



Original Article

# From Bullets to Broadcasts: Media Narratives & Misinformation after the Pahalgam Attack

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## Abstract

*In the digital age, the Kashmir dispute has moved from being a traditional military confrontation to an organized information war, where fabricated stories have become part of the war material. After the terrorist attack in Pahalgam on 22 April 22, 2025, which killed 26 people, a flood of fake images, AI-generated videos, and edited footage on social media further fuelled violence and confusion. This paper analyses the role of the media after Operation Sindoor to see how traditional and digital media shaped, and at times distorted, the Kashmir narrative. The seven major rumors bought busting by the Press Information Bureau of India, the blocking of social media accounts, and media literacy campaigns make it clear that fake information has now become a strategic tool. The research concludes that, in hybrid warfare, misinformation is a strategic weapon used to fabricate narratives, disrupt peace, and undermine trust in government institutions. After the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, the AI-generated content and sensational propaganda fuelled misinformation. This study also highlights that beyond fact-checking, it is important to empower the public to differentiate between truth and falsehood. Empowering citizens with digital literacy and promoting collaborative efforts across the media, government, and society are important to prevent the spread of misinformation and to protect the contested space of truth.*

**Keywords:** information warfare, misinformation, fact-checking, media literacy, Indo-Pak conflict, Operation Sindoor

## Introduction

Modern warfare is no longer limited to the deployment of armed forces on the border or a formally declared war, but it has unwittingly penetrated the lives of the common people through virtual networks, cyber operations, and information warfare. Tools such as data breaches, fake news, deepfake videos, unethically edited images, and social media propaganda have now become an integral part of the strategy of war strategies. This change can be clearly observed seen in the long-standing Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan.

The conflict between India and Pakistan began with the partition of 1947, and conventional wars took place in 1965, 1971, and 1999, each time the Kashmir dispute was a central issue. In 2019, India revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, which acted as catalysts in increasing tensions. This conflict is now being fought on the digital front as well as on the traditional front. Over In the last two decades, both countries have used hacking, online espionage, and psychological operations as weapons. The Internet is no longer just a medium of communication, but has become a space of intellectual strategy where states and non-state groups are engaged in influencing the thoughts and emotions of the common people. The incident occurred in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir on 22 April, 2025, in which five armed terrorists attacked tourists, killing 26 innocent civilians. This incident soured the relationship between the two countries. Media and dissemination of misinformation added fuel to the fire, mainly on the social media platform where Pak supporters took out flag marches calling it India's propaganda war.<sup>1</sup> Following which this attack, false stories, altered videos, and fabricated quotes went viral on social media, causing public outrage and further deepening diplomatic tensions between India and Pakistan.<sup>2,3</sup>

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India responded with military action against terrorist hideouts under Operation Sindoor, which also triggered an organized cyber war. Pakistan-backed hacker groups targeted Indian government websites, defense institutions, and energy companies, whereas while Indian cyber groups launched retaliatory attacks on Pakistan's railways, defense, and education institutions.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Digital disinformation campaigns also played an important role in the conflict. The claim by Pakistan's Defense Minister that the stadium lights were switched off during an IPL match, although technically proven to be false, shows that cyber capabilities have now become a part of political rhetoric and psychological warfare.<sup>7,8</sup>

Furthermore, emerging disinformation strategies in 2025, such as deepfakes created by generative AI, microtargeting, and propaganda campaigns through botnets, have further complicated this conflict.<sup>9,10</sup> India's cyber agencies have used AI-enabled cyber defense systems and real-time threat neutralization protocols to counter these threats.<sup>4</sup>

Today's battle is not just about soldiers or missiles; it is a battle for data, network control, and public trust. Nations are now using cyber power to strategically enhance security and to disturb or establish peace. This digital confrontation between India and Pakistan in 2025 is proof that future wars will be fought between minds, machines, and psychologists.

### Research Methodology

This research was based on a descriptive and analytical study that which included both qualitative and quantitative elements. The study was conducted over a specific time period from April to June 2025. Comparison of media outlets and social media content infrom India and Pakistan. Analysis of language, emotional appeal, and ideological bias used in the media.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the role of traditional and digital media after the Pahalgam terror attack in the context of the Indo-Pak conflict
2. To study the nature and impact of misinformation and disinformation campaigns spread on social media
3. To compare the responses and media strategies of governmental and non-governmental organizations in India and Pakistan.
4. To investigate the social, political and psychological effects of digital misinformation

### Research Question

What kinds of stories and misinformation did the Indo-Pak media spread after the Pahalgam attack and what impact did this information have on the public, diplomacy, and security strategies?

### Hypothesis

After the Pahalgam attack, media platforms in both India and Pakistan further escalated diplomatic tensions by spreading fictitious or misleading information.

### Data Collection Methods

1. **Primary Data:** Social media-time tracking of viral posts, hashtags such as like #PahalgamDramaExposed, #ModiExposed
2. **Secondary Data:** Fact-Check Databases, News Reports & Investigations, Government & Intelligence Briefs

### Result

After Operation Sindoor, not only military tensions and but also an intense information war started between India and Pakistan. News agencies in both the countries had broadcasted several fabricated military stories without verification, such as Pakistan shooting down five Indian Rafale jets and destroying India's S-400 system. Recent reports by BBC Verify and DISA verified that most of these videos were of the 2020 Beirut explosion or the 2023 Gaza attacks linked to the Kashmir conflict.<sup>13</sup> These viral content on social media created confusion and fear in the minds of the public, which was refuted by India's PIB Fact Check and international media monitoring organizations. This illustration shows how traditional and digital media feed on each other and presents a distorted story of the Kashmir conflict to the world.

