

Dark Public Relations (Dark PR) and the Election System in Nepal: Implications for Democratic Communication

✍ Saroj Timsina, PhD
Bhaktapur Multiple Campus
Orcid ID: 0009-0008-4009-7659

✍ Deepak Chapagain
Bhaktapur Multiple Campus

ABSTRACT

Global political campaigns have experienced a remarkable change with the rise of social media and digital communications. In Nepal, this phenomenon has given rise to a new concept called Dark Public Relations (Dark PR). Dark PR involves disseminating false, misleading, or manipulative information with the aim of influencing public opinion without any accountability or transparency. In Nepal, on March 3, 2026, social media played a major role in disseminating misinformation, false information, and covert propaganda in relation to the election campaign for the elections held on that day. Various types of politically motivated information, images, and news were shared on social media platforms, leading to a confusing situation for voters, as they were not able to differentiate between true and false information disseminated on social media platforms. This phenomenon, in a way, indicates the challenges faced in Nepal in relation to Dark PR.

Key Words: *digital disinformation, political propaganda, electoral communication, dark public relations (Dark PR), and democratic accountability*

Introduction

In the context of the digitalization of our world, the last few years have witnessed a tremendous change in the area of political communication. This has been largely impacted by the emergence of social media platforms and the proliferation of internet services. The social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X (former Twitter) have become significant platforms for engaging with the public on political issues. Unlike the earlier scenario

with the help of conventional media, when the system of checks and balances was in place, the political players could reach a large number of people with the help of social media platforms, encouraging the people to participate actively in the area of politics. However, the emergence of these social media platforms has also witnessed the phenomenon of “Dark Public Relations.”

According to Harris and Fleisher (2017), "dark PR" is a term that is used to refer to forms of communication that are designed to conceal the source of information, where false information is spread for the purpose of manipulating public opinion. Unlike other forms of public relations that are based on principles of transparency, ethics, and accuracy, "dark PR" is based on deception and anonymity. Some of the common forms of "dark PR" that are commonly used include "fake accounts," "anonymous accounts" on social media, "bots," and even "false narratives" or "false information" in the media.

It is very difficult for citizens, media, and even regulatory agencies to identify the source of this "political propaganda" because these forms of "dark PR" are designed to avoid this very issue. "Dark PR" has the ability to affect public opinion, politics, and even democracy in the "dark" areas where it is used. It is noteworthy that in recent times, Nepal has experienced a remarkable rise in internet access and social media usage, which has resulted in a rapid rise in the usage of digital communication in Nepalese politics. Online media are being used by different Nepalese political parties and politicians for engaging citizens, mobilizing their support, and seeking voters' support, which is a major threat to Nepal's democratic process, yet it provides a chance for citizens' participation in Nepalese politics.

These concerns relate to the threat posed by the situation in the electoral space in Nepal on March 3, 2026, when a number of cases of interference through digital methods became apparent several days before the election of the House of Representatives (Body & Data, 2026; Freedom Forum, 2026). The rapid spread of digital disinformation practices can be observed ahead of these elections, and according to reports of the Election Commission of Nepal, at least 54% of all misleading information about the above-mentioned elections was a deep fake or created via artificial intelligence (Ballot Bulletin Nepal,

2026). Various social media accounts and anonymous websites are spreading false information in order to create polarization, discredit certain political parties or impact voter perception of particular candidates without revealing motives and sources of such information while not conducting paid promotions, which is against the laws in Nepal (Accountability Lab, 2026). There are social media accounts or anonymous pages that spread information that seeks to heighten political polarization, denigrate political opponents, or shift public opinion without revealing the source or purpose of the information. It was difficult for the people in Nepal to differentiate between the truth and the clutter of changed stuff in this digital environment. As the digital environment around the Nepalese elections for the House of Representatives that would take place on March 5, 2026, intensified, a new era of fierce digital wars emerged, where social media was manipulated at its peak level (The Japan Times, 2026). As social media accounts for close to 80% of all online activity in Nepal, the enormous increase in digital chaos made it virtually impossible for regular citizens to separate facts from political propaganda (Taipei Times, 2026).

In the present election cycle, which serves as the first true examination of democracy after the 2025 youth revolt, there have been a considerable number of artificial intelligence (AI) slops and deep fakes fabricated by the political parties themselves to manipulate the electorate's perception about the parties' election campaigns. As revealed by fact-checking agencies like TechPana, many photos created by artificial intelligence featured rallies with more than 500,000 participants, while the actual statistics showed that the rally had only fewer than 5,000 participants (The Japan Times, 2026). Noteworthy politicians were also subjected to several deep fake movies made with artificial intelligence for manipulating the election results, where one such video showed a Nepali Congress leader encouraging his followers to back another political party in a TikTok post (The Japan Times, 2026).

Apart from the problem of synthetic media, the other major obstacle for the voters was the rapid rise of unchecked, unaccredited pages that tried to influence public perception without revealing their financial or ideological

affiliations. According to research done by Digital Rights Nepal, there were several operational meta-pages that used deceptive brandings to present themselves as unbiased, multi-dimensional political news sources but actually helped promote particular candidates through algorithm-based advertisements (Digital Rights Weekly, 2026).

Such anonymous websites were specifically targeted at the many internet users of the country, including 915,000 Generation Z voters who openly expressed their views through social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook yet were extremely susceptible to any form of algorithmic manipulations performed by their opponents (Healix Briefing, 2026). Instead of participating in constructive debates and discussions to foster democracy, both parties decided to increase political polarization by using hate speech against each other. Such a significant number of algorithmic manipulations were so massive that more than 600 lawsuits for cyber violations were filed with the courts by the Election Commission, as some of those cases were already being investigated by the Cyber Bureau of the Nepal Police in around 150 cases (Taipei Times, 2026). In terms of the post-election analysis of online hatred conducted from January 1 till March 12, 2026 by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Facebook accounted for the largest part of hate speech on the Internet (76%), while the second place went to the X platform (17%) and extremely one-sided online news portals similar to traditional mass media (UNDP, 2026).

