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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION BY SOCH FACT CHECK AGAINST ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION IN PAKISTAN 2024

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Abstract: *This study analyzes the communication strategy of SochFactCheck, a Pakistani fact-checking organization, during the 2024 General Elections. It employs Strategic Communication Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to examine 52 disinformation cases, focusing on how SochFactCheck structured, disseminated, and evaluated counter-narratives. Disinformation tactics included deepfakes, AI-generated political resignations, and gendered attacks primarily targeting PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) leaders. Through a four-phase strategic model situational analysis, message development, message delivery, and evaluation SochFactCheck deployed a hybrid communication system integrating online platforms and offline journalist workshops. The results demonstrate SochFactCheck's evolution from a reactive fact-checking outlet to a strategic actor capable of shaping public resilience and digital literacy. This study underscores the role of independent media in countering AI-driven political manipulation in fragile democracies*

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of AI-generated disinformation has introduced a profound threat to electoral integrity, especially in emerging democracies such as Pakistan. The 2024 General Elections were marked by a wave of deepfake videos, AI-cloned political statements, and gendered digital attacks. Voters were increasingly subjected to realistic yet fabricated content that distorted political narratives. Amid this volatile media landscape, SochFactCheck emerged as a key actor dedicated to countering disinformation through strategic messaging and community-based outreach.

This study explores how SochFactCheck not only corrected false claims but also functioned as a strategic communicator, building digital literacy and audience trust. It employs Strategic Communication Theory, a model that frames communication as a purposeful, audience-sensitive process consisting of four critical phases: situational analysis, message development, delivery, and evaluation (Hallahan et al., 2007). By mapping this theory onto SochFactCheck's operations, the study reveals insights into how fact-checking organizations can evolve into proactive defenders of democratic discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is based on Strategic Communication Theory, which views communication as a deliberate, goal-oriented, and context-specific process (Hallahan et al., 2007). In contrast to passive information delivery, this approach emphasizes planning, platform adaptation, and outcome evaluation. Especially during elections where information is often weaponized strategic communication plays a crucial role in shaping narratives, countering disinformation, and building public trust (Smith, 2017). SochFactCheck's approach during Pakistan's 2024 elections reflects this model, using a four-phase process: situational analysis, message development, delivery, and evaluation. Their interventions were carefully designed to be transparent, timely, and tailored to platform behaviors and audience sensitivities.

Complementing this, the study draws on Digital Literacy Theory(Livingstone, 2004) (Hobbs & Program, 2010), which frames audiences as active participants in meaning-making. In the context of AI-generated disinformation, fact-checking alone is insufficient; public resilience depends on citizens' ability to critically evaluate digital content. SochFactCheck's strategy integrated these principles by combining real-time corrections with public education. Their use of accessible language, annotated visuals, and offline training workshops illustrates a dual mission: to correct falsehoods and cultivate verification skills among the public. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing how SochFactCheck functions not only as a fact-checker, but as a strategic communicator and digital literacy advocate.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) as the primary method for examining how SochFactCheck addressed disinformation during the 2024 General Elections in Pakistan. QCA, as described by(Schreier, 2012), is particularly suitable for analyzing complex, contextual content where meaning is shaped by sociopolitical environments. Unlike quantitative approaches that emphasize coding frequency, QCA allows for interpretive depth, enabling the researcher to examine how narratives, visuals, and strategic language were used to respond to disinformation.

A dataset of 52 verified disinformation cases was selected based on their virality, political sensitivity, and timing spanning from January 28 to February 9, 2024. These cases, archived on SochFactCheck's official platform, were thematically coded to identify manipulation techniques (e.g., deepfakes, synthetic voices), narrative goals (e.g., voter suppression, political defamation), and platform behaviors (e.g., TikTok versus WhatsApp dissemination).

Primary data included SochFactCheck reports, social media engagement metrics, and semi-structured interviews with key informants: producer Sameen Aziz and editor Raza Ijaz. Their insights were crucial for understanding editorial decision-making, message framing, and audience engagement strategies. Secondary data sources included media monitoring reports and academic studies on election disinformation in South Asia (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024).

