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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Criminal Metastasis of the Fourth Estate in Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Background: An accusation often associated with Kaliyuga (the fourth age of mankind) is that it is marred by the obscurity of truth and the ubiquity of untruth. This attribute carries a variety of convenient and nuanced nomenclatures, viz. propaganda, alternative fact, post-truth, orthogonality, fake news, kayfabe, and so on. Such an assortment of mind-feeds, vehicled almost solely upon the existing Fourth Estate, is akin to a crime that remains, as yet, unaccounted for. With the advent of digitised editorial capabilities and their extent to curry tremendous monetary riches, a lie now travels several times faster than the truth. This may be identified as a nascent criminality seated within the regime of the Fourth Estate vide social media; fuelled by the thirst of attention deficiency and hyperactivity, it has metastasised communication and news into a novel crime de die in diem (from day to day).

Aim: To examine how the digitised, ad-revenue-driven economics of the contemporary Fourth Estate and social media ecosystem have transformed the age-old phenomenon of untruth into a novel, systemic, and largely unaccounted-for category of harm, and to situate this transformation within existing legal and ethical frameworks.

Objectives: (i) to trace the mechanics of ad-revenue economics and algorithmic bias that incentivise sensationalism over fact; (ii) to examine the shrinking orthogonality (independence) between traditional news media and social media, in global and Indian contexts; (iii) to evaluate untruth, misinformation, and kayfabe-style reporting as emerging categories of legally cognisable harm; and (iv) to identify institutional, legal, and human correctives capable of restoring the integrity of the Fourth Estate.

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Material: The study proceeds by way of doctrinal and analytical review of secondary sources — lexicographic and scholarly definitions, communication-theory literature on agenda-setting and post-truth, and empirical media-consumption data drawn from established industry and research bodies (including Pew-type US survey data, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, and Indian internet-penetration statistics) — read alongside the relevant Indian legal and regulatory framework, including provisions on defamation, perjury, cyber fraud, the (since-struck-down) Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, and the Press Information Bureau's Fact Check Unit.

Result: The analysis finds that orthogonality between traditional and digital media is steadily eroding, both globally and in India, producing a hybrid media ecosystem in which content, credibility, and agenda-setting influence flow bidirectionally between the two. This erosion, compounded by ad-revenue economics, algorithmic amplification, and the theatrical, kayfabe-style presentation of news, has entrenched a post-truth condition in which emotional resonance increasingly displaces factual accuracy as the currency of public discourse — with untruth functioning, in effect, as an emergent and largely unpunished crime.

Conclusion: The virtues of the Fourth Estate are under existential threat from legitimised means of corruption, for want of imposed ethical norms. Unless understood and addressed in human and institutional terms, this problem is certain to cause permanent damage to a quintessential characteristic of mankind — the demise of satya (truth) in Kaliyuga, a Shaashwat Adharma (perpetuated wrong of the highest order) with no remedial recourse, also called satyanaash (eternal damnation).

KEYWORDS

• Fourth Estate • Social Media • Orthogonality • Post-truth

Key Message: The unregulated, ad-revenue-driven convergence of traditional and social media has metastasised untruth from a perennial human failing into a systemic, criminally significant phenomenon that existing legal frameworks are only beginning to confront.

INTRODUCTION

Background

A lie is often more appealing and deeply gratifying than the truth and its apostles. The reason behind the attractive quality of a lie lies in its origin and vehicle. The seat of its origin is the human mind, whereas it flows within the sphere of humanity and not beyond. In other words, a lie or untruth is a surrogate of mankind, which it dwells within. Interestingly, the knowledge which distinguishes between truth and untruth is also fictitious, making both of them two faces of the same coin.

