



Framing False Political Narratives: Computational Propaganda, Fake News and Manipulation and Pakistan Social Media In 2025

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Abstract: The study investigated perpetuation of false narratives and political manipulation through fake news, misinformation, disinformation and computational propaganda in digital ecosystem of Pakistan in 2025. The study critically reviewed role of automation, online algorithms and coordinated human networks curtailing cyber security in political spheres. The viral political news stories of social media have been selected for content analysis employing purposive sampling technique. Exerting theoretical foundations from Framing theory and Propaganda model the study analyzed the key propaganda techniques, frames, patterns and major themes employed for shaping political discourses of Pakistani public. The findings suggested that fake AI driven technologies such as online algorithms, computational propaganda techniques, automation and intensify political polarization and serve as tool for production, consumption and dissemination of fake news and false narratives targeted to frame false narratives through manipulative propaganda techniques of political issues and news stories. The study highlighted urgent need to develop AI powered cyber security frameworks for detection of fake news and control information bias in order to enhance credibility and trustworthiness in digital spaces.

Key Words: Computational Propaganda, Fake News, False Narratives, Political Manipulation

Introduction

The hyper connected world of digital politics now offers digital manipulative strategies for framing political narratives which has somehow blurred the lines between the actual political reality and constructed false narratives through fake news and misinformation. In current digital eco system political polarization have become hub for perpetuation of false narratives, fake news stories, computational propaganda, misinformation and deliberate disinformation. Digital spaces have been plagued with AI generated false information on the name of political communication (West, 2024).

The year 2025 has seen a storm of false narratives, digital propagandas, fake news, misinformation and disinformation in Pakistan. The digitalization of political information through digital spaces have incredibly transformed the traditional political dynamics Now the political messages are constructed, disseminated and consumed more on social media than mainstream channels. The topmost popular and impactful social media platforms X (Twitter) and Facebook have emerged as the prominent sources of political communication in recent years globally and the impacts of these platforms have proven to be the turning points and set unprecedented records in terms of digital political activism, polarization, manipulation and agenda setting.

The intricate post digital technologies based on computational propaganda techniques, algorithms, and automation by politicians have made significant impacts on political decision making of people in Pakistan. There is dire need to take practical solutions for ensuring ethical regulations to systemize dissemination of false political information and introduce interventions for digital media literacy in Pakistan for safeguarding democracy (Farooq et al., 2025)

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Social media revolutions made significant impacts on political spheres in Pakistan in recent two decades and shaped public discourses and voting behaviours in elections as well. The popular political parties of Pakistan PTI and PML-N used power of social media for political communication to target mass audiences and gain support from their voters. One of the most significant reasons of Imran Khan and his party success are highly correlated with their efficient political communication and engagement tactics which played crucial role in making Khan the most influential and powerful victorious political leader against his opponents (Shabbir, 2023).

Rehman et al (2025) conducted a mixed method study to analyze cyber security policies, legal frameworks, technology interventions, public awareness levels in Pakistan to combat disinformation. Findings revealed that more than 78% participants encountered fake news stories but only 39% could hardly detect misinformation and false narratives in them. This demonstrated that Pakistan is still far to go in attaining digital literacy skills and safety mechanisms at digital spaces (Olanipekun, 2025).

Along with national level issues regarding fake news stories Pakistan combated online information bias and intense battlefield of false narratives against India this year. The AI generated deepfake images and footages blurred truth from propaganda during Pak-India conflict (Shah, 2025).

Research objectives

- ▶ **RO1:** To explore role of social networking sites in propagating fake news and political manipulation.
- ▶ **RO2:** To identify major propaganda and manipulation techniques employed at social media in fake political news stories.
- ▶ **RO3:** To analyze conspicuous patterns and themes used for political manipulation in fake news of social media.

Research questions

- ▶ **RQ1:** What role social media is playing in terms of propagation of fake news and political manipulation.
- ▶ **RQ 2:** What are the major propaganda and manipulation techniques employed at social media in dissemination of fake political news stories.
- ▶ **RO3:** What conspicuous patterns and themes are mostly used for political manipulation in fake news of social media.

Literature Review

University of Oxford (2021) reported that 93% of global countries use disinformation, political manipulation and misinformation as strategic political communication. The university surveyed more than eighty countries to investigate media manipulation and their intimidations for democratic systems around the globe and declared social media manipulation a treacherous threat. The report highlighted one of the most serious realities behind political manipulation, computational propaganda, fake news and false narratives in form of misinformation and shared that governments, politicians, public relations agencies and politicians all use exploitative power of social media for manipulation on large scale.

