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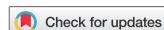
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When news is entertainment: explaining the persistence of misinformation through the information environment

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ABSTRACT

Why does misinformation persist despite its corrections? To address this issue, we propose the ‘news as entertainment’ framework, explaining how commercial considerations of the media industry shape news consumption. Using a strategic case study, we examine India’s information environment through this paradigm. Guided by industry metrics, we reveal the interplay of competing social and economic interests in a context marked by high choice and political polarization. Within this framework, we examine misinformation correction in practice, highlighting its contextual underpinnings and the potent role of mainstream media. Finally, we discursively analyze how audience responses underscore their ties to specific news environments. The ‘news as entertainment’ framework exposes the disjunction between contextually shaped misinformation and correction methods, emphasizing how media contexts influence audience receptivity to facts or falsehoods. This insight informs our understanding of misinformation mechanisms, correction, and persistence with implications for addressing these challenges.

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Misinformation; news consumption; media contexts; news as entertainment; audiences

Misinformation in the current media and political climate has assumed a virulent form in part because of its persistence. While exposing individuals to corrective information can be beneficial (e.g., Bode & Vraga, 2015; Mena, 2020), these interventions have not always fared well (e.g., Thorson, 2016). Individuals have been known to resist these for several reasons including finding the information objectionable or threatening (Garrett et al., 2013; for a review, consider Walter & Murphy, 2018). In some media literacy experiments, both national and local contexts have complicated the reception of facts (Guess et al., 2020), sometimes yielding unexpected outcomes (Badrinathan, 2020). Evaluating the persuasive impact of ‘correct information’ often oversimplifies the complex of misinformation uptake and correction, reducing it to mere efficacy or inefficacy.

Yet, certain approaches have explored contextual facets of this process, offering insight into potential explanations. For example, ‘following’ and being ‘followed’ by individuals who correct misinformation may make misinformation or its corrections more effective (Margolin et al., 2018). Socio-cultural relations and indirect methods of dispelling misinformation also prove favorable (Malhotra & Pearce, 2022). Others have captured heavy

news consumers' skepticism to editorialized content in general (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). However, the role of information environments, especially the institutional logics governing the conduct of the media, in furthering misinformation has not received much attention. Thus, in this study, we investigate the broad contours that shape the modern-day production and consumption of information and advocate for considering the information environment to understand the receptivity to misinformation corrections.

Information environments often center on political information and have been defined as the supply and demand of political news and information within a certain society (Prior, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2017). To characterize the contemporary information environment, we develop a framework of News as Entertainment and contend that heightened competition for limited attention prompts news providers to employ entertainment appeals including misinformation. The nature of information supply thus, serves to marginalize corrective information, such as that which emerges from institutional fact-checkers.

To illustrate how the media environment guides responses to corrections, we explore the demand and supply aspects of the information environment and illustrate the News as Entertainment framework, applying it to India. Relying on industry metrics, we pay particular attention to information and entertainment cues in the most popular news content. In light of this context, we examine misinformation correction in practice and highlight the disjunctures in technical corrections of misinformation through a series of case studies analyzing interventions made by two of India's most prominent fact-checkers, AltNews and BoomLive. Lastly, a discourse analysis of replies to fact-checkers reveals that audiences' responses continue to be shaped by the information environment, perpetuating the ethos of News as Entertainment. Through this discussion, we argue that when news is motivated by entertainment, structures of the information environment reproduce themselves even in discourses surrounding misinformation and its correction.

Characterizing contemporary information environments: *News as Entertainment*

Motivated by past scholarship on information environments, we posit that in high-choice media environments, news media adopt the ethos of entertainment to retain dwindling news consumers. We characterize this phenomenon as News as Entertainment. Consequently, we consider how this shift influences the production and consumption of both information and misinformation. In this section we unpack its key features.

Contexts

One aspect of entertainment-orientation of news media is well documented given the pivot to 'entertainment content' indicated by an increased focus on sports, celebrity etc. (Thussu, 2007a, 2007b). In this study, we expound on another dimension to this phenomenon, that of media environments, where hard news itself is structured by the ethos of entertainment. Research has often suggested that people's local, social and political experiences are intertwined with the nature of media available to them (Wu & Taneja, 2016). A contextual approach to news consumption allows us to look beyond

individual preferences, examining how various aspects of their environments shape their information consumption.

Contexts may include social, political, and historical environments, all of which influence the media people consume. For example, socio-political context such as living in battleground states is known to influence belief sensitivity regardless of personal predispositions (Li et al., 2023). The relative importance of different media in the information environment context influences the variation in news consumption, argued Shehata and Strömbäck (2011), finding that the level of newspaper centrism in a society can explain differences in media use among audiences. Althaus et al. (2009) explain that news interest may be shaped by the demographic makeup of local news markets. These findings suggest the need to go beyond individual level factors when considering how information is consumed.