Facts, up until now, are none of the concern, for we must understand that this quality of creating fictions or the art of storytelling can be understood as a sub-set of untruth and is one of the biggest gifts of evolution to the age of mankind — hence natural. This quintessential characteristic of humanity attains the garb of an epidemic problem when the aforestated two faces dissociate from themselves so far that the existence of truth is obscured in favour of the ubiquity of untruth. The mechanism of this oft-preferred obscurity is as appealing as the untruth itself, and when the untruth (so dissociated from truth) attains a multitude of versions and variety, it becomes a lie with a life of its own. To understand the aforestated mechanism, the following story is instrumental:

> *One day, Truth and Untruth met on a path, and Untruth, with a deceptive smile, declared the day beautiful, which Truth, after looking at the sky, agreed with. They continued their journey until they reached a well, where Untruth, with*

> *a sly grin, suggested they take a bath, claiming the water was lovely. Truth, trusting Untruth, tested the water and found it indeed refreshing, and they both undressed to bathe. As Truth was bathing, Untruth, quick and cunning, snatched Truth's clothes and fled, leaving Truth naked and ashamed. The world, upon seeing the naked Truth, turned away in disgust, leaving Truth to hide in the well, while Untruth, dressed in Truth's clothes, continued to travel, deceiving people and satisfying their make-believe needs, making disciples of them. From that day forward, the untruth — begetting a lie in every disciple, disguised as Truth — roamed the world, while the real Truth remained hidden afar, dissociated and unclothed.*

This age-old fable simply puts across an allegory of the fact that untruth, with its many pleasing faces, when it multiplies continually to keep people spellbound, germinates a brooding lie that kills the existence of truth bit by bit, to the point of obscurity. This phenomenon is colloquially identified as 'gaslighting' — the process of making someone believe untrue things, especially that they have imagined or been wrong about what has really happened, in order to control them[1]. This introduction highlights the fact that this is a problem, ageless and perennially exponential. In the present age, the problem as such has been manifesting its effects faster than ever.

The reason for this astronomical occurrence of untruth and lies as a metastasis is mankind's advancement into the age of digital information. Up until now, the digital impetus of information was limited to artistic expressions of mathematical advancement by human endeavour. The computer-generated anomaly, with the onset of Boolean processors, has changed the status quo usage of digits to a new level. The human processing mechanism is designed to filter chaos, but lately it has been challenged continuously by the bombardment and outpouring of needless chaos — even further enhancing the effects of the lie at its peak. This can simply be understood as a state of induced insanity to propel and propagate unwanted information or knowledge, disguised as essential.

There is a reason in the rule of nature and creation that humanity can process only a limited set of external stimuli, even though it is capable of producing varied and multiple outputs. For instance, human beings cannot hear and process sound frequencies below 20 Hz and above 20,000 Hz. The reason is the simple rule of limitation. Thus, as a corollary, it is logical to presume that any excess of other such stimuli to the mind shall result in anomalous and unnatural responses. This is the aforestated problem, metastasised.

Challenging the aforestated rule of nature is the case of media outflow and information management through it. The novelty of this fundamental problem, as it has evolved in the age of information and money, is the systematised outpouring of information in the name of content creation and the artistry thereof, which culminates in agenda setting. In technical terms, the media industry identifies this as orthogonality. The necessity of it, as often cited, is to avoid instances of content overlap and repetition in the initial days.

Aim & Objectives

The paper aims to examine how the digitised, ad-revenue-driven economics of the contemporary Fourth Estate and social media ecosystem have transformed the age-old phenomenon of untruth into a novel, systemic, and largely unaccounted-for category of harm. Its objectives are: (i) to trace the mechanics of ad-revenue economics and algorithmic bias that incentivise sensationalism over fact; (ii) to examine the shrinking orthogonality between traditional news media and social media, globally and in India; (iii) to evaluate untruth, misinformation, and kayfabe-style reporting as emerging categories of legally cognisable harm; and (iv) to identify institutional, legal, and human correctives capable of restoring the integrity of the Fourth Estate.