The major problem that is most likely to result from this situation is the possible danger that dark PR presents to the democratic communication in Nepal. This is due to the fact that the digital platforms used by the people in Nepal to access political information have the potential to make a significant impact in enhancing democracy in Nepal. The usage of false and misleading propaganda, however, presents a danger to the possible benefits that the digital platforms have for the people in Nepal. This is due to its potential to make the people in Nepal make decisions based on lies instead of facts. The situation is also made worse by the fact that Nepal also lacks the institutional capacity and legislative frameworks to deal with disinformation. The election that took

place in 2026 poses a question concerning the quality of the country's democracy and the results of the election, given that disinformation campaigns are being conducted without impunity.

The study has three objectives. First, in an effort to comprehend the use and implications of these strategies in the Nepalese social media environment, the study examines the concept of dark PR and the strategies used in clandestine digital political activities. Second, the study aims to examine the impact of Dark PR on public trust, democracy, and electoral transparency in the March 3, 2026, election. Finally, the study seeks to examine some strategies and legislation that can help boost accountability in the electoral process and minimize the effects of digital misinformation. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on the relationship between digital media and democracy in Nepal by addressing these objectives.

For a more detailed insight into the evolving trend of election manipulation, an investigation was carried out through qualitative research regarding the link between the influence of social media as well as traditional media in communications within the context of the forthcoming federal and provincial elections in Nepal in the year 2026. This research topic is concerned with the anonymous spread of misinformation and application of Dark PR strategies such as astroturfing and synthetic information against their political rivals (García-Ull, 2025).

Literature Review

Macro and Micro Approach: Dynamics of Political Communication in Nepal

In order to evaluate the future dynamics of political communication in Nepal, it is necessary to trace the connections between changes in the role of communication and various transformations of Nepalese democracy. Taking this into consideration, although the first elections in which the voters expressed their views according to the newly adopted Constitution of Nepal took place in 2017, the political communication processes occurred through traditional media and local gatherings, as well as a non-algorithmic usage of

Facebook. Nevertheless, in 2022, one could expect an increase in the popularity of communication technologies like TikTok, which would lead to the popularity of independent politicians through the means of social media. These factors contributed to the democratization of the exchange of information but also resulted in smear campaigns and cheap fakes. Being influenced by a number of political crises that happened in Nepal, caused by youths in 2025, political communication during the 2026 election campaign would be conducted via Internet platforms due to automation and algorithms of the media industry.

While the exploitation of digital ecosystems for nefarious purposes in Nepal exists on a micro-level, it is representative of a broader trend in political communication in the contemporary world. As the report "Global Risks Report 2026" by the World Economic Forum claims, mis- and disinformation are two primary threats facing global democratic governance at present, together with geo-economics rivalry and societal polarization (Lindén, 2026). Worldwide, the phenomenon of electoral interference has evolved beyond spontaneous fake news articles and entered into the realm of professional practice of the Dark PR industry, responsible for plausible deniability campaigns (Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025). This has become especially evident during the lengthy 2024-2025 elections cycle when numerous democracies were elected around the globe in Asia, Europe, and the Americas; here, the usage of generative AI has been taken to its peak (Shane, 2024). While the emergence of sophisticated synthetic media and voice-cloning technologies alongside botnets has led to making targeted disinformation increasingly affordable, the current problem that arises in Nepal is only part of the more global problem when information ecosystem optimization involves eliciting strong emotional response from audiences instead (Mirza et al., 2023).

Theoretical Review

Dark PR's importance when it comes to how we use the Internet in our daily lives relates to its capacity to take a concept in media studies and transform it into a tedious experience related to sorting out content from a hacker's social media account. This scenario can be easily placed in the

framework of information disorder theory which is divided into two categories; disinformation, that is, lying, and misinformation; or accidentally spreading disinformation (Mirza et al., 2023). A real-world scenario where this would occur is logging into TikTok and finding a clip of a politician speaking slowly, because Dark PR firms slowed the politician down in order to suggest that he is unsuited for his position. Once a well-meaning relative shares the clip and thinks that it is real, the ordinary person gets exposed to contaminated information. One such theoretical concept is the Agenda Setting Theory that suggests that in the process of carrying out their activities, players in the communications sector set the agenda for what people consider important in a given political discourse by influencing their perceptions of the importance of a given issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Dark PR, underground players in the sector influence people's perceptions of certain issues by changing information on the internet and highlighting certain storylines or attacking their rivals.

Dark PR's importance when it comes to how we use the Internet in our daily lives relates to its capacity to take a concept in media studies and transform it into a tedious experience related to sorting out content from a hacker's social media account. This scenario can be easily placed in the framework of information disorder theory which is divided into two categories – disinformation, that is, lying, and misinformation – or accidentally spreading disinformation (Mirza et al., 2023). A real-world scenario where this would occur is logging into TikTok and finding a clip of a politician speaking slowly, because Dark PR firms slowed the politician down in order to suggest that he is unsuited for his position. Once a well-meaning relative shares the clip and thinks that it is real, the ordinary person gets exposed to contaminated information.

In addition, the Dark PR agency manipulates platform algorithms using automated bot networks, which challenges the basic principles of the Agenda-Setting Theory in which it is believed that the media dictates the issues that society discusses (Arceneaux, 2025). From the user perspective, this is evident when a visit to a website aimed at reading information about an important economic policy finds its discussion button filled with numerous anonymous

users discussing the sensationalized political issue. By the end of your browsing session, these bots will basically hijack the societal agenda.