An institutional approach argues that media and other institutions shape the production and uptake of facts as well as falsehoods (Abhishek, 2021). Benkler et al. (2018) helpfully identify how (right wing) media ecosystems help perpetuate cycles of propaganda and polarization through their coverage of contentious issues. For instance, Fox News takes advantage of political populism and tabloid journalism turning their newscasts into political instruments (Peck, 2019). These studies show that production as well as consumption of political information relies on the political information environment.

However, what is the role of information environments in shaping discourses surrounding misinformation and its correction? In further sections, we extend such thinking by examining whether information environments can shape audiences' response to misinformation corrections as well. We demonstrate that these environments influence not only the initial consumption of misinformation but also the receptivity to subsequent corrections. Thus, we argue that information environments perpetuate themselves through dynamics of misinformation correction, potentially undermining the effectiveness of these corrective processes.

High choice and high competition

In information environments shaped by high choice, consumers tend to discover content of their choice, while political information itself is increasingly consumed as a by-product of entertainment content (Prior, 2007). High-choice has also meant high-competition among different players especially because news is a small part of one's media diet (Wojcieszak et al., 2023). As news audiences continue to decline in most parts of the world (Allen et al., 2020), the vehicle of entertainment brings people back into the fold of 'news' programming. Thus, we argue that the debate between news versus entertainment is often resolved through structures of *News as Entertainment*.

The *News as Entertainment* paradigm argues that as competition for limited viewership increases, news providers employ entertainment appeals to secure their audience, shaping how individuals engage with information itself. As such, it transcends mainstream news media. Studies have underscored how entertainment is an important factor determining production as well as consumption online (Stollfuß, 2020). The relevance of news parody and satire platforms like The Onion, late night television, political comedy or even political memes as sources of information (Fox, 2022) explain further how

entertainment shapes even news-adjacent media consumption. Given the high degree of cross-media integration, there is little reason to believe that similar motivations will not explain user behaviors across different media forms. In fact, the space of news parody is as differentiated as news channels, and also follow a similar ‘branding’ exercise using partisan identifiers. For instance, the arrival and meteoric rise of ‘Gutfeld!,’ Fox News’ late night political comedy show (Roig-Franzia, 2022) indicates that this genre is not only a site of robust competition but also leans into familiar partisan stylings that dominate every other aspect of popular political life. What underscores these processes is not just information, but the logic of entertainment, sensitive to the process of constructing a devoted audience, which recognizes them as entertainment-seekers first and news-seekers later. Consequently, entertainment underscores multiple interfaces with politics throughout the information environment – whether that is on the internet, through social media or news television.

In this study, we examine how features of the information environment can also manifest in the dissemination and consumption of misinformation narratives. While the consumption of news through sensationalism and partisanship has historical precedent in the penny press era in the United States (Hallin, 1994), our study is contextualized within the landscape of extensive choice facilitated by the post-broadcast era in the US and post-liberalization period in India. The resultant pivot of mainstream news media to softer themes, infotainment etc. is well-documented (Baum, 2002; Baym, 2005; Edgerly & Vraga, 2019; Thussu, 2007a), however, we depart from previous research in two significant ways.

First, we focus on information environments and how they shape the production of even hard, public affairs news. Second, we apply insights from the information environment to responses to corrective information, especially as it happens in the practice of fact checking by institutional fact checkers which operate largely on social media. Thus, the News as Entertainment framework allows us to think about how larger structural changes have shaped information environments, content and thus, audiences’ engagement with misinformation.

Polarization in high-choice contexts

Affective polarization, while a necessary explanation of why misinformation persists, is only one characteristic of our socio-political context (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024). The nature of ideological orientation of the news media also emerges from the market dynamics within which it is produced. Thus, we integrate an understanding of the information environment into the News as Entertainment framework.

