence than that of their parents or local community, leading to a decline in their voting behaviour. Media exacerbates this influence. For example, Verma and Sardesai (2014), using data from the National Election Study from 1996 to 2014, show that higher media exposure (television news, radio news and newspapers) leads voters, especially young adults, to support economic liberalisation. Subsequently, the failure or inefficiency of the political system to ensure economic liberalisation negatively impacts voting behaviour of these voters. Sardesai (2023) comes to a similar conclusion when media exposure includes social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube) and the sample is extended to the 2019 General Elections. Anthropological accounts highlight the scope of economic liberalisation among young adults, which extends to a variety of issues related to electricity, water, education, health, sports, consumption baskets including electronic products, etc. (Choudhury 2024).

News Consumption: Source, Preference and Time Spent

Figure 3 shows the respondents' preferred sources of news consumption. Those who use the internet as a news source are nearly equal to those who do not (Figure 3). Eight in 10 of those who use the internet rely directly (as messages or forwards) or indirectly (via news feeds) on social media and news sharing or curation applications. This suggests that a large number may be motivated to share misinformation to boost their appeal and validation in their social groups (Bowden-Green et al. 2020). On the other hand, news feeds and curated pages are typically designed or automated to increase user engagement by tracking behavioural characteristics (Gillespie 2017, Munn 2020). This can lead to platforms targeting and supplying certain people with specific types of news. Both cases show that the tendency of news to be mixed with misinformation is fairly high.

**Figure 3:** Internet as the Source of News
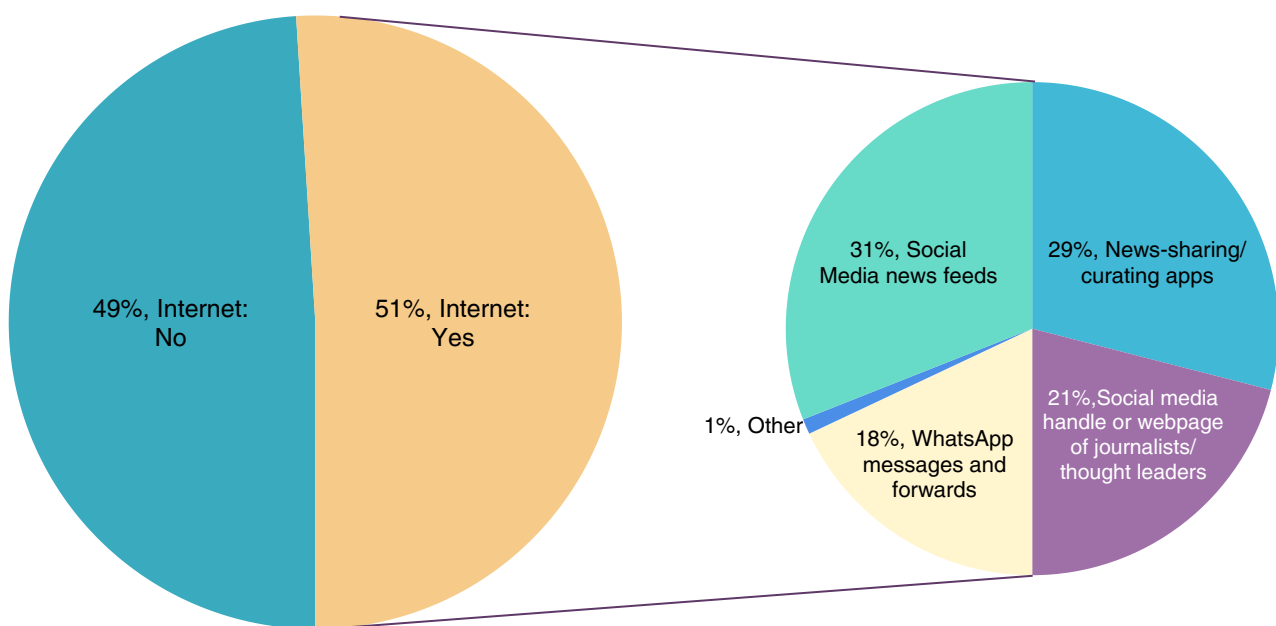
Notes: Internet as the source of news excludes the web pages or applications of newspapers or news channels. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Table 1: Preference for News Categories and Likelihood of Voting

News category rank ↓	Respondent groups		
	Have voted before	**First-time voters**	**All respondents**
	Likely to vote (relative to not vote) if a respondent ranks a news category as:		
Political	Lower	Lower	Lower
Sports	Insignificant (difference between high and low rank is insignificant)	Lower	Lower
Economic or financial	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Religious	Lower	Lower	Lower
International relations and law & order	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant

Notes: The results in the table come from several probit regressions. The level of significance is at 5 percent. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

While people engage with different news sources, each category of news is not favoured equally. We asked respondents to rank their preferences into five news categories: political, sports, economic or financial, religious, and international relations and law and order. We use these rankings to distinguish between those who are likely to vote and those who are not, by running multiple probit regressions. These regressions are performed in three alternative setups: for those who have voted before, for first-time voters, and for all respondents (Table 1). Those who rate political and religious news less favourably are more likely to vote, across all respondent groups. A similar result emerges for sports news, but only for first-time voters, which does not change when aggregated across all respondents. Overall, the results paint a surprising picture when it comes to voting behaviour: those who have a high preference for political, sports and religious news are less likely to vote, while those who have a high preference for news on economic or financial and international relations and law and order have similar voting behaviour to those who have a low preference for these topics. This is the inverse of what analysts would suggest in the absence of evidence. Most would be tempted to assume that people who prefer or access political news are more likely to vote.