Thirdly, in the third unethical practice involved in this field, it includes what is known as manufactured grassroots, whereby the digital agency creates a politically based movement that resembles an authentic grassroots movement (García-Ull, 2021). Manufactured grassroots involves Social Identity Theory and thus includes an intrinsic desire among human beings to belong to a group of peers (Rudakevych, 2025). In situations where you create a Facebook page of your local area and end up with people who share a political idea regarding a new venture of theirs in your local area, digital peer pressure is bound to occur. This is because you would be forced to accept the theory owing to peer pressure.

Another theoretical concept that can be used as a basis for this theory is the Framing Theory that highlights the importance of "the way information is presented or 'framed'" (Entman, 1993). In an attempt to influence people's perceptions without being very transparent about their intentions, dark PR applies the theory by choosing to present certain information in a given way, highlighting negative aspects of players in politics, or presenting false information in an attempt to influence people's perceptions without their full knowledge.

Furthermore, Herman and Chomsky's "Propaganda Model" can be used to illustrate how information can be manipulated for certain political or commercial interests. Although Herman and Chomsky's "Propaganda Model" was originally conceived for traditional media, it is also being applied in the context of digital media, where certain pieces of information, such as disinformation, are disseminated via algorithms. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), for example, have categorized false information as "misinformation," "disinformation," and "misinformation" in accordance with information disorder theory.

In general, these theoretical perspectives emphasize the fact that Dark PR is a deliberate form of communication with the purpose of shaping politics rather than a technology or online media phenomenon per se. The use of these

theoretical perspectives in the context of Nepal helps to illustrate how a strategic campaign of rumor, anonymous social media, and narrative was used in the electoral contest on March 3, 2026, in a context where attention, perception, and trust were systematically managed.

The conceptual framework for the objectives of this study is meant to examine the impact of Dark Public Relations (Dark PR) practices on the process of democratic communication in Nepal. The assumption for the conceptual framework for this study is that Dark PR practices are a hidden form of communication in the political process that includes practices such as coordinated actions through the internet, the spread of "fake news," anonymous social media profiles, and many more. These practices can be seen as independent variables that affect the reception and perception of communication by the electorate. The Dark PR practices identified by the conceptual framework for this study are source anonymity, content manipulation, and amplification.

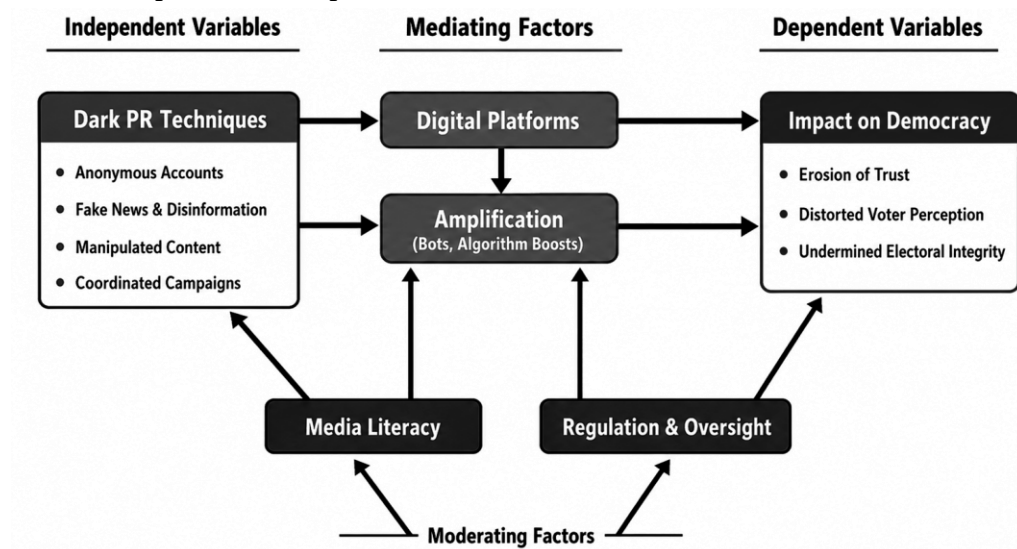
The effect on democratic communication, using the indicators of voters' perceptions, trust in political institutions, informed decision-making, and the integrity of the electoral process in a democracy, is the dependent variable. The level and intensity of Dark PR campaigns, using this framework, are perceived to affect the biased information environment that may lead to opinions formed on misinformation, polarization, and even electoral manipulation. The moderating variables may be voters' media literacy, Election Commission control, social media policies, and fact-checking agencies' capabilities, which may either offset or worsen the negative effects of Dark PR on democratic communication.

The paper aims to find the causal link between the obstacles to electoral accountability and the use of secret digital communication techniques by exploring Dark PR in relation to the former. It aims to concentrate on the degree to which digital media are a booster and facilitator of manipulation. It also aims to concentrate on the degree to which the behavior of voters is affected by these, depending on the context. This approach offers a systematic approach to analyzing the electoral situation in Nepal on the 3rd of March,

2026. This enables researchers to analyze the techniques of Dark PR and its implications. The theoretical aspect of the above article offers a foundation for the conceptual framework that follows below, which also offers a guide for this writing.

Figure 1

The Conceptual framework Dark Personal Relations (Dark PR) and impact in democratic process in Nepal.



(Source: Created by the author, adapted from theoretical frameworks by Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; and Howard, 2020).

However, note that voter perception, voter trust, and democratic communication integrity could all be significantly influenced by Dark PR, especially considering digital media and regulating factors such as media literacy. From the conceptual model, we understand how the independent variables interact. The independent variables for this research will include Dark Public Relations (PR) strategies such as concerted efforts, fake news, use of anonymous accounts, and content manipulation. The extent to which the content is disseminated will be determined by mediating factors such as digital media. Factors such as content amplifiers, bots, will also influence how far the content will spread. On the other hand, factors such as voter perception and integrity of democratic processes will form the dependent variables.