Hypothesis

The paper hypothesises that the progressive erosion of orthogonality between traditional and digital media — driven by unregulated ad-revenue economics and algorithmic amplification — has produced untruth as a distinct, emergent, and largely unpunished offence, one that existing legal and ethical frameworks are ill-equipped to address without also endangering legitimate free expression.

MATERIAL METHOD

This is a doctrinal and analytical study rather than an empirical or laboratory-based one. The material consists of: (a) lexicographic and dictionary definitions used to fix key terms (e.g., gaslighting, post-truth); (b) communication-theory and media-studies literature on agenda-setting, intermedia influence, and the post-truth condition; (c) secondary quantitative data on media consumption trends in the United States and India, drawn from established research and industry bodies; (d) case-study analysis of a documented instance of intermedia agenda-setting (the "Obama-is-a-Muslim" rumour study); and (e) the relevant Indian statutory and regulatory framework governing defamation, perjury, cyber fraud, and online misinformation. The method is qualitative and interpretive: sources were read comparatively to trace how declining orthogonality between traditional and social media translates into a legally cognisable phenomenon of untruth, and the findings were organised thematically under orthogonality, untruth as emerging crime, kayfabe-style reporting, and the post-truth condition, with particular attention to the Indian context.

RESULT

Orthogonality

Orthogonality refers to the independence of different forms, channels, or dimensions of communication. If two media elements or platforms are orthogonal, they do not interfere with each other and can function independently while still coexisting within a broader ecosystem.

In the context of news media and social media, orthogonality refers to the degree of independence between the two in terms of content creation, distribution, and influence.

Orthogonality between news media and social media is decreasing as the two become more intertwined. News outlets increasingly source content from social media, while social media platforms shape public discourse by amplifying or distorting news. The challenge lies in maintaining journalistic integrity while leveraging social media's reach.

For instance, Md. Abu Naser examines how political blogs influenced traditional news outlets during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Focusing on the "Obama-is-a-Muslim" rumour, Naser analyses content from both political blogs and legacy media, using Internet Search Volume Index data to assess the interplay between the two platforms. The study reveals that political blogs significantly predicted legacy-media coverage of the rumour over a five-day period, indicating a notable intermedia agenda-setting effect. The research also finds that coverage by both media types substantially influenced internet search behaviour related to the rumour, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between media coverage and public interest.[2,3]

It is apparent that while political blogs can momentarily steer the media agenda, their influence is often transient compared to the enduring impact of traditional news outlets in shaping public discourse. Non-traditional platforms can affect mainstream media narratives, yet the latter continues to hold substantial sway over public opinion. A broader understanding of intermedia agenda-setting — emphasising the need to consider the complex interactions between various media forms in contemporary communication studies — helps show how a media misdemeanour can, over time, fuel a genuine crime.

Media consumption trends: a comparative snapshot

A comparative reading of media-consumption data from the United States and India illustrates the scale of this shift (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative media-consumption indicators, United States and India

Indicator	Finding
Internet as primary US news source (2010)	41% of respondents, a 17-point jump over the previous year
Online news access ≥ 3x/week vs. newspaper readership (US, 2010)	46% online vs. 40% newspaper — online overtakes print for the first time
Most popular US news source overall (2010)	Local TV news, at 50%

table cont....

Indian internet users (2023)	Over 900 million; overall penetration 65.89% (urban 110.03%, rural 41.72%)
Indian active internet news users cited elsewhere in the literature	Over 886 million, with 55% from rural areas
JioTV unique visitors (March 2020)	84 million

By 2010, the internet had become a dominant source of news in the United States, with 41% of people citing it as their primary platform for national and international updates — a seventeen-point jump from the previous year (see Table 1). This shift marked the beginning of a decline for traditional print newspapers, as more people accessed news online at least three times a week than read a newspaper, surpassing newspaper readership for the first time. The appeal of online news lay in its real-time updates, accessibility, and diverse sources, contrasting with the fixed publication cycles of print media. At the same time, the financial model of newspapers faced disruption as advertisers moved to digital platforms, where audiences could be targeted more effectively. While national and international news consumption migrated online, local TV news retained its position as the most popular source, suggesting that television remained a trusted medium, particularly for local coverage.