The rise of a commercially driven media ecology (Hamilton, 2011) has enabled a politically differentiated media system such that mutual distrust among different partisans is nearly a desirable consequence that allows segregating audiences easily. Perceptions of media bias and hostility are not mediated by the valence of media coverage itself but by accusations of bias from elites (Watts et al., 1999). Partisans find coverage biased or hostile against them, with these being influenced by media consumption levels (Goidel et al., 2021; Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Perryman et al., 2020). Here, an information environment approach provides complementary insights advancing contextual explanations for these phenomena. Outlets’ need to distinguish themselves is often resolved

through ideologically segregating from one another (Hagar et al., 2023). News organizations use politically charged issues to ‘segment the market and slant toward extreme positions’ (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). The rise of ‘measurable journalism’ (Carlson, 2018) and the availability of granular metrics also allows producers to respond instantaneously. Polarization of the media becomes another way to respond to a saturated media market. News media often align with political parties to attract specific audiences, such as Fox News appealing to right-leaning viewers and MSNBC to the left. Politics becomes the brand, transforming public life into entertainment (Jones, 2012). This shift increases focus on political scandals, regardless of their truth (Tsfati et al., 2020). Routines of media production and consumption create differentiated and identifiable audiences, and so, polarization is not an independent symptom. It is another layer within the *News as Entertainment* complex which mediates news production and consumption. We situate our study within this argument and consider the nature of the media environment in shaping engagement with information. More specifically we ask, *how and why information environments shape audiences’ amenability to misinformation corrections.*

Next, we offer a comprehensive overview of the media and political environments in our focal context, India, a vast democracy with misinformation across the political spectrum (Chakrabarti, 2018). The following section, has insights from key industry documents such as television ratings and discusses key axes of polarization in both, digital and traditional media.

News as Entertainment in contemporary India

The growth of Indian media is tied to the 1991 economic reforms resulting in media privatization. This meant streamlining news audiences to suit the advertisers and a reframing of reportage (Rao, 2008), flipping the landscape of media consumption. Not only was content adapted to the tastes of the intended audiences, but audiences were constructed in such a way as to mean the greatest profit for the news establishment. As a result, a historically anti-establishment press with a strong public interest focus shifted (Mazzarella, 2003) to news about culture, cricket and cinema, reconstituting the public sphere. Market driven structural transformations lead to another effect in how news came to be constructed through a marked decline in news of international importance (Thussu, 2007a, 2007b) at the hands of an increased focus on hyperlocal news stories (Roy, 2011), opinion-based news exploiting controversial, polarizing themes based in religion, culture, civil unrest etc. (Devi, 2019).

As a medium with the highest penetration in India, television news provides a view into how *News as Entertainment* is mobilized. The news landscape, specifically prime-time, is characterized by a horse race between well-known anchors across top channels, with the pecking order dominated by few channels (Firos, 2023). A closer inspection of programming on the top-rated shows¹ indicates sensationalist framing (‘Pakistan fears India’s [surgical] strike’, News 18, 2023a), a reliance on personalities (‘Who threatened to kill godman Bageshwar?’, Times Now Navbharat, 2023; ‘Putin is a Modi fan, Calls him the most intelligent politician’, News 18, 2023b) as well as conjectures and conspiracies (‘Elon Musk’s Twitter sold out praising Modi’, Aaj Tak, 2023a; ‘Rover fights an alien on the moon’, News 18, 2023c). Polarizing language, aggression and populism are operationalized through sensationalism in these shows (Pande, 2019; NWMI, 2022). In this

competitive milieu, unsubstantiated narratives have also found airtime. False stories surrounding Putin's arrest have been aired on popular outlets like News18 while Republic Bharat has produced a series of features on the dubious pill 'Coronil', as a cure for Covid19. The stories employ controversial right-wing talking points invoking nationalist pride, islamophobia and anti-intellectualism. Table 1 provides a list of illustrative headlines (translated) used in the most viewed news programs². Executives explain it as news anchors 'cross[ing] the line' (Kumar, 2012) under pressure to prevail over the ratings. On the other hand, they admit it is motivated by entertainment. The quest for viewership remains a spectator sport where a greater spectacle produces better ratings (Kumar, 2012). NDTV's prime time shows, which held on to its anti-establishment credentials till a recent ownership change, do not feature in the highest viewership lists. At the same time, the channel is diversifying into local news across multiple states (Adgully Bureau, 2023a), advancing efforts on platforms like YouTube as well as strengthening non-hard news verticals such as technology reviews and celebrity collaborations (Adgully Bureau, 2023b). Interestingly, NDTV is the most popular English news channel on YouTube, while AajTak leads in Hindi (Adgully Bureau, 2019).

Understandably, the configuration of the news media's political leanings is yet another function of the political context in India. This is exemplified by the recent hostile takeover of NDTV by a business conglomerate infamously close to the prime minister. One may infer that the news media is buckling under indirect government control (Reporters Sans Borders, 2023). Another telling illustration of the modulation between political ideology and audience seeking is that Zee News frequently presents prime time shows on Hindu 'victimhood' on themes like 'love jihad' and 'hate against Hindus' among others (Zee News, 2017). Zee Salaam, an Urdu channel owned by the same parent, Zee Media, features critical stories on Muslim victimhood and Islamic culture, often critiquing majoritarian politics ('The voiceless Muslim', Zee Salaam, 2023). Engaging audiences remains the media's primary goal, regardless of political leaning.