To enhance validity, the study employed triangulation, cross-checking disinformation cases across platforms and integrating field interviews to ensure interpretive accuracy. This methodology aligns with both Strategic Communication Theory and Digital Literacy Theory,

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emphasizing the interplay between message design and audience understanding in disinformation counter-strategies (Hallahan et al., 2007)(Livingstone, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disinformation Typologies and Spread

The disinformation analyzed clustered into five typologies: fake political resignations (27%), deepfake/edited videos (23%), impersonation (19%), doctored political speeches (17%), and gendered disinformation (14%). One of the most viral cases involved a deepfake of Imran Khan allegedly calling for election boycotts from jail a clip that circulated widely on TikTok and Twitter/X but was later debunked by matching it with metadata from a 2023 public speech.

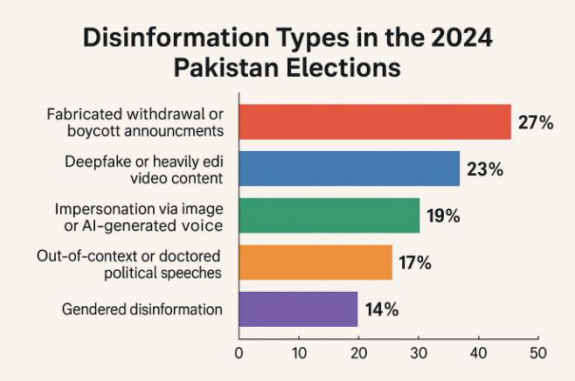

Figure 1. Bar chart showing distribution of disinformation types by percentage

Another case involved a synthetic voice clip of Yasmin Rashid announcing PTI's withdrawal. SochFactCheck's forensics traced the audio to a cloned voice layered over old press footage. A third example targeted Maryam Nawaz using a deepfake video sourced from Indonesian influencer Jihane Almira Chedid, edited to appear scandalous. This manipulation reinforced gendered stereotypes and aimed to delegitimize female leadership.

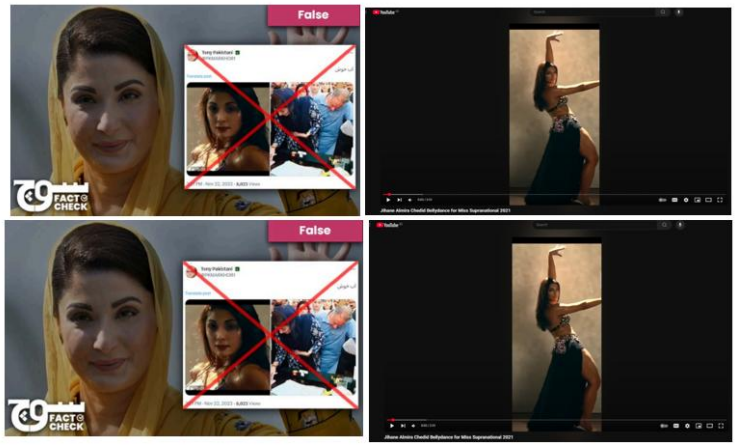

Figure 2. Stills from Maryam Nawaz deepfake juxtaposed with original Jihane Almira video.

Strategic Communication Phases

SochFactCheck's approach to countering disinformation during the 2024 Pakistan General Elections was deeply rooted in the principles of Strategic Communication Theory.

Rather than responding haphazardly to viral falsehoods, the organization followed a structured, phased methodology that allowed for timely, targeted, and effective interventions. This framework enabled SochFactCheck to align its fact-checking efforts with both audience behavior and media platform dynamics. Their communication strategy unfolded through the following-stage cycle:

Situational Analysis

SochFactCheck entered the 2024 election cycle anticipating a surge in AI-driven falsehoods. The organization conducted pre-election audits of past disinformation waves and media behaviors. They observed a clustering of disinformation surges between February 3–7, directly preceding the February 8 election. These narratives disproportionately targeted PTI and capitalized on political volatility such as legal verdicts and public rallies.