Figure 4: Daily Time Spent in Reading or Watching the News (minutes)
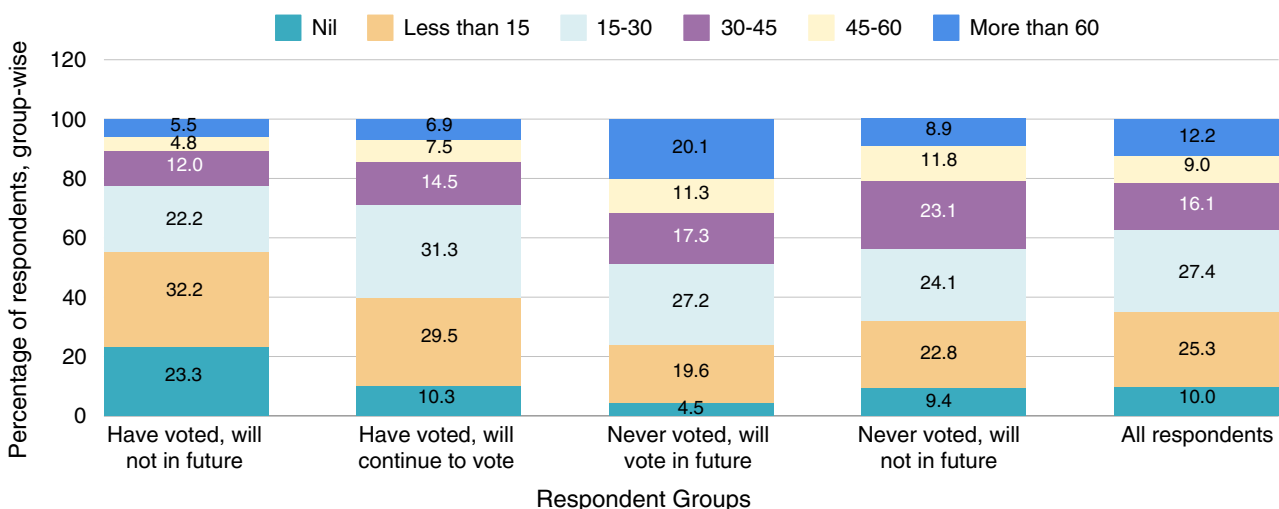
Notes: The daily time spend in reading or watching news is recorded across all sources, including social media. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 4 looks at how much time respondents allocate towards reading or watching the news each day, including the time they spend on social media. Most respondents (63 percent) spend up to 30 minutes a day reading or watching the news. The median response among those who have voted but do not plan to vote in the future indicates that they spend less than 15 minutes per day on news. In contrast, those who are voting for the first time spend the most amount of time on news: one in two spends more than 30 minutes a day. Overall, the median daily time spent on news is between 15 to 30 minutes. These results suggest that those who have voted before but do not plan to vote in the future are most dissuaded by the news, while those who will vote for the first time seek it out the most.

We examine whether the perception of misinformation in the news is a plausible reason for these observed patterns, in the following section.

Misinformation in the News and its Impact

We asked respondents to rate the extent of misinformation in different news categories on a five-point scale, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high. Figure 5 shows the results, from which two important takeaways emerge. First, respondents think political news carries the maximum misinformation, ranging between high and very high (average score of 4.2). They rated all other news categories between neutral and high (average score between 3.4 and 3.9). Second, only those who have already voted but do not intend to vote in the future rate misinformation in all news categories as high to very high (average score of 4.1). All other respondent groups rated misinformation in the news categories as neutral to high (average score between 3.6 and 4).[2]