Bienvenue (2020) critically reviewed computational propaganda, political manipulation by politicians and their parties at social media and conducted a series of case studies to interpret automation, anonymity, scalability as tools for setting false political narratives. Unlike traditional media digital platforms are highly active and provide precise information in less time and target large number of consumers generating mass responses. The hyper-connective digital world makes it easier for politicians to engineer public discourses through sock puppets, algorithms, bots and serve as powerful tool for dissemination of fake news and frame false narratives for political manipulation.

West (2024) raised serious concerns on role of AI in shaping intense misinformation content at social media platforms. He reported that millions of social media users share false information online. AI generated political disinformation benefits certain websites, individuals and organizations as they get certain benefits from this

disinformation. This flood of political manipulation, disinformation and false narratives have plagued digital system which seems difficult to control in such circumstances.

The Cyber Crime Circle of Federal Investigation Agency Pakistan (FIA) arrested eight people involved for propagating fake news in form of AI generated tempered images of Maryam Nawaz, The Chief Minister of Punjab (The Express Tribune November 15, 2025). Fake news Watchdog (January 1, 2025) debunked a fake news against Imran Khan's sister Aleema Khan and lawyer Shahid Aslam accusing PTI lawyers for misusing party funds.

Misinformation and Fake news in political spheres are not limited to developing countries where there is lack of cyber security mechanisms such as India Pakistan but are a real time threat at global levels in developed countries including US and UK as well. Carlson (2018) declared fake news as moral panic for political manipulation by critically analyzing presidential election stories of Trump from 2016. Significant preponderance of fake news stories and misinformation bombarded US social media generating mass clicks and advertising revenues stepping towards new dimensions of political communication. Same patterns of political manipulation, fake news and storm of false narratives by Trump and Elon Musk were evident in 2024. Tait (2024) criticized Trump and Musk for propagating false narratives, fake videos, fabricated claims in election campaign.

Gabol (2025) shared an incident of negative political manipulation as multiple social media users shared a doctored image of Maryam Nawaz and her mother Kalsoom Nawaz on a book cover of 10th class textbook. The fake news gave the impression that the book was printed in order to give tribute to both ladies as heroic political figures and symbol of women empowerment in Pakistan. This false news gained popularity with more than 45,600 views and more than 1300 users shared it without any verification. Later on, it was found a case of negative political manipulation and biased framing.

There are numerous anti state actors, militant groups and terrorist groups which are operating hyperactive propagandist social media accounts against Pakistan. Pakistani officers investigated that more than 148 social media accounts were used by militant groups such as TTP and BLA against Pakistan. In order to curb this anti state propaganda Pakistan strongly urged global social media platforms (Facebook, X, WhatsApp and Instagram) to block these accounts.

Howard (2023) termed computational propaganda as popular tool which is emerging in the world of digital political manipulation and playing crucial role in dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. He urged to propose a socio-technical framework for addressing issues to combat algorithmic biases for political manipulation advocating international level scientific collaboration to deal with the challenges of information bias and political manipulation.

Political manipulation and disinformation at social media platforms are becoming a serious global concern. Although it is sometimes difficult to debunk and counter computational propagandas and political manipulations at social media. Propagation of disinformation in the form of digital AI generated news, doctored images, videos and audios have become a routine matter around the globe and particularly in the case of Pakistan where there are rarely any prominent mechanisms for countering digital disinformation and political manipulation.

Pakistan has struggled hard to navigate challenges of fake news and information biased at its digital platforms. One of the core steps taken to combat fake news. Disinformation and misinformation at digital spaces is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes act (PECA, 2016) which criminalized online information deception. Pakistani government also proposed Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority in 2025 to regulate digital ecosystem for protection from fake news and disinformation. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Pakistan (2018) set up an X account for countering fake news and false propaganda. Currently the account has more than 72k active social media users as followers. This account regularly shares credible facts and updates regarding propagation of false narratives, manipulate framing of events, distorted images and doctored audio or videos.

Although Pakistani academics and researchers are now focusing on perpetuation of fake news at social media still there exists a significant research gap in interpretation of AI driven technologies and their role in shaping false narratives at these platforms for political polarization.

Theoretical Framework

The study has adopted two theoretical frameworks, The Framing theory and The propaganda model. Together both theoretical frameworks have offered a comprehensive lens for interpreting how digital mechanisms such as algorithms, bots and computational propaganda are used to disseminate fake news as tool by setting or shaping false narratives using intended for political manipulation through online social media platforms.

Framing Theory

The theory guides to interpret how political events and their news stories are constructed using certain perspectives and frames for highlighting, omitting specific details and shaping or setting false narratives for manipulation of political discourse for social media consumers.