The growing role of social media and news aggregators such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google News further fuelled this transformation, allowing users to engage with news in a personalised and interactive way. Social platforms made it easier to discover and share news, increasing audience participation in discussions around current events. The trend that began in 2010 continued in the following years, shaping the modern media landscape into one that prioritises on-demand, mobile-friendly, and algorithm-driven news consumption.

In recent years, India has witnessed a significant shift in news consumption patterns, paralleling global trends. As of 2023, the country had over 900 million internet users, with an overall penetration rate of 65.89% — urban areas exhibiting a penetration rate of 110.03%, while rural regions stood at 41.72%[4]. This surge in internet accessibility has transformed how Indians consume news, with a growing preference for digital platforms over traditional print media. The proliferation of affordable smartphones and data plans has facilitated this transition, enabling users to access news on the go. Challenges nonetheless persist, including a digital gender gap and the need for more vernacular content to cater to the country's diverse linguistic landscape.

Traditional media outlets have adapted by enhancing their digital presence. NDTV, for instance, operates multiple broadcast channels alongside a robust online platform; CNBC has expanded into smart-TV streaming services to diversify content delivery; and streaming platforms such as JioTV have gained significant traction, recording 84 million unique visitors in March 2020[5]. Despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional media remains relevant, with television and print continuing to attract substantial audiences, especially during significant events such as elections.

In India, the concept of orthogonality in media consumption is evident in the evolving relationship between traditional news media and digital platforms. The rise of the internet as a primary news source signifies a shift in which digital and traditional media coexist yet function independently in key respects. While television remains dominant, especially for real-time updates and major events such as elections, digital platforms cater to a younger, mobile-first audience. This suggests that, despite the increasing influence of digital media, television and print still maintain distinct roles, operating in parallel rather than replacing one another. The digital divide, particularly in rural areas, further ensures that traditional media continues to hold significance in specific demographics, preserving a degree of orthogonality.

At the same time, orthogonality between traditional and digital news is gradually diminishing as mainstream outlets increasingly integrate digital platforms, offering live streaming, mobile apps, and social-media updates. Yet challenges remain: digital media is immediate and interactive, but it often struggles with misinformation and credibility issues, requiring traditional media's editorial rigour to maintain journalistic standards.

This interdependence suggests a hybrid media ecosystem rather than fully orthogonal entities. Governments that enforce strict misinformation laws can, in the same breath, misuse them for censorship, silencing dissent under the guise of controlling falsehoods — leaving the balance between protecting society from harmful lies and upholding democratic freedoms a complex and unresolved issue.

Untruth as an Emerging Crime

The idea of untruth as a crime is deeply rooted in legal, ethical, and societal frameworks. While freedom of speech allows individuals to express opinions and beliefs, deliberate falsehoods that cause harm can be legally punishable. This concept can be examined through the lens of media-consumption patterns and the orthogonality between traditional and digital news in India. The rise of digital platforms has amplified the spread of misinformation, making falsehoods a pressing legal and societal concern. With hundreds of millions of internet users, India has witnessed the rapid circulation of fake news, deepfakes, and manipulated narratives, often with real-world consequences such as mob violence and electoral misinformation. The legal system has responded with laws against defamation, cyber fraud, and the (now struck down) Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, which had attempted to curb online misinformation.

Laws against perjury, defamation, fraud, and misinformation exemplify how false statements can be criminalised when they damage reputations, deceive the public, or endanger lives. Perjury — lying under oath — is a serious offence in most legal systems because it undermines the integrity of justice; defamation laws similarly protect individuals from reputational harm caused by false statements. In modern contexts, misinformation laws have become increasingly relevant, particularly where false information spreads through digital media and leads to violence or public unrest[6].