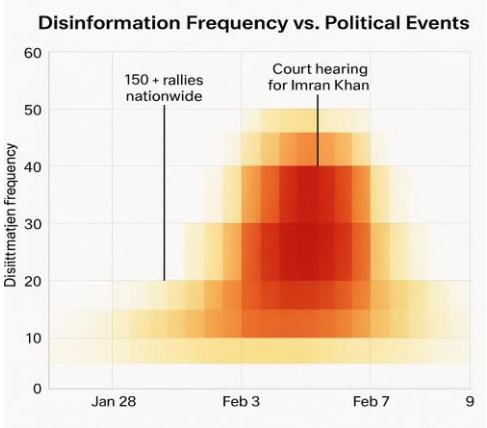

Figure 3. Heatmap overlay of disinformation frequency with court dates and rallies.

Producer Sameen Aziz explained, "These weren't isolated hoaxes. We'd see three different PTI candidates 'withdraw' within hours. The design was templated—same music, banner, voice modulation—but different faces" (Aziz, 2024). This pattern suggested not just disinformation, but disinformation strategy.

Message Development

SochFactCheck's editorial process prioritized credibility, empathy, and transparency. Rather than simply labeling content as "fake," their debunks used a four-step storytelling approach: (1) state the viral claim, (2) describe the manipulation method, (3) provide original source links or forensic evidence, and (4) offer sociopolitical context.

For example, the Imran Khan deepfake was not only debunked with metadata but also contextualized by explaining the restrictions in Adiala Jail that make such videos impossible. Similarly, the Maryam Nawaz video was handled with cultural sensitivity to avoid victim-blaming, using language like "gendered disinformation" rather than sensationalist headlines.

Editor Raza Ijaz emphasized: "We blur or annotate only when necessary. We explain why we did it. People trust us because we show them how we verified" (Ijaz, 2024).

Message Delivery

Given Pakistan's diverse media consumption patterns, SochFactCheck adopted a platform-specific communication architecture. On WhatsApp, they pushed Urdu-language alerts with visuals. On Instagram, they posted reels and carousels. Twitter/X remained a key space for rebuttals, amplified by tagging journalists and influencers. Facebook housed long-form explanations for older audiences.

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Their offline outreach—especially through the Google News Initiative—trained over 150 journalists and educators, creating local "verification nodes" across provinces like Punjab and Sindh.

Figure 4. Photo from media literacy workshop

This multichannel approach made disinformation correction accessible, trustworthy, and fast.

Evaluation and Impact

Strategic communication concludes with evaluation, and SochFactCheck's metrics show significant audience engagement. Election debunks averaged 12,000–18,000 views in the first 24 hours. More importantly, public behavior began to shift: "People no longer just ask 'Is this fake?' They now ask, 'How did you know?'" Aziz reflected. This curiosity reflects increased digital literacy.

SochFactCheck also analyzed repeat submissions. Content flagged by workshop trainees had a 34% faster verification turnaround, suggesting the effectiveness of grassroots literacy programs.

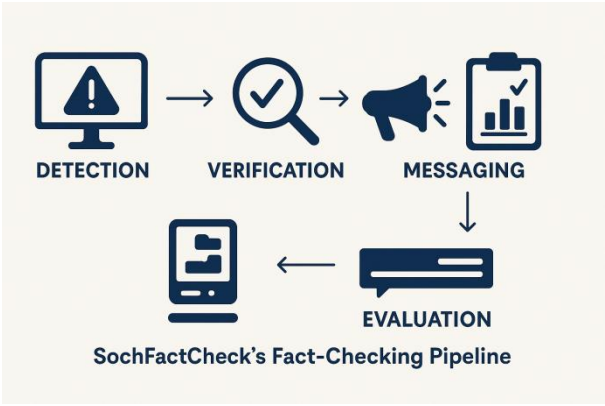

Figure 5. Infographic showing full communication cycle: detect → verify → craft → deliver → evaluate.