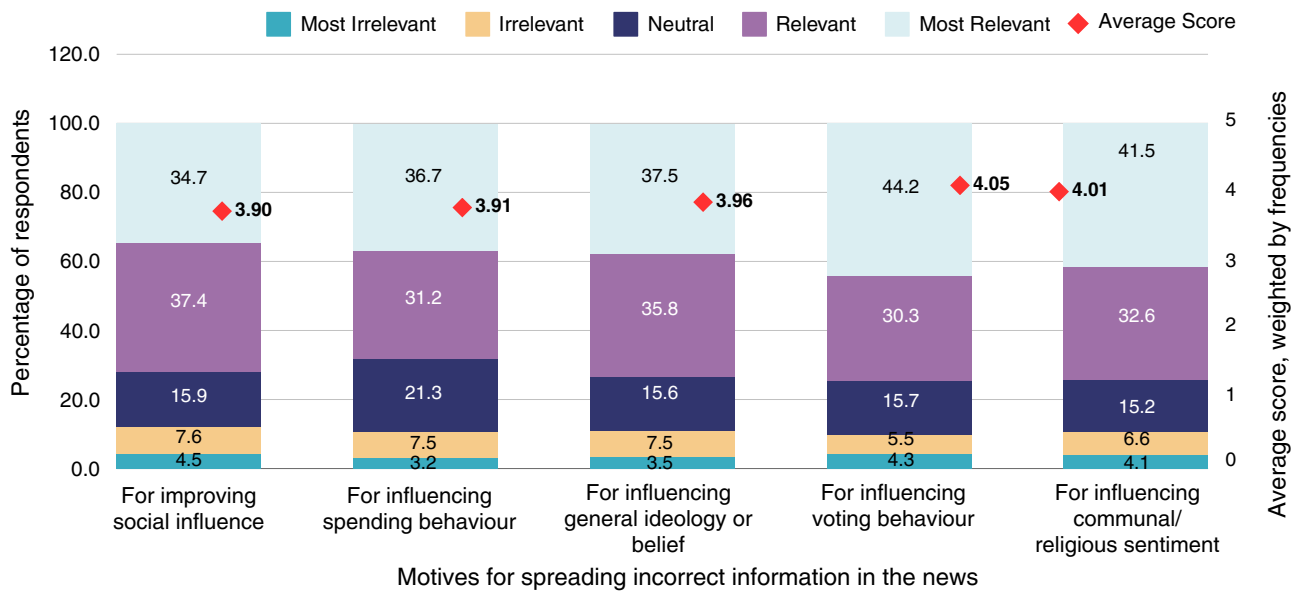**Figure 5:** Perception on Misinformation in the News
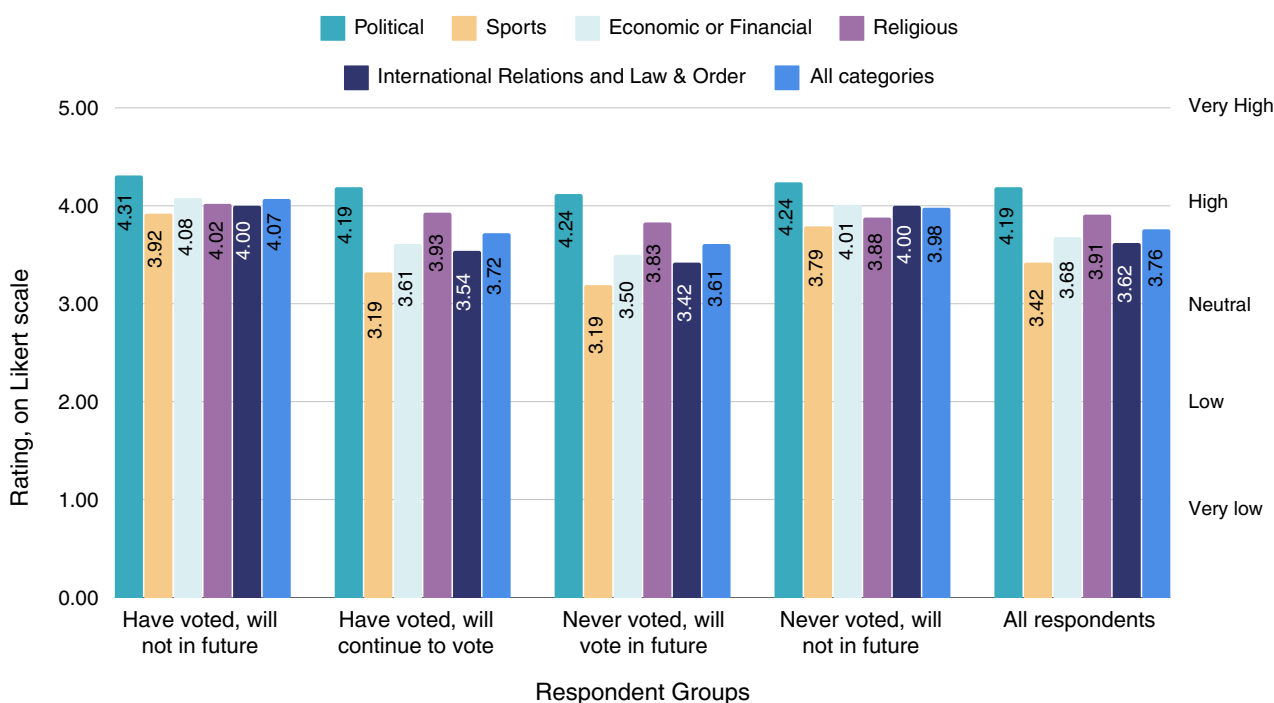
Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "very low" and 5 being "very high." The ratings are aggregated using weighted average. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

These results, as well as the results in Figures 4 and Table 1, provide evidence of a twofold effect of misinformation in the news. One, misinformation not only reduces the appetite for news consumption (Figure 4), but also has a negative effect on people's voting behaviour (Table 1). Two, misinformation in the news has a regressive effect on those who have already voted but do not intend to vote in the future, as it marks a transition from belief in the democratic process to seeing the electoral process as onerous. This is plausible because the expected results of these people's past voting may have fallen short of their desired outcomes.