Criminalising untruths nonetheless raises concerns about freedom of expression and state overreach. Determining the intent behind a false statement is often challenging — distinguishing between a mistake, satire, and malicious deception requires nuanced legal interpretation. Governments that enforce strict misinformation laws can misuse them for censorship, silencing dissent under the guise of controlling falsehoods; the balance between protecting society from harmful lies and upholding democratic freedoms remains a complex issue. In the digital age, the Press Information Bureau of India has established a Fact Check Unit to counter misinformation relating to government policies and schemes[7], even as legal systems worldwide continue to debate how to punish deliberate falsehoods without stifling legitimate discourse.

Kayfabe-Style News in India

The concept of kayfabe, originally from professional wrestling, refers to the deliberate portrayal of staged or scripted events as real, in order to engage audiences emotionally. In the Indian media landscape, kayfabe-style news has increasingly become a tool for sensationalism, political narrative-building, and audience manipulation.

News channels and digital platforms often blur the line between reality and performance, amplifying emotionally charged stories, exaggerating conflicts, and dramatising political debates to boost ratings and engagement. With television anchors adopting theatrical delivery and panel discussions resembling verbal wrestling matches, Indian news media frequently prioritises entertainment over factual reporting, creating a hyper-partisan environment in which perception often outweighs reality[8,9].

A major concern with kayfabe-style news is its impact on public opinion and democratic discourse. Many news outlets, influenced by corporate and political interests, selectively present information to fit a particular narrative, often disregarding journalistic ethics; social-media algorithms further amplify such content, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish fact from fiction. This style of reporting fosters tribalism, where audiences engage with media that reinforces their biases rather than challenging them with objective facts. In India, where television and digital platforms shape national conversation, the prevalence of kayfabe-style news threatens media credibility, polarises society, and diminishes trust in journalism. Addressing this issue requires stronger fact-checking mechanisms, media-literacy initiatives, and ethical journalism practices to ensure that news remains an instrument of truth rather than scripted entertainment[10].

Post-truth

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "post-truth" as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. This definition underscores a pivotal shift from an era in which facts and evidence were paramount to one in which subjective perceptions and emotions hold greater sway. Scholars argue that this transition signifies not merely a rejection of truth but an environment in which the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes increasingly blurred.

This erosion of factual primacy can be attributed to various factors, including the proliferation of misinformation, the fragmentation of media landscapes, and the rise of relativistic attitudes toward knowledge. As a result, public discourse becomes susceptible to manipulation, with narratives crafted to resonate emotionally rather than convey factual accuracy. This shift has profound implications for democratic processes, as informed decision-making relies heavily on the availability and acceptance of objective information. The post-truth condition thus challenges the very foundations of rational discourse, necessitating a critical examination of the mechanisms that have facilitated this epistemological transformation[11].

The concept of post-truth, while gaining prominence in the twenty-first century, has roots that trace back through historical shifts in media, politics, and public perception. The advent of mass media introduced new dynamics in information dissemination, where the line between fact and fiction began to blur. The rise of public relations and spin further complicated the landscape, as information was increasingly tailored to shape public perception rather than convey objective reality. The digital revolution and the proliferation of social-media platforms have exacerbated these trends, enabling the rapid spread of misinformation and creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs — reflecting a broader cultural shift toward relativism and scepticism toward authoritative sources of information[12].

Structural Factors Contributing to Post-Truth

Several structural factors have contributed to the emergence and entrenchment of the post-truth phenomenon. The transformation of the media landscape, characterised by the decline of traditional journalism and the rise of digital platforms, has played a significant role. Economic pressures on media organisations have led to sensationalism and clickbait journalism, prioritising engagement over accuracy. The algorithmic nature of social-media platforms further amplifies this issue, as content that elicits strong emotional responses is more likely to be promoted, regardless of its veracity. The erosion of trust in institutions and experts has, in addition, created an environment in which individuals are more inclined to rely on personal beliefs and emotions when interpreting information — a distrust often fuelled by political actors seeking to undermine authoritative sources to advance their own agendas[13].