Digital media in India has extended the logic of traditional news platforms. As political pressures exacerbated on mainstream media, around the 2014 General Elections

Table 1. Illustrative examples of headlines used in most viewed prime time shows.

Episode title (translated)	Program name (translated), channel
The greatest truth of the Coronavirus; Consider the world ended	The Last Word, News18
Is Sweden going to war over the insult of the Quran?	The Last Word, News18
Nobody can save Pakistan from Putin	The Last Word, News18
The temple miracle which has surprised even Islamic countries	School of News, Times Now Navbharat
Here's the proof: Congress's strategy which has frightened PM Modi a lot	School of News, Times Now Navbharat
The opposition has got hold of PM Modi's magical camera. Will this switch the 2024 elections?	School of News, Times Now Navbharat
A list of runaway Khalistani terrorists	Black and White, Aaj Tak
How many each of Hindus and Muslims in Bihar?	Black and White, Aaj Tak
The unheard story of India's guest, Crown Prince Salman	Black and White, Aaj Tak
Is Justin Trudeau repeating his father's mistake?	Black and White, Aaj Tak
Fasten your seatbelts, is the political balance about to deteriorate?	The Public's Question, Times Now
Is this top Congress leader annoyed by Hindu attire?	Black and White, Aaj Tak
The world order is changing, Congress stuck on Nehru	The Public's Question, Times Now

(Chaudhry, 2016), several digitally-native news platforms led by former editors of elite newsrooms emerged on the internet. The online news space is also a site of competition for greater readership as well as ideological dominance. Attacks on media platforms are particularly persistent from the self-identified right-leaning media. Instances include the publication of articles like: ‘Here are 7 occasions on which Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of The Wire, violated the ethical principles of Journalism’ (OpIndia Staff, 2020a); ‘Propagandist Scroll publishes fake news, claims ‘no temple’ was attacked in North East Delhi during the riots’ (OpIndia Staff, 2020b); and, ‘On Police’s Rebuttals Of The Wire And IANS Reports And Leftist Media’s Silence On it’ (Swarajya Staff, 2020). These strategies only supplement how mainstream news routines often also resort to dismissing their critics as lap dogs, anti-national or *jihadi* or terrorist (Behl, 2022). Together, traditional and digital news platforms discussed account for sharing a majority of the misinformation which circulates in India. AltNews reported that Times Group (Times Now, Times Now Navbharat), Zee Media (Zee News), India Today Group (India Today, Aaj Tak), OpIndia and NDTV shared the most number of debunked misinformation stories in 2022 (Kinjal & Jha, 2023). Factoring the reach of these channels across broadcast and web, these sources are arguably how a majority of individuals encounter information, factual or otherwise. This model of differentiated media routines mobilizes vastly different expectations from news consumption among audiences. With these insights about the media environment in mind, we present our case study and findings in the subsequent sections.

Method: examining misinformation correction in practice

Considering the pervasive nature of misinformation within this complex milieu, we propose an innovative approach to examine the political information environment. First, we examine how misinformation is corrected in practice, focusing on the contextual underpinnings of misinformation as well as the role the information environment, specifically the mainstream media, play in propelling them. Second, we highlight how structures of the information environment perpetuate by analyzing replies that fact-checkers receive on their official Twitter accounts.

To do this, we present a strategic case study approach focusing on two of India’s foremost fact-checking organizations: AltNews and BoomLive. These organizations were a natural choice as they hold central positions in public discourse surrounding misinformation and enjoy a more privileged standpoint relative to similar initiatives. Further factors underpin our choice as well. First, both AltNews and BoomLive are pioneering initiatives in India, have been certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), and collectively command a substantial following of nearly 600,000³ on Twitter (X). Second, they are independent and remain unaffiliated with larger media groups (such as AFWA, India Today’s fact-checking unit) or the government (like the Press Information Bureau’s fact-checking department). They are also independently funded, including through public donations. Third, both primarily reach audiences through platforms like Twitter and their websites, allowing a view into the logic of misinformation correction dissemination and consumption. AltNews in particular is the most followed fact-checker in India, with their interventions also finding recognition in popular media (Raj, 2022).