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2   In line with the results in Figure 5, participants also stated that they had received false news, particularly in political and religious categories, in the six months prior to answering the survey. 58 percent of respondents reported receiving political news with false information. 45.8 percent reported the same for religious news. These results are omitted to save space and can be furnished on request.

Most believe that the main reason for misinformation in the news is to influence voting behaviour, followed by influencing religious or communal sentiments (Figure 6). Their responses indicate that it is less common but still noteworthy to influence general ideology or belief, spending behaviour and social reputation through misinformation in the news. The results are therefore largely in line with findings from previous studies. For example, Guess et al. (2018), Madhavan (2019) and Levy (2021) report on the prevalence of misinformation in elections, Alimardani and Elswah (2020) and Kiper (2023) discuss the prevalence of misinformation in influencing religious sentiment, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) highlight the role of misinformation in ideological influence, and Acemoglu et al. (2021) show the strong presence of filter bubbles that reinforce the role of misinformation in spending behaviour and social reputation.

Figure 6: Drivers of Misinformation in the News

Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "most irrelevant" and 5 being "most relevant." The ratings are aggregated using weighted average. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 7: Has Misinformation Increased with Rising Popularity of the Internet?
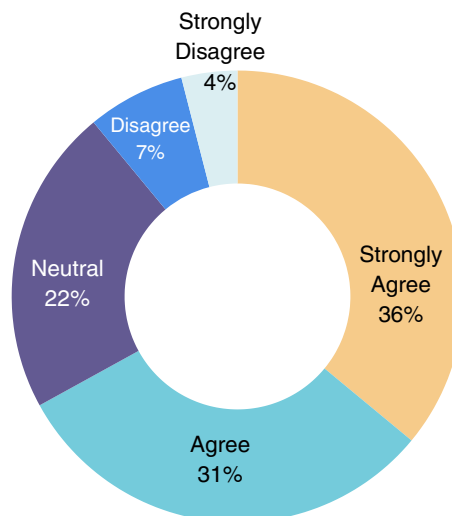
Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Nearly 70 percent of the respondents believe that the level of misinformation in the news has increased with the rising popularity of the internet (Figure 7). This is in line with global trends. For example, the CIGI-IPSOS Global Survey on Internet Security and Trust found that fake news is highly prevalent on the internet, with 65 percent respondents reporting to have seen fake news on social media globally. This statistic is marginally higher for India, at 72 percent (CIGI-IPSOS 2019).

The following section looks at this aspect in more detail by seeking respondents' perception on the spread of misinformation in the news and its targets.

# The Spread of Misinformation in the News and its Targets

We ask respondents how often they instantly share the news on a five-point scale (Figure 8). The majority (59 percent) never or rarely do so, followed by sometimes (26 percent). Only 15 percent respondents share the news they receive immediately. However, social networks typically mimic the characteristics of a 'small world' which refers to the pattern that people's direct and indirect connections intersect at some point. This makes dissemination of information smooth and fast, as in a small world (Jackson 2006, Davidsen et al. 2018, Boguñá et al. 2020). Several studies suggest that the strength of clustering (or grouping) in these small-world social networks is more than 100 or even 1000 times the strength in a random distribution of people (Èbel at al. 2003, Jackson 2006). Therefore, given the small world nature of social networks, instant sharing of the news by 15 percent – which is unlikely to be checked for embedded misinformation – can have an outsize impact (i.e. 100s of times) upon its widespread instantaneous reach.
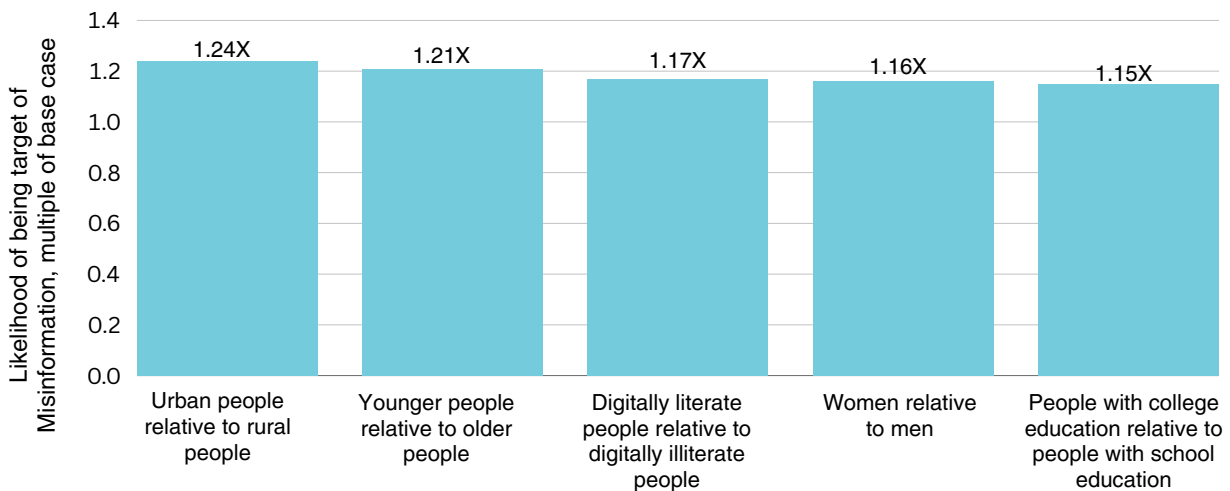
Figure 8: Instant News Sharing Habits
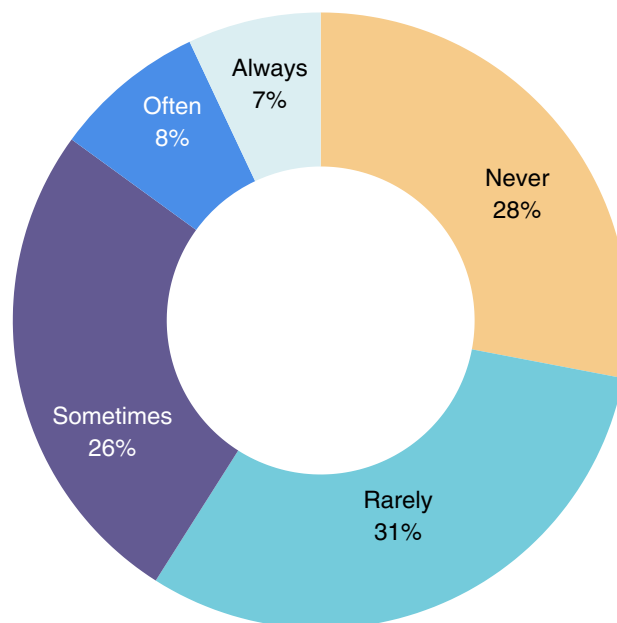
Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "never" and 5 being "always." The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