Apart from that, through assisting people in critically analyzing the information that is being presented to them and through assisting authorities in imposing accountability, the moderating variables can contribute to or mitigate the effects of Dark PR. This method not only emphasizes the significance of protective strategies in managing the possible negative effects but also explains the relationship between cause and effect in the context of digital communication.

Research Methodology

The generalization of research through the application of statistics is not employed in this research design. Instead, qualitative research is conducted through the use of critical discourse analysis and political phenomenology. By way of deconstructing and comprehending the working of "Dark PR," ascertaining what the problems are in relation to democratic governance that are caused by it, and creating an intervention strategy, this research seeks to comprehend how communication is responsible for destroying democracy. In the wake of empirical data gathered from the election for the House of Representatives in Nepal in March 2026, in combination with theories of information disorders, algorithm amplification, and political communication in a digital environment, the current research seeks to provide a thorough investigation into the effect of the hidden communications that take place online on voter perception.

Conceptualizing Dark Public Relations

For the purpose of influencing public opinion, voter behavior, or political outcomes, communications are deliberately created and disseminated in a way that is secretive, dishonest, or immoral. Such a phenomenon is referred to as 'Dark Public Relations' or 'Dark PR.' Dark PR is different from conventional PR in that the conventional version lays a great deal of emphasis on openness, honesty, and morality in communication. On the other hand, Dark PR deliberately keeps the source and the motivations for communication a mystery from the audience, who cannot make a judgment about the truth or accuracy of the message.

For the purpose of influencing public opinion, voters' behavior, or political outcomes, communications are carried out through hidden, dishonest, or immoral means. This is referred to as "dark public relations" or "dark PR." Unlike conventional public relations, which emphasize transparency, honesty, and moral communication, dark PR attempts to obscure the source of communication or its underlying motivations, making it difficult for the audience to judge the accuracy or correctness of the communicated information.

Additionally, Dark PR is also referred to as part of a broader concept of "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This is where people deliberately spread information that is false or misleading with the intention of deceiving the audience, shaping their perceptions, and instilling distrust in them towards political institutions. The types of information disorder include misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation, where misinformation is false information that is spread unintentionally, disinformation is false information that is spread intentionally, and misinformation is true information that is spread intentionally with destructive intent. This is because its primary intention is to shape political processes, not to inform, and thus it falls under disinformation and misinformation.

The process of carrying out dark PR has over time been a complex process that is difficult to identify. Some of these processes involve the creation of automated accounts that are used to pass the message, the creation of algorithmic manipulation that is used to increase visibility, and the creation of deep fake content that is used to create false images. Overall, it is clear that dark PR is not just an unethical means of communication but also a strategic move aimed at creating divisions among people based on clandestine political activities.

Techniques Used in Dark PR

Dark PR campaigns make use of a number of sophisticated techniques that are aimed at shaping public opinion and, in the end, shaping political processes in an almost undetectable manner. The use of anonymous social media pages or profiles that are later used in the dissemination of political

information while remaining anonymous about the identity of the person who creates such a page or profile is one of the most popular techniques that are being used in dark PR campaigns. This technique allows dark PR campaigners to insult their opponents or disseminate some forms of political information while remaining free from all forms of legal scrutiny and accountability for their actions due to their anonymous nature. Another technique that is being used in dark PR campaigns is the dissemination of false news, which involves the deliberate dissemination of false information, false news, and misinformation for the purposes of influencing the opinions of voters and many other things. It is difficult for the public to differentiate between what is true and what is false since the false information being disseminated is plausible in nature.

Another Dark PR strategy that involves a group of coordinated individuals or accounts that can be used to spread a message in order to create the illusion that a certain message is being endorsed by a majority of people is the bots. This creates a false sense of urgency for a message by amplifying it. Character assassination, which involves the spread of false accusations, rumors, and lies about a political opponent in order to destroy the character or reputation of the opponent, is another Dark PR strategy. This may be emotional in nature and intended to elicit a response from the opponent.

Nepal's Digital Politics and Election Communication

There has been a paradigm shift in terms of the way in which political campaign and election communication processes have been structured within the country because of the advancement that has taken place in technology within telecommunication and mobile phones. For the last ten years, there has been use of many different forms of social networking websites such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X formerly known as Twitter as the first mode of communication as opposed to the secondary form of communication within the public sphere, political communication, and rapid information exchange. This therefore means there has been a change within the Internet-mediated media system, which is now seen as the best media tool for millions of Nepali citizens to access political information and conduct civil discourse.

This is based on empirical evidence from Nepal Telecommunications Authority (2024).

This is a reflection of the global trend in the pattern of political communication all over the globe. This is due to the fact that the politicians are able to communicate directly to their constituents through such channels without the intervention of the gatekeepers of the media. The traditional pattern of political communication in Nepal has undergone a change. The traditional pattern of political communication in Nepal involved the use of the network of parties, mass demonstrations, as well as the media.

For mobilizing their voters, popularizing their campaigns, and establishing a narrative, both politicians and political parties are using digital media for their purpose. It is very important for a politician to reach a maximum number of people with the help of digital media, which can be easily done as resources are scarce in a developing democracy (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

The development of digital campaigning, therefore, transformed the nature of the electoral contest in Nepal as a whole, as the political actors are now given the opportunity to get seen and heard by the people with the help of digital campaigning. However, very important issues are being raised with the regard to the authenticity of the information being spread through digital media with the development of digital campaigning, as it was argued by the academics that "the rapid evolution of digital communication has also made citizens more susceptible to propaganda, disinformation, and clandestine forms of political manipulation."

In particular, one may point out that one of the most obvious changes in the digital political sphere in Nepal is that specific political movements which have gained significant popularity because of social media campaigns through algorithmic activation exist. Such a conclusion can be drawn because of the fact that the creation of such a reformist political party, which has been established by a person famous from the media world, took place, and his experience allowed him to organize social media promotion.