However, challenges remain. English-dominant formats marginalize low-literacy groups, and AI tools for Urdu deepfakes are still underdeveloped.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how SochFactCheck responded to the surge of AI-generated and politically orchestrated disinformation during Pakistan's 2024 General Elections. Using

Strategic Communication Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), the research analyzed 52 verified disinformation cases and revealed that SochFactCheck functioned not only as a fact-checking organization but as a strategic communicator. Their efforts demonstrated an intentional, phased approach beginning with situational analysis and concluding with post-campaign evaluation that allowed the organization to move beyond rebuttals and toward audience empowerment.

The findings highlight that disinformation targeting PTI leaders was not random but coordinated and timed to coincide with moments of political volatility, echoing trends identified globally in emerging democracies (Bradshaw, n.d.)(Tucker et al., 2018). Deepfake speeches, AI-cloned withdrawal announcements, and gendered visual attacks functioned to suppress voter turnout and delegitimize political participation. SochFactCheck's strategic response anchored in transparency, cultural literacy, and cross-platform adaptation played a key role in mitigating these effects.

More importantly, the organization succeeded in cultivating public trust and promoting digital literacy. Through localized workshops, real-time WhatsApp alerts, and simplified visual debunks, they shifted public behavior from passive consumption to active verification a transition consistent with civic engagement goals outlined in media literacy literature(Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013)(Claire & Hossein, 2017).

In sum, this study shows that combating disinformation requires more than technical verification it demands strategic, audience-aware communication. SochFactCheck offers a replicable model for how civil society actors in the Global South can build resilient, decentralized infrastructures for electoral integrity. As algorithmic manipulation and synthetic media evolve, such strategies will become increasingly vital to democratic survival.

Suggestion

In light of the findings presented in this study, several recommendations emerge that may enhance the effectiveness and reach of disinformation countermeasures during future electoral cycles in Pakistan and similar hybrid media environments. First, there is a clear need for SochFactCheck and comparable organizations to expand their Urdu-first content strategy. Although much of SochFactCheck's material is linguistically accessible to urban, educated audiences, rural populations and those with limited literacy still face barriers to understanding and engaging with debunks. Implementing simultaneous releases in multiple regional languages particularly Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto could bridge this gap, especially on platforms like WhatsApp and community radio.

Secondly, technological infrastructure must be strengthened. The development and integration of automated tools for detecting deepfakes and synthetic audio in local languages would significantly reduce verification time and improve preemptive responses. Given that many disinformation cases during the 2024 election cycle involved cloned audio or heavily edited footage, especially in Urdu, the absence of locally trained AI detection models remains a critical vulnerability.

Furthermore, the study recommends the scaling of SochFactCheck's grassroots media literacy initiatives. The success of journalist and educator workshops, conducted in partnership with Google News Initiative, demonstrates the efficacy of decentralized networks in increasing verification capacity. These training programs should be expanded

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both geographically and demographically, targeting not only journalists but also schoolteachers, university clubs, and local government communication officers. These individuals serve as critical nodes in their respective communities and can amplify disinformation correction efforts through trusted interpersonal relationships.

From a policy perspective, collaboration between electoral authorities such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and independent fact-checkers should be formalized. Establishing a shared disinformation response portal or real-time alert system during the pre-election and polling periods could institutionalize verification workflows and create a centralized repository of rebuttals. This would help standardize the credibility of fact-checks and reduce redundancy among media outlets and watchdogs.

Lastly, further academic research is encouraged to deepen the understanding of counter-disinformation strategies in Global South contexts. Comparative studies involving actors in Indonesia, Kenya, or Brazil could reveal context-specific best practices or shared challenges. Longitudinal studies measuring changes in audience trust and verification behavior over time would also provide valuable insights into the long-term effectiveness of strategic communication interventions like those pioneered by SochFactCheck. Together, these recommendations aim to fortify democratic processes against the growing sophistication of politically motivated digital disinformation.

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