In Figure 9, we explore this issue further by asking respondents about their perceptions of forwarding misinformation in different categories of the news. Three in 10 have forwarded seemingly false information across all news categories, with political news being forwarded most often (40 percent) and sports news least often (26 percent). This means that people's voting behaviour is many times more susceptible to misinformation than other aspects like sports, economic or financial, given widespread instantaneous reach of information via social networks.

Figure 9: Perception on Forwarding Misinformation in the News, by Categories
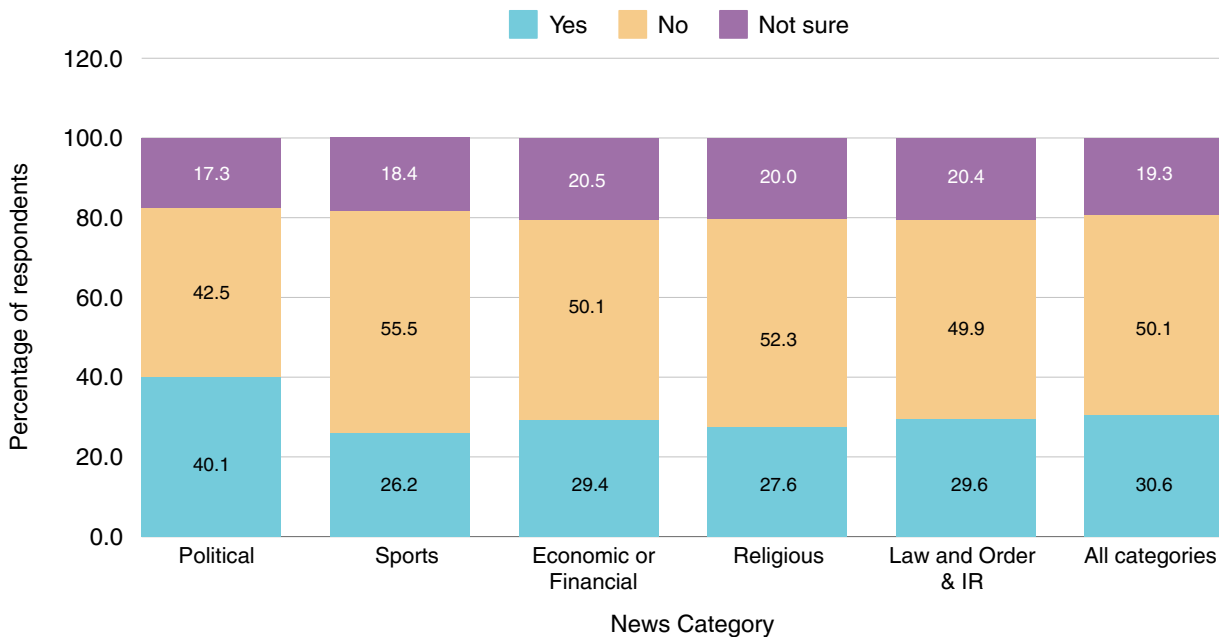
Notes: The question was asked on a three-point scale as "yes," "no" and "not sure." The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 10: Perception on Targets of Misinformation in the News

Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "very unlikely" and 5 being "most likely." The ratings are aggregated using weighted average, and then projected onto a probability scale, with a one-point change on the rating scale corresponding to a 0.25 change on the probability scale. The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Since misinformation is now ubiquitous in the news, we ask respondents whether they believe that certain groups of people are more targeted to receive it than others. Figure 10 shows the results, which indicate that different groups, based on location, age, digital literacy, gender, and education level, are frequently targeted for the spread of misinformation. In particular, people who live in cities, are younger, digitally literate, and have a university degree are more likely to be the target of misinformation in the news than people who live in villages, are older, are digitally illiterate and have only a school education respectively.