As it can be noticed, since this was a populist political movement that was based on dissatisfaction of common people with the policies of traditional elites, the campaign focused on the issue of transparency and corruption. Not being based on the structures of a conventional political party, it allowed for efficient social media campaigning for voters. Thus, one can state that the political campaign has been organized according to socio-economic discontent (Acharya, 2023).

The internet makes it possible to bring down the entry barriers of newcomers to politics and thus brings about democratization in politics. An example of this could be the creation of the Rastriya Swatantra Party. Political parties can utilize technology in order to communicate with their voters without necessarily belonging to any political party in existence and financially strong. The query raised by political scholars about internet-powered politics is whether it is possible to promote a political agenda based on populist principles and viral communication rather than politics based on policy-making (Howard, 2020).

Digital Strategies and Sub-National Electoral Realignments.

A second good example that could be given to illustrate the possible impact of digital activism on the course of sub-national elections in Nepal is the case of the success of an independent candidate in the election of mayors in Kathmandu. The case perfectly shows how effective it could be to use the internet as a channel of communication to encourage politically disenfranchised citizens who are disillusioned about the policies and outdated election agenda offered by existing political parties. In this regard, using the Internet and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, the candidate was able to convey his message about political reform. To conclude, the above-mentioned example proves to be quite effective in satisfying the needs of the middle class in Nepalese cities who are prone to technocratic slogans for fighting corruption.

From a critical standpoint, the empowering of these politically engaged independent people via digital technology indicates the increasing personalization of politics in today's digital media environment. Indeed, the

democratic process is evolving from a discussion-based, institutionalized process of political deliberation to one that is more individualized and closer to the concept of political consumption. Systemically, this growth is due to the fundamental qualities of social media algorithms, which prioritize charisma, emotionality, and aesthetics over politics (Enli, 2017). While the democratizing effect cannot be ignored, the process offers considerable challenges to purely political procedures that rely solely on digital popularity.

In addition to these benefits, a new set of challenges in propaganda and disinformation have emerged with the rise of digital politics. In election campaigns, politically motivated campaigns, coordinated messages, and anonymous social media accounts are easily able to spread false information. In addition, emerging democracies are more vulnerable to such interference, as they lack adequate institutional capacity and regulation, according to scholars who study digital politics (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). The regulatory bodies in Nepal have found it difficult to monitor and control the dissemination of false information, especially during the election period since the politicians compete strongly against one another.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the level of media literacy in the population. While the rate at which people are accessing the internet is rising rapidly in Nepal, the citizens lack the ability to think critically and differentiate between authentic and false information that they access from the internet. According to the research carried out regarding the information disorder, the chances that sensational information will be disseminated rather than factual information through social media platforms make it easier for false information to influence the opinions of the people. This creates confusion in the minds of the voters, affecting their decision during the Nepalese elections.

In spite of all the hindrances faced, there have been positive opportunities that have arisen due to online media. One can now be in touch with the political elites, apart from monitoring their activities and being involved in debating them. For instance, the views of those who support Balendra Shah and those who oppose him are shared by people in the

Kathmandu Metropolitan City regarding the policies of the government. This way, it is shown how the internet can help achieve participatory democracy through the citizen's voice.

Two Faces of the Digital Democratic Sphere.

In summary, the evolution of digital politics within the context of the Nepalese elections ecosystem has completely transformed political communications by introducing a new mode of direct communications between politicians and citizens. In this regard, the increased role of independent candidates and fast formation of new reformist political parties provide evidence that alternative forces can successfully leverage the power of social networks to dismantle established political structures.

Nevertheless, the shift into the digital realm has created risks that pose a serious danger to democratic processes. Information disorders, populism based on algorithms, and hidden public relations are among such risks that are extremely dangerous for the civil society. Hence, contemporary communications studies suggest that in order to prevent such risks, there are two major measures that should be taken. First, the level of digital media literacy needs to be enhanced within the general population. Second, the monitoring of funds raised during digital campaigns and generation of synthetic content needs to be regulated, while avoiding constitutional restrictions in Nepal.

Dark PR on March 3, 2026 Context of Elections

However, the application of Dark PR in the digital political communication process of Nepal has been experiencing a tremendous rise prior to the legislative elections in Nepal that took place in March 2026. Due to increased electoral competition, the capabilities provided by Nepalese social media platforms facilitated the ability for political players, secret societies, and governmental proxies to manipulate public opinion through covert communication methods (García-Ull, 2021). Moreover, it is essential to highlight that such phenomena occurred largely due to the speed of information spread inherent to modern digital systems and consistently

surpassed the work done by fact-checkers (Mirza et al., 2023). Coupled with low levels of media literacy on the part of citizens of Nepal, this situation made the information environment rather susceptible to disinformation.

In this corrupted digital space, the methods of Dark PR are executed via non-centralized and non-formalized means. These include hyper partisan digital groups, politically biased entities that cannot be validated regarding their authenticity and organized yet anonymous cyber activists driven by ideology and financial reward (Rudakevych, 2025). Rather than employing traditional campaign methods, these organizations utilize DCTs to conduct smear campaigns, manipulate algorithms, and generate artificial citizen consensus (Arceneaux, 2025). The frequent application of such methods indicates how current technologies can be leveraged for subverting democracy and how the democratic digital space is used for political warfare purposes.

Dissemination of Political Misinformation

The most obvious manifestation of Dark PR is the dissemination of political misinformation content, especially through social media, during the 2026 election in March. There were many rumors, video clips, and headlines, as well as political perspectives that were not substantiated. The misinformation content, in particular, tried to influence the opinions of the voters about a particular issue in politics by accusing the opponent of being dishonest, incompetent, or promoting divisive ideologies. The content, in particular, focused on popular political figures and parties. The misinformation content, in particular, focused on emotionally charged stories that tried to incite the fear, anger, or political animosity of the audience.

