

# [***As India votes, misinformation surges on social media: 'The whole country is paying the price'***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXT-SYV1-JC5B-G31D-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW DELHI — Bollywood stars seldom weigh in on ***politics***, so videos showing two celebrities criticizing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi — and endorsing his main opposition, the Congress party — were bound to go viral.

But the clips of [*A-list actors*](https://apnews.com/article/india-general-elections-2024-bollywood-modi-nationalism-2aea78fec4324d805d74ddc2bff9f633) Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh were fake, AI-generated videos that were yet another example of the false or misleading claims swirling online with the goal of influencing [*India's election*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-campaign-photo-gallery-3d8134d1b096b6bb1d484a5bc22e4805). Both actors filed complaints with police but such actions do little to stanch the flow of such misinformation.

Claims circulating online in India recently have misstated details about [*casting a ballot*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-women-poll-workers-photos-d2bbc8e45617e1a6fb188504b07f681d), claimed without evidence that the election will be rigged, and called for [*violence against India’s Muslims*](https://apnews.com/article/india-violence-clashes-haryana-muslims-hindus-a4e5d0bd9427c85bdb311d64fdf98f08).

Researchers who track misinformation and hate speech in India say tech companies' poor enforcement of their own policies has created perfect conditions for harmful content that could distort public opinion, spur violence and leave [*millions of voters wondering what to believe*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-voices-photo-gallery-79038bb02d02679ec7cff91a4b30e1e9).

"A non-discerning user or regular user has no idea whether it's someone, an individual sharing his or her thoughts on the other end, or is it a bot?" Rekha Singh, a 49-year-old voter, told The Associated Press. Singh said she worries that social media algorithms distort voters' view of reality. “So you are biased without even realizing it,” she said.

In a year crowded with big elections, the [*sprawling vote in India*](https://apnews.com/article/india-voting-congress-elections-modi-gandhi-bjp-ecebcccaaf32ad337e7360d9962c5cee) stands out. The [*world’s most populous country*](https://apnews.com/article/religion-india-democracy-modi-ec43d9cb81c4f1b249b948e6f930fccf) boasts dozens of [*languages*](https://apnews.com/article/elections-artificial-intelligence-language-platforms-ed829171343812cbe55fab99615c77e5), the greatest number of WhatsApp users as well as the largest number of YouTube subscribers. Nearly 1 billion voters are eligible to cast a ballot in the election, which [*runs into June*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-2024-explainer-41d7aa3131dc0c7e0df1ea4be6b6a4c7).

Tech companies like Google and Meta, the owner of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, say they are working to combat deceptive or hateful content while helping voters find reliable sources. But researchers who have long tracked disinformation in India say their promises ring hollow after years of failed enforcement and “cookie-cutter” approaches that fail to account for India's linguistic, religious, [*geographic and cultural diversity*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-electronic-voting-machines-photos-2bb38afcb450e145431b10b077997c73).

Given India's size and its importance for social media companies, you might expect more of a focus, say disinformation researchers who focus on India.

“The platforms are earning money off of this. They are benefiting from it, and the whole country is paying the price,” said Ritumbra Manuvie a law professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Manuvie is a leader of The London Story, an Indian diaspora group which last month organized a protest outside Meta’s London offices.

Research by the group and another organization, India Civil Watch International, found that Meta allowed political advertisements and posts that contained anti-Muslim hate speech, [*Hindu nationalist narratives*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-rss-79c30c8ae750a9c037d86b9e2c1b640c), misogynistic posts about female candidates as well as ads encouraging violence against political opponents.

The ads were seen more than 65 million times over 90 days earlier this year. Together they cost more than $1 million.

Meta defends [*its work on global elections*](https://apnews.com/article/meta-facebook-instagram-political-ads-deepfakes-2024-c4aec653d5043a09b1c78b4fb5dcd79b) and disputed the findings of the research on India, noting that it has expanded its work with independent fact-checking organizations ahead of [*the election*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-bjp-democracy-8998fe6aba5fa26debc0f82c4e2ccf69), and has employees around the world ready to act in case its platforms are misused to spread misinformation. Nick Clegg, Meta’s president of global affairs, said of India's election: “It’s a huge, huge test for us.”

“We have months and months and months of preparation in India,” he told The Associated Press during a recent interview. “We have teams working around the clock. We have fact checkers in multiple languages operating in India. We have a 24-hour escalation system.”

YouTube is another problematic site for disinformation in India, experts say. To test how well that video-sharing platform was doing in enforcing its own rules, researchers at the nonprofits Global Witness and Access Now created 48 fake ads in English, Hindi and Telugu with false voting information or calls for violence. One claimed India raised its voting age to 21, though it remains 18, while another said women could vote by text message, though they cannot. A third called for the use of force at polling places.

When Global Witness submitted the ads to YouTube for approval, the response was disappointing, said Henry Peck, an investigator at Global Witness.

“YouTube didn’t act on any of them,” Peck said, and instead approved the ads for publication.

Google, YouTube's owner, criticized the research and noted that it has multiple procedures in place to catch ads that violate its rules. Global Witness removed the ads before they could be spotted and blocked, the company said.

“Our policies explicitly prohibit ads making demonstrably false claims that could undermine participation or trust in an election, which we enforce in several Indian languages,” Google said in a statement. The company also noted its partnerships with fact-checking groups.

[*AI is this year's newest threat*](https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-misinformation-deepfakes-2024-election-trump-59fb51002661ac5290089060b3ae39a0), as advances in programs make it easier than ever to create lifelike images, video or audio. AI deepfakes are popping up in elections across the world, [*from Moldova to Bangladesh*](https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-elections-disinformation-chatgpt-bc283e7426402f0b4baa7df280a4c3fd).

Senthil Nayagam, founder of an AI startup called Muonium AI, believes there is growing demand for deepfakes, especially of politicians. In the run up to the election, he had several inquiries on making political videos using AI. “There’s a market for this, no doubt,” he said.

Some of the fakes Nayagam produces feature dead politicians and are not meant to be taken seriously, but other deepfakes circulating online could potentially fool voters. It's a danger [*Modi*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-democracy-modi-hindu-nationalism-8f22465a6f0f021d43105a06a71d7840) himself has highlighted.

“We need to educate people about artificial intelligence and deepfakes, how it works, what it can do,” Modi said.

India’s Information and Technology Ministry has directed social media companies to remove disinformation, especially deepfakes. But experts say a lack of clear regulation or law focused on AI and deepfakes makes it harder to squash, leaving it to voters to determine what is true and what is fiction.

For first-time voter Ankita Jasra, 18, these uncertainties can make it hard to know what to believe.

"If I don’t know what is being said is true, I don’t think I can trust in the people that are governing my country,” she said.

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AP journalists Matt O'Brien in Providence, Rhode Island, and Rishi Lekhi in New Delhi contributed to this report.

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