Similarly, women are more likely to be the target of misinformation in the news than men. The extent of excessive targeting of these groups (relative to the base case) is between 15 and 24 percent. These findings affirm the inference in Figure 6 that misinformation targets a variety of characteristics, including influencing voting behaviour, religious or communal sentiments, general ideology or beliefs, spending behaviour and social standing. People who live in cities, are younger, digitally literate and have a university degree, as well as women, seem to tick these aspects more easily than their counterparts.

It is important to examine the hedging mechanisms that people might have in the face of pervasive misinformation in the news. The following section looks at this aspect.

Verification and Identification of Misinformation in the News

Most respondents verify the news they consume (84 percent). 16 percent do not verify the information out of habit (7 percent) or do not have the necessary knowledge to do so (9 percent). For those who verify the news, it is important to distinguish between hard verification (i.e. when the likelihood of finding the factual truth is high) using sources such as newspapers and research articles, and soft verification (i.e. when the likelihood of finding the factual truth is low) using sources such as social media and search engines. This distinction is important because soft sources often use algorithms that mimic a person's behavioural patterns rather than factual accuracy (Levy 2021, Acemoglu et al. 2021).

People can be divided into three categories depending on the source of news verification: those who do not verify news, which makes them susceptible to misinformation (16 percent); people who verify news through soft sources, which makes them somewhat susceptible to misinformation (54 percent); and those who verify news through hard sources, which makes them least susceptible to misinformation (30 percent). This seconds the earlier findings that suggest that misinformation in the news is widespread, even from the point of view of verification.
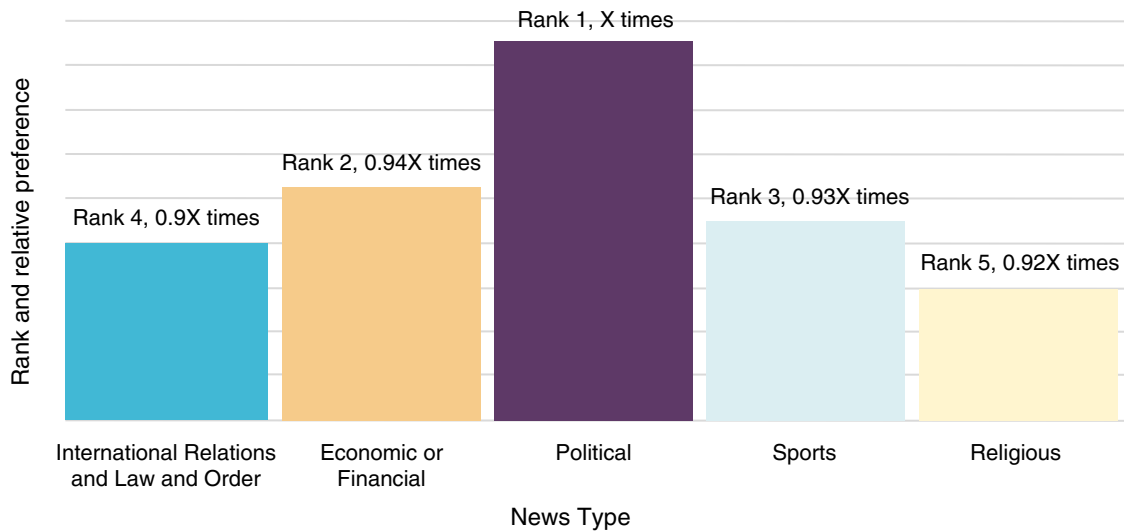
Figure 11: Mode of News Verification
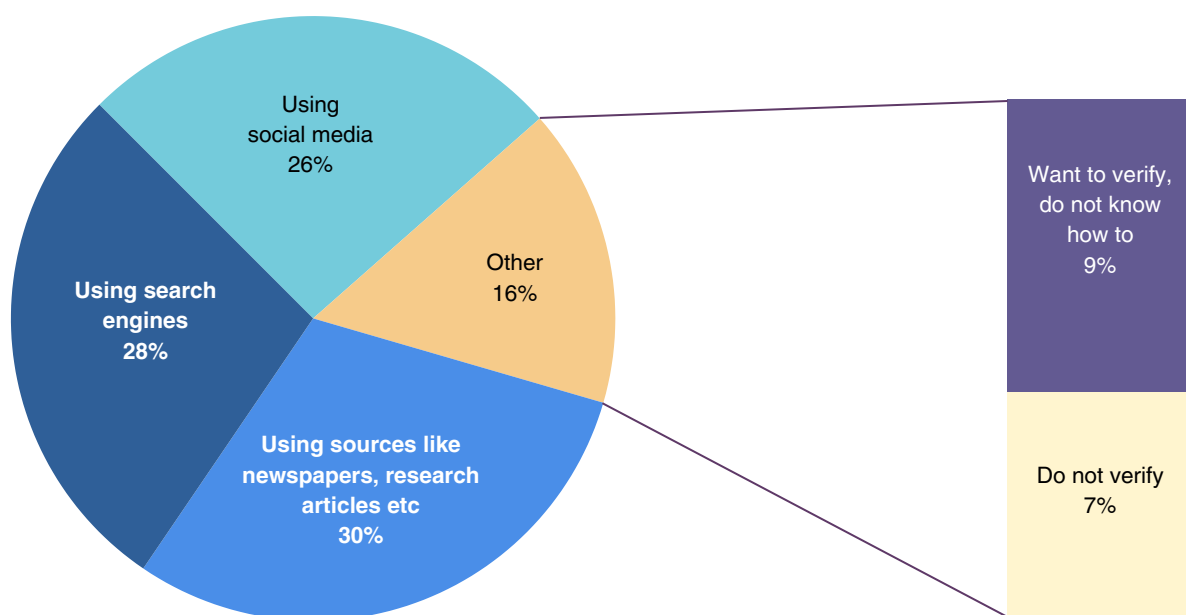
Notes: The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Respondents state that they are most likely to verify political news (Figure 12), given the extent of misinformation is most prevalent in this category (Figure 5). This is followed by verification of economic or financial news, sports news, and news related to international relations and law and order. Respondents verify religious news the least.