Thus, to address how misinformation is corrected in practice, we source the misinformation corrections initiated by these organizations from their websites where all interventions are documented. Neither the cases nor the selection of interventions aims to be statistically representative or generalizable. Instead, our purposive sample aims to document the processes employed to correct misinformation across key thematic areas within circulating misinformation cases spanning a three-year period from 2018 to 2021. Most importantly, it allows logical generalizations emerging from the strategic case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Luker, 2008). Our strategic choice of examining two prominent fact-checkers allows us to logically generalize our findings to less influential misinformation correction efforts. Other initiatives are likely to face even greater challenges from the information environment, making our insights particularly relevant for understanding the broader landscape of misinformation correction. (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Leveraging these organizations' persistent efforts in debunking misinformation from various sources, including WhatsApp, we arrived at our selection of corrections through an inductive process, identifying commonalities and trends across various misinformation instances. Common in communication scholarship (for eg. Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), the case study approach allows us to foreground the relationship of information environments with misinformation, considering 'many more variables of interest than data points' (Yin, 2003).

To analyze public responses to the fact-checker, we downloaded all the tweets posted by AltNews over a 13-month period, along with all the replies using the full archive search endpoint of the Twitter API v2. AltNews stands out for its higher engagement compared to its peers, rendering it suitable for such examination. The metadata for the tweet interactions such as the number of likes, replies, and retweets were used to determine the most engaged tweets, given that fact-checkers generally received low engagement in that period. In particular, we analyze the 20 most replied-to tweets of AltNews⁴ from February 4, 2020 to March 3, 2021. Twitter is a notable platform for news consumption, with more than 22% of Indians using it for that purpose (Jha, 2022). Its public and conversational nature makes it particularly suitable for analyzing the dynamics of engagement and discourse around fact-checking. Unlike Facebook, where interactions can be contained within personal networks, Twitter allows for a more visible exchange of ideas and arguments, providing richer data for examining emergent discourses surrounding misinformation corrections in practice.

It is worth noting that commenters on Twitter do not represent the average news consumer but they give us a window into how highly motivated individuals navigate corrections to misinformation in practice. Although others might not reply to fact-checkers, they may still encounter these replies. In that, these responses can reflect and possibly amplify predominant news cultures in the information environment and not just on social media.

Discourse analysis is well-suited to this study because it allows us to delve into the nuances of these interactions and understand the role of the information environment therein. By employing discourse analysis, we pay particular attention to how individuals use particular frameworks to construct their perceptions and carefully consider their use of specific language to infer how it relates with the partisan sorting led by the mainstream media (Schroder, 2021). We use each tweet by the fact-checker as the unit of analysis acting as the node around which discourses unfold. A discursive approach situates us to not

only examine the content of tweets but also situate it within the context of the nodal tweet posted by the fact-checker as well as draw from the larger context of the information environment. We focus on recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and how individual users align themselves with or against certain narratives. As a result, such analysis can situate us to understand the role of information environments in perpetuating misinformation narratives as well.

For both analyses, we adopt an inductive approach to identify key emergent themes. In the first part of the analysis, we focused on capturing the most prevalent themes of misinformation in the period. In the second, we attempt to highlight the discourses which emerge when individuals encounter agreeable or disagreeable misinformation corrections. To triangulate our interpretations and in the interest of reliability and validity, the investigators arrived at these themes through an iterative process. Following an independent analysis, we collaboratively discussed our findings to address any discrepancies and refine our interpretations. Through this process, we were able to reconcile any differences and achieve consensus on the themes, ensuring that our conclusions were robust and reflective of the data. Where possible, we also supplement our insights with secondary sources such as industry documents and news archives to spotlight how the information and political environments shape the dynamic of misinformation and its corrections.

Findings

Misinformation and its correction: case studies

Science and health

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in health and science-related misinformation, with many fact-checks focusing on this topic. Claims about the efficacy of alternative medicine, such as the Ayurvedic product ‘Coronil’ from Patanjali, were frequently debunked. BoomLive debunked the claim that Coronil was approved by the WHO as the first evidence-based Covid-19 medicine. They relied on a set of tweets clarifying that the WHO does not approve drugs and explaining ‘Good Manufacturing Practices’ (Kudrati, 2021). AltNews also debunked multiple cases related to traditional and alternative medicine, summarizing research papers to show that no scientific study supported these claims (Satani & Shaikh, 2020; Shaikh & Satani, 2020; Shaikh, 2020). These accounts denote the persistence of misinformation promoting traditional techniques to treat health problems.

Several claims come from the current Government of India’s Ministry of Ayush. As an institutional body, it was founded in 2014 by the first Narendra Modi government to focus ‘thrust on the Indian Traditional Systems of Medicine’ (Ministry of Ayush, Government of India, 2021). Critics (including fact-checkers) have highlighted the potential for harm in them. Ayurveda, however, is popularly extolled as an Indian cultural practice. This religious-cultural narrative has found a mention in Prime Minister Modi’s speeches (Doordarshan National, 2017) and has been broadcast to the public through commercial and public broadcasting channels. The founder of the Patanjali empire, godman Ramdev has also appeared several times on news channels extolling the virtues of his products (‘Ramdev shares tips on fighting the coronavirus’, Republic Bharat, 2021) and has

enjoyed an enduring presence on spiritual television channels in the past. The context of governmental and media patronage this narrative has received underlines how misinformation on this subject may not be a matter of just technical propriety.