False information also has a higher tendency to spread faster compared to real news, especially when it relates to emotions or political identity, as revealed in studies concerning digital misinformation. According to Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral (2018), since people have a higher tendency to share sensational or controversial information in social media, false information has the potential to spread faster and reach a larger audience compared to real information. This was seen in the campaign phase in the political politics of Nepal in 2026. There

was the use of memes, speeches, and videos in the internet, but background information concerning political personalities was not given in order to present them in a negative manner.

From a critical perspective, the spread of misinformation during the election campaign further reveals the weakness of digital political communication in developing nations. The social media technologies are free from any editorial control in Nepal, whereas the agencies of traditional journalism have a significant role to play in the matter of verifying the information. This is an environment that allows the spread of misinformation without any check or accountability. Further, the algorithm of disseminating the content is based on the level of interaction it receives. This is an unintended way of providing more mileage to the contentious or misleading political communications. By deciding the nature of the information that is brought to the fore and extensively discussed, it is an opportunity for the Dark PR to exert its influence.

Anonymity and Astroturfing in the Digital Public Sphere

The anonymity phenomenon is another characteristic feature of the Dark PR network that has been applied in the process of conducting the legislative election in Nepal in March 2026. The use of structured anonymity in the course of this event has manifested itself in the emergence of many political campaigns structured anonymously in the form of a multi-platform network. Thus, it was possible to impact the image of certain political individuals through unverifiable digital spaces, organizations, and social media accounts. In this way, the dissemination of the ideology-related information having a strong polarizing influence upon people has taken place within anonymous independent groups and organizations.

As far as theoretical analysis is concerned, the idea of intentional anonymity is regarded as the core strategic premise of Dark PR because through it, the message sent from the top, funded by the organization or partisanship, is perceived as if it was conveyed from the bottom, as if it was the result of public consensus. In political sociology, such communication is

perceived as being more authentic, believable, and credible when it does not stem from institutionalized political actors but from their peers or ordinary people. This cognitive trick is employed by Dark PR groups via artificial creation of public consensus.

Speaking about the use of anonymity in the context of the 2026 election in Nepal, there should be mentioned the utilization of media with a low threshold and participation rate enabling using memes, politically-oriented editing of video, and simplified politically-oriented phrases. Such a strategy was advantageous for the anonymous sources because of their ability to use an asymmetrical structure of the message implying the defamation of their opponents' political actors and flattery directed at the promotion of their own candidate.

This evident split in the campaign's activities shows its direct link with the secret political agenda of the candidate, which is never revealed to anybody. Thus, it is quite difficult for voters to assess the level of sophistication in the political reasoning offered by somebody, as no information is provided on who or what motivates such a candidate. This is definitely a violation of a democratic process in terms of the importance of revealing the identity of the message sender.

Rumor communication in terms of dark public relations involves the manipulation of informational uncertainty through speculation rather than the use of outright lies that can be debunked easily. An absolute lie relies entirely on falsehood; however, in contrast to this, a rumor is characterized by the integration of truths, hyperbole, and speculation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It becomes quite tricky to disprove rumors since people get into murky waters concerning the information that they have gathered. The instant rumors go viral in the social media environment; there will be an imbalance in the perceptions of the voters, ultimately resulting in the downfall of politicians despite their refutation attempts.

The above trend has been observed and there exist certain fundamental issues with the domestic information systems of Nepal. A causal relationship definitely exists between the rise in political rumors and increased distrust in

the Nepalese government and media (Pathak, 2024). This is because the citizens of Nepal will not resort to using such sources for gathering information as soon as they come to know that their sources lack reliability. The dark public relations firms utilize this loophole in the system to spread divisive news reports.

In addition, the weaponized rumors became an essential tool for the creation of affective polarization in terms of emotional and perceptual effects on digital citizens. The political cyber troopers and supporters of their activities spread numerous rumors about politicians without any confirmation and in self-supporting echo chambers in order to provoke discussions, attack opponents, and protect their favorites from any criticism. This kind of activity resulted in severe conflict inside the community and practically took control over the whole digital public sphere. Thus, the debates about such issues as macroeconomic stability, infrastructure development, provision of services, and economic growth became totally pointless.

Consequences for Nepal's Democracy

The democratic governance structure in Nepal is expected to be affected by the growing phenomenon of Dark Public Relations in digital political communication in Nepal. The capacity to manipulate information through coordinated digital communication campaigns, disinformation, and anonymous propaganda will affect the manner in which citizens view democratic institutions and processes, given the emergence of social media platforms as significant channels for political communication and campaigns. The capacity of citizens in Nepal to harness digital technologies for enhanced civic engagement and participation is expected to erode democratic values such as accountability, transparency, and informed political choice, considering the manipulation of disinformation (Howard, 2020).

The dark PR proliferation may have negative consequences for the stability of democracy in Nepal, which has a developing democracy. For instance, the erosion of trust, manipulation of voter decision-making, and

increased political polarizations can be cited as some of the possible effects of dark PR proliferation in Nepal.

Discussion

The conclusions and analysis presented in the study reflect the increasing trend of Dark Public Relations (Dark PR) in the dynamic digital media scenario in Nepal. The strategies that help shape the opinions of the people have become dynamic in response to the increasing trend of the internet being used for political communications. The electoral scenario on March 3, 2026, is a reflection of digital media being a tremendous tool for democracy and manipulative at the same time. It has provided the opportunity for a larger number of people to get involved in politics and spread information faster than before. It has also provided the opportunity for clandestine propaganda, spreading false information, etc., that could shape the opinions of the people in a less transparent manner.