Figure 12: Likelihood of Verifying Misinformation in the News, by Categories

Notes: The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

Figure 13: Ease of Identifying Misinformation in the News
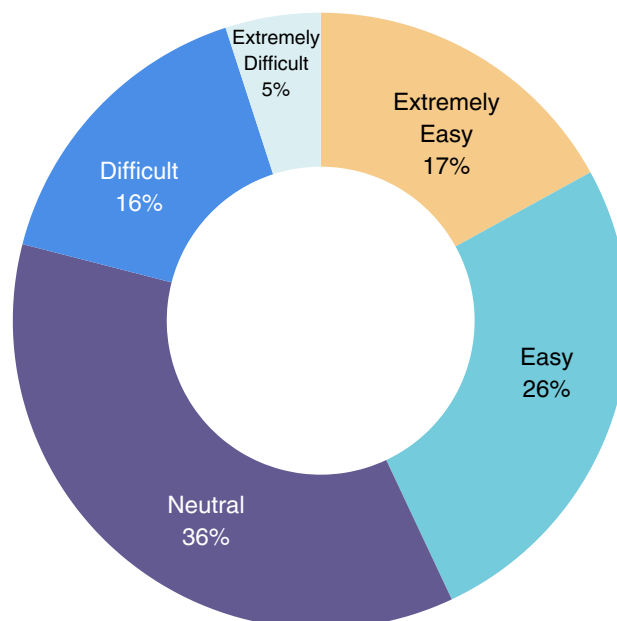
Notes: The question was asked on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "extremely easy" and 5 being "extremely difficult." The data comes from a primary survey of 5,837 people conducted in January-February 2024.

The identification of misinformation in the news largely follows certain patterns in their verification (Figure 13). Twenty one percent respondents find it difficult or extremely difficult to identify misinformation in the news, while 36 percent are neutral, which means they have an even chance of finding it easy or difficult to identify misinformation in the news. The remaining 43 percent find it easy or extremely easy to spot misinformation in the news. Since 54 percent people verify news through soft sources such as social media and search engines (Figure 11), which may reinforce their biases, 21 percent is a possible lower bound for how often it is difficult to spot misinformation in the news. Conversely, 43 percent is the upper bound for how easy it is to spot misinformation in the news. Nonetheless, Figures 11 to 13 suggest that verifying and identifying misinformation in the news remains a challenge for a significant share of people.

Discussion on Policy Implications

In 2023, the Government of India amended Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (Rules). The new provision requires all intermediaries, such as social media companies, to make reasonable efforts to prevent the dissemination of false, fake, or misleading information about the government or its business (Bhatnagar 2023). To give effect to the rules, a fact-checking unit comprising officials from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting will be appointed to act as watchdogs against fake news and order the removal of such content (Singh 2023). The amendment has been challenged in the High Court of Bombay by rights activists and a final outcome is still pending.

The Government has also started to crack down on AI-enabled misinformation. In December 2023 and later in March 2024, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology issued directives to social media intermediaries to crack down on deepfakes. The latest advisory states that all AI-generated content, especially that which is susceptible to deepfake manipulation, must be labelled by intermediary services. It also instructs social media intermediaries to embed content with unique metadata or identifiers indicating its source. Similarly, the proposed Digital India Act could also include penalties for misinformation and disinformation campaigns or organised efforts to spread deepfakes (Bhardwaj 2023).

Law enforcement agencies can also utilise the general criminal provisions of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 to address the misinformation. These include promoting enmity between different groups on the ground of religion (Section 153A), defamation (Section 499), criminal intimidation (Section 503), intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace (Section 504) and utterances causing public discord, alarming the public and inciting one class or community to commit offences against another (Indian Penal Code n.d.).

Further, the Disaster Management Act, 2005 provides that a person who gives or spreads a false alarm or false warning of a disaster or its severity or extent, causing a panic shall be punishable with fine or imprisonment or both (Disaster Management Act n.d.). The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 have also been previously used against misinformation spread on social media about members of backward classes (Nishith Desai and Associates 2022).