Current political events

Misinformation referencing current events is also prevalent in contemporary information diets. Fact-checkers devote significant effort debunking these claims. A circulating image of a rioting mob alleged ‘violence against Hindus in Hooghly’ was debunked by AltNews as misinformation, revealing that it was linked to a 2013 Daily Mail report on riots in Bangladesh. (Chaudhuri, 2021). BoomLive debunked claims that protests erupted in Bangladesh against PM Modi’s visit by showing that the viral image was associated with protests against the French President (Das, 2021a). These are a few of several pieces of misinformation that are ‘debunked’ by invalidating the supporting media (Das, 2021b; Alphons, 2021) using methods like reverse image search.

These instances ‘frame’ Hindu victimhood vis a vis a Muslim other, whether in Bengal or Bangladesh. Jaffrelot (2021) documents extensively, the stigmatization of Muslims through initiatives against interfaith couples, cow slaughter and conversion into Islam or Christianity (p. 195) under the Narendra Modi governments. He also notes that the idea of Hindu vulnerability precedes the current government and locates its origins in pre-Independence times (p. 12). Popular news channels like Republic Bharat, Zee News etc have featured several prime time ‘debates’ on Islamophobic issues such as forced conversions (‘Eye opening report on love jihad’, Republic Bharat, 2023) and changing population demographics (‘Muslim population in India,’ Aaj Tak, 2023b). As a result, these ideas have found greater credence in the mainstream, amplifying perceived threats against Hindu identity. The persistence of this theme deepens faultlines within discourse and necessitates understanding the role of the information environment in providing accessible frameworks which propel these narratives further.

Enduring narratives

Enduring cases of political misinformation keep re-emerging from time to time, often towards broader agendas. Persistent themes include the vilification of India’s Muslim community and smearing the political opposition (particularly the Congress party). A recurring case involves a picture of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, which has been employed in various false narratives. While one claim falsely asserts that Nehru was beaten by a mob in the aftermath of the loss of the Sino-Indian war (Chaudhuri, 2018), another suggests he was slapped by a godman for his comments on Aryans (Sidharth, 2019; Alphons, 2019). Yet another suggests that he was arrested while attempting to travel to the Indian state of Kashmir without a visa (Chaudhuri, 2018).

While the claims with the accompanying media vary, each instance attacks the reputation and goodwill of the former prime minister. Nehru is a frequent target of misinformation in India, as documented by fact-checkers (Jawed, 2017). In many cases, mainstream news channels are identified as sources of these claims (Sidharth, 2018). While the origins of the image have been established several times by fact-checkers using reverse image search, the misinformation campaign endures over time, despite it.

This instance highlights the ideological opposition of BJP and the Congress, which surpasses electoral contestation. Nehru, among the most enduring Indian statesmen, argued for secular nationalism rooted in multiculturalism; he was also categorically opposed to religious nationalism and identity politics. The BJP on the other hand, has embodied a majoritarian idea of a Hindu state, which other religions threaten. The topic of Nehru is not one ignored by mainstream or digital media. Several primetime features have been devoted to the subject of Nehru's opposition to Indian culture ('Suppression of Indic view by Nehru', Times Now, 2022) and exposing his conjectured lies ('Nehru's mistakes which lead to Pakistan's Illegal occupation of some parts of Kashmir', Times Now Navbharat, 2022). Given the mainstreaming of such narratives, it is understandable that one of the most persistent pieces of misinformation against Nehru misquoted him as having said that he was 'Hindu by accident' (Sidharth, 2019). The enduring nature of such misinformation reflects the contestations of the socio-political landscape. It also spotlights the role of mainstream media in perpetuating it, exacerbating the challenge of falsifying it.

The cases exemplify why misinformation could persist by exploring the mechanisms that could explain it. In the next section, we study audiences' responses to such corrections.

An analysis of replies to fact-checkers

In replying to fact-checks, users rarely engaged with the correction or the misinformation itself. They were geared, instead, at broader contexts, addressing the ruling party or the opposition, political ideologies and the state of the media – irrespective of the political underpinnings of the misinformation. In spite of correction, audiences continue to reproduce the segments created by news media. Individuals engage in decoding processes which reflect the partisan sorting that mainstream news media engage in, highlighting how the information environment shapes how audiences engage with misinformation-related discourses as well. Several commenters called out the general state of mainstream media which broadcast the misinformation being corrected. Others called out Alt-News as 'fault news' to indicate how they 'bring India down' by highlighting misinformation pertaining to national security contexts, comparable with the positions that many prime-time presenters adopt.