Implications for Democracy and Society

The ascendancy of post-truth poses significant challenges for democratic societies, where an informed citizenry is fundamental to the functioning of democratic processes. When objective facts are devalued, public discourse becomes susceptible to manipulation, and policy decisions may be based on misinformation or ideological bias rather than evidence. This erosion of factual discourse undermines accountability, as political leaders and institutions can evade scrutiny by appealing to emotion or dismissing unfavourable facts as fake news. The polarisation of society is exacerbated in a post-truth environment, as individuals gravitate toward information that aligns with their preconceptions, leading to fragmented public spheres and diminished common ground for dialogue. The implications extend beyond politics to areas such as public health, where misinformation can have dire consequences[14].

Post-Truth in the Indian Context

The rise of post-truth politics in India reflects a global trend in which emotional appeals, misinformation, and ideological narratives often overshadow objective facts in public discourse. The rapid expansion of digital media, social-media penetration, and the politicisation of mainstream news have amplified the spread of misinformation, half-truths, and

alternative narratives. With hundreds of millions of internet users, India has witnessed an explosion of politically motivated fake news, WhatsApp forwards, and manipulated narratives that influence electoral outcomes, public perception, and social cohesion. Political leaders, party supporters, and even mainstream media have often weaponised misinformation to shape public opinion — whether around elections, religious tensions, economic policy, or historical narrative. The 2019 and 2024 general elections saw a surge in misleading information, with fact-checking organisations actively debunking viral misinformation; confirmation bias and political allegiance, however, often prevent fact-based corrections from gaining traction, entrenching a post-truth culture[15].

One of the most concerning aspects of post-truth India is its impact on democracy, governance, and social trust. Political discourse increasingly relies on emotive storytelling, identity-based mobilisation, and polarisation strategies rather than verifiable policy discussion. Social-media platforms serve as battlegrounds for ideological narratives, often blurring the line between fact and propaganda. The delegitimisation of mainstream media and independent journalism has, moreover, created an environment in which citizens are unsure whom to trust, while government agencies and political parties have attempted to control narratives through selective information dissemination and regulatory action against independent media[16]. This erosion of factual discourse undermines accountability, as leaders can dismiss criticism as 'fake news' or 'anti-national propaganda.' Addressing India's post-truth crisis requires strengthening media literacy, promoting ethical journalism, and fostering a culture of evidence-based discourse to ensure that truth remains central to public life.

Combating the post-truth phenomenon necessitates a multifaceted approach addressing both the supply and demand sides of misinformation. On the supply side, promoting journalistic integrity and supporting independent media can help ensure the availability of accurate information, alongside regulatory measures to curb the spread of false information on digital platforms that nonetheless respect freedom of expression. On the demand side, fostering critical-thinking skills and media literacy among the public can empower individuals to discern credible information from falsehood. Educational initiatives that emphasise evidence-based reasoning and the scientific method can contribute to a more informed citizenry, while encouraging dialogue across ideological divides can help bridge the gaps created by polarised information environments. Ultimately, addressing post-truth requires a societal commitment to valuing truth and a collective effort to uphold the standards of factual discourse.

DISCUSSION

Read together, the findings above suggest that the Fourth Estate's digital transformation has not merely changed the speed or medium of news; it has altered the underlying incentive structure of journalism itself. The declining orthogonality between traditional and social media means that agenda-setting influence now flows in both directions — legacy media both shapes and is shaped by viral, unverified content — which multiplies the surface area for untruth to travel and entrench itself before correction can occur.