Many regulations govern misinformation on the internet. However, India needs to develop a holistic response to the evolving information environment. A large share potential voters are discouraged from participating in the electoral process due to misinformation. Regulations alone will not bring people back to the polls or get them to engage with the information environment. User empowerment and awareness programmes can help, especially if they are coupled with some proactive steps by the outreach services.

International Landscape

Humans are constantly catching up with technology (Friendman 2017). Online harms are outpacing society's ability to prevent and manage them (World Economic Forum 2022). Scholars suggest that there is

no substitute for empowering users in this context (Valais et al 2022). This approach must stem from both regulatory and tech-centric interventions.

Countries, international organisations, and technology companies are increasingly taking steps to empower users and enhance their agency. To this end, 20 global tech companies signed an accord at the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, to address both misinformation and AI-generated synthetic content in light of elections across the globe (Stiftung Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz 2024). Tech companies agreed to eight commitments, including the pledge to continue to engage with a diverse set of global civil society organisations and academics and support efforts to foster public awareness, media literacy, and all-of-society resilience. These are in addition to the tech-enabled efforts that the companies will take.

In a similar vein, UNESCO has created a Media and Information Literacy (MIL) curriculum. It provides a teacher training framework, empowers people to find, evaluate, and use content effectively, and guides them on how to identify and verify information in the news. The European Commission also strengthened its Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2022 to allow users to easily recognise political ads by providing more efficient labelling (European Commission n.d.). The United States has a pending Bill which stipulates the formation of a committee to raise public awareness around misinformation (Congress.gov n.d.). User awareness and empowerment is also a priority area for the United Kingdom (Legislation.gov.uk n.d.) and France (Euro News 2022), with attempts being made to ensure the public does not believe online information as it is presented to them. The aforementioned Indian Government advisory on AI also stresses on the need to ramp up content labelling to mitigate deepfake manipulation. Aside from media literacy, there is an emergent need to empower people with the means to control content they can access or is recommended to them. Additionally, easier reporting mechanisms and the ability to verify sources and their reliability are areas that demand focus.

Table 2 shows some laws and bills that aim to balance regulatory action with public awareness.

Table 2: Laws Dealing with Misinformation Around the World

Jurisdiction	Action Taken/Framework	Details
European Union	In 2022, the European Commission strengthened its 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation.	It moves away from self-regulation to co-regulation for Very Large Online Platforms under the Digital Services Act. The Code prescribes stronger measures to demonetise disinformation, broadening and strengthening tools that empower users, e.g. to detect and flag false or misleading content, increasing the coverage of fact-checking across EU countries and languages, and increasing the transparency of political and issue-based advertising, among other things. The Code mandates allowing users to easily recognise political ads by providing more efficient labelling. Users will be better protected from disinformation through enhanced tools to recognise, understand and flag disinformation, to access authoritative sources, and through media literacy initiatives (European Commission n.d.).

United States	Educating Against Misinformation and Disinformation Act introduced in Congress	The Bill was introduced in 2022 and is still pending. This bill establishes a commission and requires other activities to support information and media literacy education and to prevent misinformation and disinformation. The commission has many functions focused around creating awareness and educating the public on identifying programs and resources on information (Congress.gov n.d.)
United Kingdom	The Online Safety Act was amended to create a legislative framework to protect from the harms of misinformation	The Act introduces a "duty of care" on large tech platforms to address misinformation and other harmful content and empowers the regulator to fine platforms who fail to do so. It also requires digital platforms to establish user-friendly reporting mechanisms and seeks to promote public education and awareness campaigns to empower individuals to identify and mitigate misinformation (Legislation.gov.uk n.d.).
France	The National Assembly passed the loi [visant à] sécuriser et réguler l'espace numérique (SREN) in 2023	Among other things, the digital law aims to protect the public by protecting against foreign propaganda, disinformation, and interference and criminalizing deepfakes published without consent (Thompson 2023). French President Macron commissioned a report on misinformation, which sought to study the consequences of misinformation. The recommendations from the report highlight the need to teach children to question what they see in social media to better protect elections against foreign interference and sanctioning those who disrupt public order by spreading fake news.
Singapore	The Parliament passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act in 2019	The Act seeks to prevent electronic communication of false statement of fact, to suppress the financing, promotion and other support of online locations that repeatedly communicate false statements of fact in Singapore; and enable measures to be taken to detect, control and safeguard against coordinated inauthentic behaviour and other misuses of online accounts and bots and enhance transparency of online political ads, among other things (Singapore Statutes Online n.d.). The government has also established the National Anti-Scam Centre to improve information sharing across the various agencies and the private sector (Lim 2023).
Estonia	The Government of Estonia created a network to combat disinformation in 2016	The framework was created by the State Electoral Office in the form of an interagency task force to combat the influence of false messaging in the democratic process (McBrien 2020). Estonia adopted a network approach by engaging partners from other government agencies, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, social media companies, and the press to identify and monitor disinformation and to work with the press to correct false statements. It also developed a curriculum to help high school students improve their ability to separate fact from fiction.[3]

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3 After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Estonian Government started funding public and private media to improve Russian-language media coverage for its ethnic Russians, to combat misinformation coming from the Kremlin (Coda 2023)

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