A fact-check by AltNews, debunking a claim that protesting farmers in New Delhi had replaced the national flag with separatist insignia, elicited a variety of responses. Despite the video accompanying the claim being refuted as doctored, users responded with different versions of the video to dispute the fact-check as 'fake news.' Comments across different corrections suggested that the fact-checker supported '*naxals*' and '*jihadis*' at the cost of the Hindu majority. As reported previously, these narratives are common in mainstream media and we see them used to discredit fact-checkers themselves.

These patterns were observed even when the opposition was fact-checked. Commenters mocked the fact-checker for the 'pain [they] endured' in correcting misinformation that did not seem to support opposition parties, indicating their belief that the fact-checker is a 'propaganda channel' for the opposition. Among the most replied-to tweets, four were not fact-checks: two sought funds for the fact-checker, one was a DIY fact-checking tutorial, and one reported a police charge against an AltNews co-founder. Responses concerned banning AltNews, whether its fact-checking efforts were politically

motivated against the incumbent government, how the fact-checker is, in fact, the ‘originator of fake news’ and whether it is on ‘Islamist payroll.’ At the other end were those who donated to the organization, expressing their rejection of ‘godī’ or lapdog media (Sibal, 2019), a satirical phrase that gained popularity through a popular news presenter on NDTV who has been critical of the media and current Modi government.

The divide we highlight develops under most corrections which get some engagement. Much of this vocabulary, whether references to ‘*godī*’ media, loose renderings of ‘naxal’ and ‘*jihad*’ or the expressions of victimhood among the majority, has been popularized through mainstream news media. Our analysis thus, situates the role of existing media structures in shaping individuals’ response to even corrective information. In that, we do not focus on who replies to what, but rather highlight how the nature of the information environment is projected in users’ responses as well. While audience members seem adept at ideological talking points, our analysis of the media milieu and misinformation case studies indicate the role of additional factors which could have also shaped such responses.

The responses, in particular, suggest that phenomena such as motivated reasoning (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) and belief echoes (Thorson, 2016) do not exist in isolation. Instead, the nature of the information environment plays a significant role in shaping how facts or corrections are interpreted. Our findings indicate that news media structures reproduce themselves through audiences’ comments, even in the face of objective evidence, thereby shaping the very nature of responses to misinformation correction. This is further exemplified by the consistent engagement patterns and underlying biases observed in responses under non-fact-check posts, which reinforce our argument that the information environment and larger media context can influence the effectiveness of misinformation corrections.

Discussion

Why does misinformation persist despite its correction? To address this issue, we introduced the novel framework of ‘news as entertainment’ through which we argued that in media environments characterized by high choice, news providers often use entertainment appeals to secure their audience, and that shapes how individuals engage with information itself. We argue that in these contexts, structures of the information environment reproduce themselves even around misinformation correction discourses, potentially undermining their efficacy. We exemplify this framework through strategic case study analysis (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), and examine multiple instances of misinformation correction in practice sourced from the most prominent fact-checkers in India. Across three themes, political misinformation is consistently rooted in cultural and political cues which make them compelling (Althaus et al., 2009; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011; Li et al., 2023). We also illustrate how they have been reinforced by mainstream media, highlighting the supply side of the information environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) with an eye on misinformation. Fact-checking on the other hand, seeks to draw a dispassionate distinction between truth and falsehoods and fails to occupy the dominant narrative.

Findings from the analysis of replies to fact-checkers captures the consumption aspect of the information environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017). It reveals that audiences self-sort

into segments guided by mainstream news media. We showcase how the information environment leverages political contexts to shape audiences as well as the publics they constitute (Benkler et al., 2018; Peck, 2019; Thussu, 2007a, 2007b). These structures perpetuate through audience comments, even in the presence of objective evidence, potentially marginalize fact-checkers' efforts further. The case studies, the replies and the news programs may appear as simply instances of partisan battling. However, when observed through the lens of 'news as entertainment', the role of the information environment in users' responses becomes evident. As a result, we argue that misinformation is embedded in the logic of entertainment, underscoring the challenges inherent in rectifying it.

A key aspect of the news as entertainment framework is the declining share of news in individuals' media diets (Wojcieszak et al., 2023). As a result, commercial concerns of the news media dictate operations. Thus, partisan sorting of audiences to cater to a reliable group of loyalists (Hamilton, 2004; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005) is mobilized through the logic of strategic entertainment which we highlight through our framework. Insights from the Indian context indicate that the audience-making practices employed are revealed in audience's comments. Importantly, we demonstrate that media leverage social and cultural contexts to inform their programming choices. Thus, we argue that the competitive structure of news media organizes how political information is consumed.