However, the most significant finding from the study is the transitional nature of the digital political communication environment in Nepal. On one hand, social media have played a significant role in the democratization of political communication access by providing people, activists, and players with an opportunity to share their ideas and mobilize their followers. On the other hand, social media have equally been used in the dissemination of misinformation and political attacks. The emergence of fake videos, misinformation headlines, and stories based on rumors during the 2026 election season is a clear example of how quickly social media have been leveraged in shaping public opinion in Nepal. This is similar to what is happening globally in shaping public opinion and determining the outcome of elections (Howard, 2020).

Nepal's case also shows the weakness of developing democracies to the danger of disinformation through the internet. Developing democracies are prone to structural challenges in managing information flows through the internet compared to well-established democracies. This is attributed to the unregulated environment, technology-related issues, and intelligence levels.

This is in line with the study carried out on digital propaganda, where developing democracies offer an opportunity for strategic political communication through the internet without the need to look for mechanisms of accountability in traditional media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). This can be said to be true for the cyber political environment in Nepal, especially during electioneering campaigns.

The importance of anonymous communication networks in the transmission of political narratives was also seen in the study carried out in this research. Anonymous social media, political groups, and political communicative activities that hide the identity of political actors who are involved in such activities are considered components of dark PR strategies. The capacity of voters to differentiate manipulative propaganda from political communication is negatively affected by the anonymous nature of the political communication networks. The anonymous nature of political communication networks played a crucial role in the transmission of political rumors and baseless information about political actors and political institutions during the March 2026 election campaign. The legitimacy of the overall political communication environment is negatively affected by the transmission of political information without sources and accountabilities.

From this investigation, it is clear that one of the major processes of the dissemination of false information is through algorithm-driven amplification. This is where controversial or engaging information is given priority by the algorithm of social media, given that it is likely to increase engagement among users of social media. Rumors that are sensational or engaging in politics may be amplified faster than truths that are verified through facts. This is given that false information is likely to spark some kind of emotional response, whether it is fear, anger, or outrage. This has been proven by various studies that false information is amplified faster than true information through digital media (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). This process of algorithm-driven information dissemination has a tendency of fueling politics or making controversial information trend during an election campaign in the digital political sphere of Nepal.

The impact of Dark PR on the legitimacy of democratic processes is another important theme that the current study brings to the fore. The presence of informed citizens who can make an opinion on political decisions based on correct information is the backbone of democratic processes. The presence of false information can lead to the formation of a wrong opinion among voters. This can have a long-term effect on democratic processes due to the loss of faith in political personalities, the media, and the election system. As per the views of academics, a long period of time is required for the citizens to lose all faith in politics due to the presence of contradictory information (Norris, 2017).

The discussion also highlights the significance of the public audience, the internet, and political actors with regard to the formation of the current political communication. The political significance of internet communication technologies is increasingly becoming clear to political leaders. The latter can now communicate with the audience without the aid of the traditional media through social networking sites. This form of communication can lead to a more democratic political communication, but it can also lead to difficulties with regard to the differentiation of manipulative propaganda from political messages. The lack of a clear mechanism for political communication online is a complex situation with all the actors vying for the public audience.

Besides, the Nepalese case also shows that information manipulation can be accompanied by political innovations and internet activism. Social media has proven its value as a means for independent leaders and emerging forms of political movements to challenge conventional forms of political systems and gain popular support for them. In the past, it was not easy to do this through conventional media channels, but digital media can offer opportunities for citizens' activism and political engagement. On the other hand, these media can also be used for political competition that involves character assassination and information manipulation campaigns. The ambivalence of digital political communication in modern democracies is also seen in the presence of democratic innovations alongside information manipulation.

The results confirm the hypothesis that the phenomenon of information disorder indeed has the potential to seriously affect the current democratic systems from a theoretical point of view. Information disorder is defined as the intentional dissemination of false information for the sake of ideology or politics (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This phenomenon is also represented in the form of dark PR strategies that incorporate the characteristics of strategic communication, disinformation, and propaganda. Information disorder is also a process that can take place in a relatively new digital environment that lacks adequate institutional protection, as is seen in the Nepalese case. However, in order to address the issues of Dark PR, the necessity of strengthening institutional resilience and civic awareness is again emphasized in the discussion.

In order to mitigate the adverse effects of disinformation, it is again emphasized that it is necessary to strengthen electoral laws, digital literacy, and cooperation between government agencies and tech companies. At the same time, citizens also contribute to a robust system of democratic communication. They can do this by actively engaging against suspicious information and using technology in an appropriate manner.

The conversation also ends by dwelling further on the different ways in which the development of Dark PR in the digital Nepalese political sphere can be considered as part of the broader changes in the nature of political communication in the global sphere. There has been a significant impact of social media on the nature of political communication. This technology has the potential to be used in disinformation and covert propaganda, as well as in democratic engagement and participation. In order to be able to deal with the issues brought about by the above-mentioned issues, the democratic system in Nepal has to be in a position to balance the need for free speech.

Conclusion

The emergence of Dark PR during the Nepalese March 2026 elections highlights one of the significant flaws in the process of digitizing democracy in Nepal. While social media offers a greater level of access and speed when it

comes to discourse in civil participation, it can easily be used for political manipulation from the inside out. As demonstrated in the whole paper, the weaponization of anonymity, astroturfing, and rumors through automation makes the legitimacy of discourse impossible to distinguish. Exploiting confirmation bias and using algorithms designed to create the strongest affective response in the user, Dark PRs disseminate disinformation fast amongst the users. This form of asymmetric communication causes cognitive overload amongst the electorate to such an extent that politics becomes alienated from its realities and connected to imaginary scandals (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). This is why all of the above factors create an overall democratic crisis scenario wherein both institutional and journalistic credibility are eroded, voters' rational epistemology is questioned, and affective polarization is created.

However, considering the fact that digital communication is by nature transnational, making it difficult to regulate by traditional means, it would be necessary to use the mechanism of multi-level governance to combat such a threat. In order to do so, legislation must be adopted in order to ensure transparency in the source of digital currency being used for campaigning while taking steps against any false information. In addition to that, the responsibility of securing platform integrity will lie on the part of major social media sites alongside efforts from non-governmental organizations to inform citizens.