The Propaganda Model

The model at the other hand justifies how certain digital mechanisms, power structures, political supremacies set, shape and amplify false narratives using algorithms, computational propaganda techniques at social media platforms.

Research Design

The study has adopted qualitative content analysis as research design for selection, collection and analysis of data. The rationale for selecting this research design is to have an in-depth analysis of dominant themes, popular trends, appeals, manipulative techniques and techniques of computational propaganda at online spaces which have become hub of political manipulation and false narratives for consumers.

Population and Sample

All the viral political news stories which were later on debunked and proven as fake in the year 2025 have been considered population of this study. The posts were circulated at Facebook and X consumed and shared by social media users of Pakistan. The stories for sample have been through purposive sampling technique.

Table I

The Selected Sample of Fake News Stories Used for Political Manipulation in Pakistan (2025)

S#	Fake news/ political manipulation	Findings	Framing/ Propaganda
1	Controversial statement against PTI lawyers attributed to Aleema Khan and Shahid Aslam regarding exploitation of party funds went viral on social media (Abbasi, 2025).	The news was later debunked by Fake news Watch dog.	The news was framed for false propaganda against Imran Khan's sister and party administration.
2	A storm of fake news, computational propaganda and disinformation based content was circulated by social media users from both countries during Pak/India conflict.	Most of the images and videos were doctored and created using AI software.	These news stories were framed for propagation of anti- state narratives, setting omitting authentic details and credible figures just to promote negative image of target.
3	Indian media was mocked globally for disinformation and fake news.	Most of the news lack authenticity and credibility and based on unverified, exaggerated information.	Most of the news stories were part of computational propaganda and lack any credible bases.
4	Multiple Indian social media users shared a video featuring Bilawal Bhutto claiming that they have planted people in Indian parliament	The video was doctored and used as a tool of disinformation and fake news against Pakistan and Ministry of foreign affairs of Pakistan.	These vides were framed by using anti-Pakistan narratives to discredit Pakistani politicians for name calling and defamation.



S#	Fake news/ political manipulation	Findings	Framing/ Propaganda
5	Fake victory photo controversy of Shahbaz Sharif and Asim Muneer.	The picture got viral on social media platforms and multiple doctored images were created to defame Pakistan government and Army.	This photo was targeted to malign Pakistan army and general and expression of violent Indian media propaganda.
6	False claims regarding deals between Imran Khan and establishment	Multiple news stories based on rumors regarding deals and settlements between Imran Khan and power structures have always been on social media but they got debunked and proven false by credible sources.	Imran Khan has been the most popular political leader due to his social media power so he is always in top trends at these platforms. Immense posts regarding his deal circulate at social media by his opponents and at the same time his followers keep countering them with counter narratives.
7	Deep fake video to defame Uzma Bukhari	The video was used as tool of propaganda against the minister and was created by her opponents and critiques lacking moral and ethical standing.	PML-N has always notorious for its unethical political propaganda scandals but the same thing was happened with their own minister by her opponents which was a full fledge social media campaign to question her political integrity based on character assassination.
8	Fake text book cover news featuring Maryam and Kalsoom Nawaz as heroic women.	Viral news stories were based on exaggerated claims and framed in order to propagate false narratives by opponents.	Maryam Nawaz has also been in top social media trend due to her controversial selection as CM since than several social media campaigns have been targeting her propagating fake news and false narratives both in her favor and against her political credibility.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The study aimed to analyze the perpetuation and dissemination of fake news, disinformation, false political narratives and manipulation through computational propaganda and framing at social media platforms. Pakistan has a rich yet controversial political history with its own positives and negatives. Pakistani politicians have been using immense political stunts to attack their opponents using computational propaganda techniques in recent years. But those traditional propaganda techniques have now got even more exploitative by using power of AI powered tools in digital spaces.

The proliferation of fake news in digital ecosystems of Pakistan is exploiting political discourses and affecting public opinion in drastic ways. The viral fake news stories are circulated by active propagandists, politicians, journalists or bots through anonymous accounts and afterwards people with low media literacy skills become active participant of sharing those news stories further at large scale without any verification.

These fake news stories are part of strategic campaigns aimed at disseminating false narratives for people in order to manufacture their opinions about political issues and politicians. There are few dominant themes which have been identified through the literature review and critical analysis of selected data of this study.

Character Assassination

The major themes include character assassination and personal attacks against politicians. This is a common trend that people hire expert manipulative propagandist social media experts to hire full fledged campaigns against their opponents. There are numerous examples when both male and female politicians fell prey to such fake news stories which were part of computational propaganda against them. The viral fake news stories about Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, Asim Muneer and many others are clear cases when their credibility was questioned, unverified charges were imposed, personal boundaries were invaded at social media platforms.