### Impact of traditional media

#### 1. Indian media stories

On May 7, the Indian media went on a rampage of reporting on Operation Sindoor, with several channels airing unverified visuals and claims. Clarifications issued by the PIB refuted these claims, but by then, several news channels had carried them prominently. At a PIB workshop in Kishtwar on June 27, officials urged the media to make greater use of fact-checking mechanisms and avoid misinformation.<sup>2</sup> This initiative shows that the government is now adopting a strategy of dialogue and training to hold traditional media accountable.

#### 2. Pakistani media stories

The Pakistani media also responded, such as to attacks on Indian military installations or the defeat of the Indian Army. On June 26, a media workshop was organized in Mirpur to train Pakistani journalists on the "credibility crisis of Indian media" in which the Indian media was described as a 'propaganda machine'.<sup>11</sup> This shows that traditional media has now become a tool for ideological warfare, not just information.

### Digital media promoting misinformation

According to reports by BBC Verify and Frontline, in May 2025, several videos circulated on social media, such as the attack on an Indian brigade headquarters and the wreckage of an Indian fighter jet, which were taken place from old wars, video games (such as Battlefield 3) or other countries.<sup>12,13</sup> Fake alerts on WhatsApp and Telegram platforms such as malware like "Dance of the Hillary" or hacks of banking systems spread fear and confusion among the general public.<sup>14</sup> This shows that misinformation on digital means is no longer just a rumor, but is becoming a planned strategy.

### **Misinformation and Disinformation Campaigns: Tools of Strategic Influence**

After the Pahalgam attack, both countries blamed each other for the digital disinformation. Pakistan accused Indian media of systemic bias, while India blamed Pakistan-backed social media for “influencing public opinion”.<sup>15</sup> Recently, Zee News reported that Cyber Police Kashmir has blocked more than 200 social media handles that were spreading terrorism and misinformation.<sup>16</sup>

### **Misinformation and social media as a double-edged sword**

According to reports by ABC News and Frontline, videos portraying Kashmiri Muslims as supporters of terrorist ideology went viral on social media, causing fear, alienation and mental stress among the local people.<sup>15</sup> Many vloggers on YouTube and Instagram asked provocative questions to the local people, leading to social isolation and digital defamation. Brain health experts have warned that this type of information violence can affect have an impact on children and youth.

### **Implications and Policy Responses: Towards Information Resilience**

The Indian government permanently blocked more than 8,000 social media accounts and removed 16 Pakistani channels from the telecast list in May 2025.<sup>17</sup> In addition, PIB broadcasts more than 30 clarifications and intensified Media True Fact programs. In a dialogue workshop held in Kishtwar on June 27, PIB officials asked the media to play a proactive role against fake news.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan has criticized the “Indian propaganda” strategy by organizing a media workshop in AJK.

### **Discussion**

After the Pahalgam incident, a parallel struggle was started by the media of India and Pakistan, which was fought not on the border but on platforms where fabricated stories can be easily circulated. News organizations in the traditional media supported the visuals and claims without verification, thereby undermining the primary duty of the media, “communicating the truth.” Indian national news organizations shaped a nationalism-oriented narrative through the visual presentation of ‘Operation Sindoor,’ while PIB fact-checking later refuted many of the claims. The Pakistani national media, on the other hand, spread half-truths and fabrications against India. Training of Pakistani journalists on the “credibility crisis” of Indian media at AJK workshops is indicative of this trend.

This makes it clear that the media is no longer just a communicator of information, but has become a political and ideological weapon. Misinformation on social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, and X affected the public in a fast, personal, and emotional way. The viral videos showed jet debris and live recordings of attacks that were either captured taken from old wars or video game clips. Frontline reports that most of the fake posts were targeting certain linguistic and geographic areas. Provocative questions posed by vloggers on Instagram increase mental health and stress in society. The blocking of more than 8,000 social media accounts and 16 Pakistani

channels by the Indian government was a proactive information security measure, but there were related concerns. Evidence presented by the Frontline and ABC News shows that misinformation has led the Kashmiri Muslim community to become turn a terrorist ideology. This has led to social stigma, local tension, and cyber harassment. Mental health experts warned that children and adolescents exhibit PTSD-like symptoms due to digital violence.

### **Conclusion**

“Earlier in conflicts tanks and artillery used to march forward, today information has become the platoon.”

21<sup>st</sup> century wars are no longer fought on the battlefield, but they spread their wings in the information space, where news, videos, posts, and memes have become weapons. The way traditional and digital media organizations in of India and Pakistan disseminated information after the Pahalgam incident provides a clear glimpse of this changing war. This article clarifies makes it clear that media stories, fake news, and digital propaganda no longer just serve to provide information, but they have the full potential to influence the public, divide ideological opinions, and influence policy making.

The Indian government tried to control the immediate crisis by banning Pakistani social media accounts and YouTube channels and issuing fact-checked clarifications with the help of organizations such as like PIB. These measures are important, although experts do not consider them to be sufficient. Along with TRPs, the media should also develop media literacy, digital discretion, and critical thinking.

Students in Kolkata are learning responsible digital behaviour through a school program, which is a positive sign in this direction. Apart from this, Accountable social media platforms, transparent fact-checking mechanisms, and global cooperation are necessary to reduce the impact of misinformation spreading across the world, especially in conflict-ridden areas such as like Kashmir, where even the smallest distorted piece of information can affect peace efforts.

The central finding of this study is that today's battle is not just on military frontiers, but is fought on the ground of mind and psyche—where “narrative” moves first and “action” follows. And In this narrative war, citizens, policy makers, media institutions, and technology platforms are all not just spectators, but active combatants. Fighting fake news and disinformation requires not just censorship but also collective moral responsibility and a communicative information culture.

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#### Conflicts of interest

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