Ways Forward

In order to make sure that the democratic process of Nepal does not get impacted by dark PR tactics, it becomes essential for the Election Commission to partner up with tech giants from overseas and make sure that there is strict adherence to platform integrity measures so that de-platforming can be done in a timely fashion when it comes to deep fakes and inauthentic activity. Secondly, there is an urgent requirement to bring changes into the current legislation and incorporate measures where open records must be kept for all the costs incurred on digital platforms as far as the campaign expenses are concerned.

References

- Accountability Lab. (2026, March). *Nepal election monitoring: Coordinated digital campaigns and code of conduct violations*. Accountability Lab Nepal & Digital Rights Nepal.
- Adhikari, S. (2026). *Echo chambers and digital literacy: Navigating misinformation in Nepal's 2026 federal elections*. Kathmandu Centre for New Media Studies.
- Arceneaux, P., Anderson, J., Lukito, J., Shah, M., & Kioussis, S. (2025). Social bots as agenda- builders: Evaluating the impact of algorithmic amplification on organizational messaging. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 37(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2025.2606676>
- Ballot Bulletin Nepal. (2026, February). *Synthetic media tracker: Deepfakes and machine- generated content on the campaign trail*. Election Observation Committee Nepal.
- Body & Data. (2026, March). *Media monitoring March 2026: Misinformation, disinformation, and the unethical use of AI during the HoR election*. Body & Data Nepal.
- Boman, C. D. (2021). Examining characteristics of prebunking strategies to overcome PR disinformation attacks. *Public Relations Review*, 47(5), Article 102105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102105>
- Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organized social media manipulation* (Working Paper 2019.2). Computational Propaganda Research Project, Oxford Internet Institute.
- Chu, X., Otto, L., Vliegenthart, R., Lecheler, S., de Vreese, C., & Kruijkemeier, S. (2023). On or off topic? Understanding the effects of issue-related political targeted ads. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(7), 1378–1404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2023.2265978>
- Digital Rights Weekly. (2026). *Digital rights weekly* (Year 5, Issue 4). Digital Rights Nepal.

- Edwards, L. (2021). Organised lying and professional legitimacy: Public relations' accountability in the disinformation debate. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(2), 168–182.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120966851>
- Eze, U. Z., & Zacky-Eze, C. J. (2025). Combatting disinformation: Analyzing effective communication strategies and tactics for organizational resilience. *Tripodos*, (57), 11–26.
<https://doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2025.57.01>
- Falkheimer, J. (2026). *Psychological defence and information influence*. Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar.
- Freedom Forum. (2026, March). *Free expression and digital integrity on the eve of Nepal's landmark vote*. Freedom Forum Nepal.
- García-Ull, F. J., Broseta-Dupré, B., & Lamirán-Palomares, J. J. M. (2025). Analyzing X mentions to uncover micro-clusters interfering in political campaigns: A case study during the Spanish elections. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, Article 1545634.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1545634>
- Grömping, M., Liddy-Corlett, T., & Carson, A. (2026). How election management bodies disrupt electoral disinformation: Australia and the UK in comparative perspective. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2026.2631703>
- Harris, P., & Fleisher, C. S. (Eds.). (2017). *The handbook of public affairs*. SAGE Publications.
- Healix Briefing. (2026, February). *What you need to know about Nepal's election*. Healix International Insights.
- Howard, P. N. (2020). *Lie machines: How to save democracy from troll armies, deceitful robots, junk news operations, and political operatives*. Yale University Press.

- Koc-Michalska, K., Klinger, U., Bennett, L., & Römmele, A. (2023). (Digital) Campaigning in dissonant public spheres. *Political Communication*, 40(3), 255–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2173872>
- Lindén, M. (2026). Safeguarding American democracy: Resisting electoral manipulation after the attack on the Capitol. *Democratization*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2619085>
- Mirza, S., Begum, L., Niu, L., Pardo, S., Abouzied, A., Papotti, P., & Pöpper, C. (2023). Tactics, threats & targets: Modeling disinformation and its mitigation. *Proceedings of the 2023 Network and Distributed System Security (NDSS) Symposium*. <https://doi.org/10.14722/ndss.2023.23657>
- Moloney, K. (2006). *Rethinking public relations: PR propaganda and democracy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Nepal Telecommunications Authority. (2024). *Management Information System (MIS) report*. Government of Nepal.
- Norris, P. (2017). *Why American elections are flawed: And how to fix them*. Harvard University Press.
- Rudakevych, O. M. (2025). The interconnected mechanisms of black PR and affective polarization. *Journal of Political Sciences*, 12(2), 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.47912/jps.2025.1221>
- Shane, T. S. (2024). *The near-term impact of generative AI on disinformation frameworks*. Centre for Long-Term Resilience.
- Shires, J. (2021). Windmills of the mind: Higher-order forms of disinformation in international politics. *Proceedings of the 2021 13th International Conference on Cyber Conflict (CyCon)*, 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.23919/cycon51939.2021.9468292>
- Taipei Times. (2026, March 4). AI turns Nepal's election into 'digital battleground'. *AFP Kathmandu Bureau*.
- The Japan Times. (2026, March 4). AI disinformation turns Nepal polls into 'digital battleground'. *AFP-JIJI Report*.
- UNDP. (2026, April). *Final report: Use of online platforms and the flow of electoral misinformation in the House of Representatives election, Nepal*. United Nations Development Programme / UN Women.

- Vasist, P. N., & Krishnan, S. (2022). *ICT4D: Development or destabilization? A cross-country study on the polarizing effect of political disinformation through social media*. Research Square. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2099119/v1>
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy-making* (Council of Europe Report). Strasbourg, France.