Misogynist Attitudes and Gender Biasness

A common social media computational propaganda and political manipulation revolves around gender biased misogynist attitudes against female politicians. The deep embedded patriarchal mindset of Pakistan sometimes creates serious problems for female politicians because they are easy targets for their opponents. There are several cases when unethical viral news stories were shared about female politicians at social media platforms. The common examples are strategic computational propaganda against Maryam Nawaz, Bushra Bibi, Benazir Bhutto, Imran Khan sisters and recently Uzma Bukhari. These women are sometimes portrayed as less capable and intelligent as compared with their male politicians. Numerous social media campaigns have been run by politicians and even general social media consumers against female politicians in recent years.

National Interest

A common trend that has been observed in the recent Pakistan India conflict was dissemination of fake news stories, misinformation and disinformation on the name of national interest by both sides. People framed news stories as per their own preferences and the role of social media users did not remain limited to consumers but they stood out as active content creators as well. Numerous social media posts were designed and shared by young social media users of both countries to combat digital warfare. Some people also termed this war as modern digital warfare which was fought incredibly by young social media warrior of Pakistan by their world famous war memes. This was the time when political manipulation, framed news stories even if fake were enjoyed, liked shared and subscribed by social media users. At the same time Indian media were trolled globally for their unprofessional reporting and dissemination of fake news stories, false narratives and disinformation.

Anti-state, Anti/Government Narratives

There are also some forces which are working on paid agendas to propagate anti state and antigovernment narratives. These propagandists include terrorist groups, rebels, and politicians in opposition, journalists or general social media users of critical mindsets. A number of campaigns have been actively run against army, sitting government, judiciary and other institutions of Pakistan in the year 2025 which have been part of computational propaganda, served political interest of certain individuals and groups.

Sectarian and Ideological

One of the most common issue which starts intense conflicts among people are issues regarding their sect, religion, race of anything which relates with their ideological identity. These are one of the hottest points where people get manipulated easily and get charged. In such campaigns fake stories are generated, framed and propagated for political manipulation which spread a chaos in society. Where there are ideological conflicts it is easy to divide, manipulate and exploit people. Social media platforms have increased these conflicts because every other person now believes they are experts so they keep sharing information on sensitive issues without any verification. Most of the social media users share stories on sensitive issues without any sanity which has created an environment of extreme behaviour in digital settings which has intensified polarization in Pakistan.

The application of Framing theory and propaganda model on these findings have suggested that digital ecosystem offer wide range space for perpetuation and propagation of false narratives. As political discourses and stories are framed in manipulative ways using emotionally manipulative frames. Facebook and X have become hub of computational



propaganda promoting dissemination of fake news, disinformation and misinformation shaping political discourses for people. The theoretical frameworks have explained how certain issues and their specific details are amplified while some other aspects and issues are drowned out. Online algorithms play up and play down information regarding political events for people and serve as modern version of filters in today's digital ecosystem.

The study has highlighted highly significant aspects of political manipulation, raised serious concerns regarding dissemination of false narratives. There is dire need to ensure digital safety and security for its consumers by developing mechanisms based on truth, credibility, fairness and objectivity.

Conclusion

The study concluded that although digitalization of online spaces offered various benefits in terms of political activism and enhanced awareness levels of public yet due to AI powered manipulative techniques somehow these platforms have also become powerful sources of political manipulation which often blurred the lines between the credible information and fabricated false narratives. The digital eco system of Pakistan presents blend of old propaganda techniques with new computational tools in which issues are framed with manipulative approaches to shape and precisely engineer popular political discourses and public perception. False narratives are propagated using polarized content in order to create digital divides and ideological biases. The study underscored urgent need for public awareness to gain digital media literacy skills, digital policy interventions and AI powered detection tool and legal frameworks to combat information biases. Conclusively Pakistan is already navigating turbulent transitions in its political spheres this storm of misinformation and fake news is exploiting national integrity which must be countered by all the stake holders including government, law enforcement institutions and public for positive and developmental democratic outcomes.

Recommendations

The research has contributed valuable findings regarding digital information bias issues and highlighted importance of developing cyber security frameworks and mechanisms in Pakistan. The same AI technologies which have added to the exploitation of information biases through echo chambers, automation and algorithmic biases can be used for development of interventions, policies and mechanisms to detect fake news and ensure cyber security and credibility of information in digital spaces. All the stake holders including the state and its law enforcement institutions, politicians and social media consumers all need to work for digital literacy skills for Pakistani social media users.

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