Studies have examined how competitive information environments shape the production of polarized narratives by taking advantage of cultural and institutional faultlines (e.g., Abhishek, 2021). Our analyses show that audiences of corrections perpetuate predominant 'informational' narratives into the correction process. Findings from the case studies and the discourse analysis of replies show that not only do persistent narratives re-emerge, users also present counter-arguments to fact-checkers, backed with 'evidence' i.e., other versions of the (debunked) misinformation. This indicates that corrections are presumed to be aligned with or oppose existing structures of the information environment rather than as efforts towards media education. As a result, efforts at correction of misinformation also get appropriated to existing frameworks of audience making (Benkler et al., 2018; Thussu, 2007a). For instance, responses to fact-checkers either question the authority of their investigation or support them because they question the dominant politics they are critical of. The methods they employ or the evidence they present do not seem to be resonant determinants of their influence. However, the influence of narratives in the information environment remains persistent in undermining fact-checks. In that, it demands a better understanding of media ecosystems and their influence on audience behavior.

As the logic of entertainment determines how polarization is operationalized through news and information, the small minority of news literate individuals likely find no use in fact-checking enterprises, given their preconditioned skepticism to all forms of editorialized content (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). Those most vulnerable to misinformation, possibly including some repliers to fact checkers who propagate misinformation despite correction, continue to reinforce the information environment. As noted, accusations of partisanship are not limited to the right or the left. Rather, the case studies capture a wide net of circulating misinformation and show how they exemplify the logic of the information environment (Peck, 2019) through scandal and conspiracy. And so, polarization and suspicion also ride on the vehicle of entertainment to produce compelling content to sustain loyal audiences.

Our study offers important insights in the face of limited success of misinformation correction interventions (Badrinathan, 2020; Guess et al., 2020; Thorson, 2016). The regimes of audience-making have transformed such that entertainment orients the process, rather than public service notions of objectivity. The case studies illuminate the role of mainstream media in propelling these narratives through entertainment frameworks. Dispassionate corrections understandably appeal to different audiences than those socialized by mainstream media. As a result, there is a disjuncture exemplified through the analysis of replies which show audiences' response reproduces media structures in practice, negating dispassionate fact-checking. Users resort to different versions of the debunked media to reinforce their beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Garrett et al., 2013), often to discredit the correction. Misinformation correction as a technical intervention that converses only with evidence and counter-evidence can fail to create the desired sensitivity to facts. This study is a demonstration of how the political information environment can account for the persistence of misinformation. When news becomes a vehicle for entertainment, the debate between fact and falsehoods loses significance. With the news media structure sensationalized, it leaves little room for incredulity or disbelief for the audience, either when Marilyn Monroe's iconic image is morphed to look like an opposition leader's (Niranjankumar, 2020), or when the origins of the image are established. That there is a lack of acceptance of counter-evidence, in discursive practice as well as in media literacy experiments only corroborates this further. Thus, any meaningful intervention to falsify misinformation must attempt to address how misinformation is itself an artifact of its media contexts. 'News as Entertainment' thus becomes one way to characterize contemporary news media when addressing how we can expect audiences to respond to misinformation and its corrections.

Finally, we want to highlight some caveats that should guide the interpretation of results from this study. The data from this study are not well-suited to examine how audiences interpret messages, nor to examine how news messages are produced. Secondly, we only focus on the most-replied-to with tweets, highlighting that fact-checks in general, do not receive enough engagement. These posts do not represent general engagement received by fact-checkers. Thus, we are unable to capture less prominent interactions that could still contribute to misinformation correction in practice. Finally, in the absence of information on users' political leanings, it would be impossible to suggest how far partisan priors or backfire effects may be at play here. Despite these limitations, our data and findings show that the nature of information supply in the media environment reproduces itself into the consumption of corrective information as well. Thus, we highlight the importance of considering the structures governing information environments to combat misinformation effectively.

Notes

1. The dynamics of competition among media outlets is explored by using television ratings from Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC; Firos, 2023), identifying the most-watched news shows. BARC is an independent industry body which provides data on Indian viewership behaviors.
2. Original headlines, further examples as well as detailed references for the news programs (in text and from the table) are also shared in Table A1 in the appendix.

3. As of March 2021. While BOOM continues to be an IFCN signatory, AltNews (Pravda Media Foundation) has not renewed their status since its expiry in December 2021.
4. We share the public metrics of all posts analyzed in Fig 1 in the appendix.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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