This dynamic converts what was once treated as an ethical or reputational failing (sensationalism, bias, editorializing) into something closer to a legally cognisable harm, particularly where kayfabe-style theatricality and post-truth emotional appeal are deployed knowingly and at scale for ad-revenue gain. Existing legal tools — defamation, perjury, cyber-fraud provisions, and residual IT Act mechanisms — were largely designed for discrete, identifiable false statements rather than for the diffuse, algorithmically amplified, and often anonymously authored misinformation that characterises the contemporary ecosystem. The result is a persistent enforcement gap: harmful falsehood is easy to identify in the aggregate but difficult to attribute, prosecute, or deter at the level of any single actor.

At the same time, the analysis cautions against overcorrection. Because the line between honest error, satire, opinion, and malicious deception is often genuinely difficult to draw, expansive misinformation laws risk becoming instruments of censorship in the

hands of the state, silencing dissent under the guise of controlling falsehood. Institutional correctives such as the Press Information Bureau's Fact Check Unit and independent fact-checking bodies are therefore best understood as necessary but partial solutions — useful for correcting the record, but insufficient on their own to alter the underlying ad-revenue economics that reward sensationalism over accuracy. A durable response accordingly requires a combination of regulatory oversight, platform-level algorithmic accountability, and sustained media-literacy efforts, rather than reliance on any single legal or technological fix.

CONCLUSION

In the digital age, the Fourth Estate, traditionally considered a pillar of democracy and a watchdog against corruption, has undergone a transformation that has introduced both new opportunities and significant ethical dilemmas. As explored in this paper, the rapid evolution of digital media has facilitated a more immediate and far-reaching dissemination of information, yet it has also made the industry susceptible to criminal infiltration, misinformation, and ethical transgression. The interplay between media, governance, and digitalisation has led to a complex dynamic in which the lines between journalism, propaganda, and digital manipulation are increasingly blurred.

The discussion has highlighted the alarming trend of media entities being co-opted for illicit gain, including political manipulation, financial fraud, and the spread of disinformation. The digital landscape has provided unprecedented opportunities for anonymous actors, including state-sponsored entities and private interest groups, to influence public perception in ways that challenge the very foundations of democracy. The unchecked proliferation of misinformation and the monetisation of sensationalism over factual reporting pose significant risks to public trust in media institutions.

As examined, the legal and ethical frameworks attempt to mitigate the malign influence of criminal elements within the media sphere. While regulatory measures and digital forensics play a crucial role in curbing the spread of false information and illicit media activity, enforcement remains a challenge owing to jurisdictional complexities and the ever-evolving nature of digital deception. The question of media accountability is further compounded by the monopolisation of information platforms by a handful of corporate entities, raising concerns over the impartiality and integrity of news reporting[17].

In response to these challenges, it is imperative to adopt a multi-pronged approach encompassing regulatory oversight, technological safeguards, and media-literacy initiatives. Strengthening legal mechanisms to hold media entities accountable for the wilful dissemination of falsehoods, fostering independent journalism free from political and financial coercion, and leveraging AI-driven verification tools are essential steps in combating the metastasis of criminal elements within the media ecosystem. Promoting critical-thinking skills among the public can, in addition, empower individuals to discern credible sources from manipulative content, thereby reducing susceptibility to disinformation campaigns.

Ultimately, the role of the Fourth Estate in the digital age remains indispensable to the health of democratic societies. To preserve its integrity, however, media institutions must adapt to the rapidly changing landscape with a renewed commitment to ethical journalism and factual reporting. Governments, civil society organisations, and technology firms must work collaboratively to ensure that digital platforms serve as facilitators of truth rather than conduits for deception. If left unchecked, the criminal metastasis within the media industry threatens to erode democratic values, weaken public trust, and exacerbate societal divisions. Addressing this issue with urgency and strategic intervention is therefore not only necessary but imperative for the preservation of a free and informed society.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Ethics Declaration

Not applicable. This is a doctrinal and analytical legal study based entirely on secondary and

publicly available material; it involves no human or animal participants, no primary data collection, and accordingly required no ethics committee clearance.

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